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THE ASSESSMENT OF BLAME FOR THE EXCLUSION
OF MOSES FROM THE PROMISED LAND

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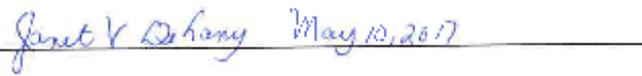
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Abstract

The Assessment of Blame for the Exclusion of Moses from the Promised Land

Thomas E. Truman

The book of Deuteronomy assigns blame for Moses' exclusion from the Promised Land to two individuals. Deut 1:37; 3:23-28; and 4:21 place the blame on Israel while Deut. 32:50-51 place the blame on Moses. Why is the blame assessed differently? Is there an open contradiction in the book, or is there some way of meshing the two assignments? It is the goal of this thesis to use techniques developed within narrative criticism to examine the accounts of the interactions between Moses and Israel prior to and during the wilderness journey to observe how each are characterized. This thesis will demonstrate that Moses' dominant trait is his willingness to intercede on behalf of people and that Israel's dominant trait is its consistent complaining, resistance, and/or outright rebellious nature. It will be further shown that over time, Israel's contentious behavior slowly wore down Moses until, in a fit of anger, he failed to obey God and provide a basic need to the people. The fact that every time Moses deviated from his normal characterization as intercessor is preceded by resistance, demands, and complaints from the nation warrants the conclusion that Israel played a major part in Moses' exclusion from the Promised Land. Blame is thus assigned asymmetrically—Moses bears primary responsibility for his exclusion but Israel was the major contributor to Moses' downfall.

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List of Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
<i>AJSR</i>	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
ArBib	The Aramaic Bible
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
<i>BBC</i>	<i>The Broadman Bible Commentary</i> . Edited by Clifton J. Allen. 12 vols. Nashville: Broadman, 1969-1973.
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> .
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
BSC	Bible Student's Commentary
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary

<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CEV	Contemporary English Version
ConBOT	Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series
<i>CookComm</i>	<i>The Holy Bible with an Explanatory and Critical Commentary.</i> Edited by F. C. Cook. NY: Scribner's, 1871-1881. Repr., <i>The Bible Commentary.</i> 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker, [n.d.]
<i>CTR</i>	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
<i>DBSup</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de la Bible: Supplément.</i> Edited by Lous Pirot and André Robert. Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1928-
<i>EBC</i>	<i>The Expositor's Bible Commentary.</i> Edited by Frank E. Gaebelin. 12 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978-1992.
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
<i>EncJud</i>	<i>Encyclopedia Judaica.</i> Edited by Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum. 2nd ed. 22 vols. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007.
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FC	Fathers of the Church
FF	Foundations and Facets
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar.</i> Edited by Emil Kautzsch. Translated by Arther E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910.
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.</i> Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stramm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994-1999.

<i>HAR</i>	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IB</i>	<i>Interpreter's Bible</i> . Edited by George A. Buttrick et al. 12 vols. New York: Abingdon, 1951-1957.
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IECOT	International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
ISBL	Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature
ITC	International Theological Commentary
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JBQ</i>	<i>Jewish Bible Quarterly</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JHNS</i>	<i>The Johns Hopkins Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>

JQRSup	Jewish Quarterly Review Supplement
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
KHC	Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament
<i>Lange</i>	Lange, John Peter. <i>A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures Critical, Doctrinal, and Homiletical</i> . Translated, enlarged, and edited by Philip Schaff. 12 vols. [New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., n.d.]. Repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960.
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LD	Lectio Divina
Mek.	Mekilta
MSU	Mitteilungen des Septuaginta-Unternehmens
MT	Masoretic Text
NCB	New Century Bible
<i>NIB</i>	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i> . Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994-2004.
NIBCOT	New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTG	Old Testament Guides
OTL	Old Testament Library

OTM	Old Testament Message
OtSt	Oudtestamentische Studiën
PC	<i>The Pulpit Commentary</i> . Edited by H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell. 22 vols. Reprt., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.
<i>Proof</i>	<i>Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History</i>
PTMS	Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RelSRev	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
RSR	<i>Recherches de science religieuse</i>
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
ScrHier	Scripta Hierosolymitana
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SemeiaSup	Semeia Supplements
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
SSN	Studia Semitica Neerlandica
StBibLit	Studies in Biblical Literature
SubBi	Subsidia Biblica
TBC	Torch Bible Commentaries
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-2015.
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
UCPNES	University of California Publications, Near Eastern Studies

<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
<i>WBC</i>	<i>The Women's Bible Commentary</i> . Expanded ed. Edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998.
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WC	Westminster Commentaries
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Problem: Who is to Blame for Moses’
Exclusion from the Promised Land?

There are four locations in the book of Deuteronomy that speak of the denial of Moses’ entering the land of Canaan. (1) Deut 1:37: “Because of you the Lord was incensed with me too, and He said: You shall not enter it [Canaan] either.”¹ (2) Deut 3:23-28: “I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying ... ‘Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.’ But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me.”² (3) Deut 4:21: “Now the Lord was angry with me on your account and swore that I should not cross the Jordan and enter the good land that the Lord your God is assigning you as a heritage.”³ And (4) Deut 32:50-51: “You [Moses] shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend, and shall be gathered to your kin ... for you both [Moses and

¹ גם־בי התאנף יהוה בגללכם לאמר גם־אתה לא־תבא שם. Unless otherwise stated, all scripture translations are from the New Jewish Publication Society version.

² וַיִּתְעַבֵּר יְהוָה בִּי לְמַעַנְכֶם וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֵלַי (Deut 3:26).

³ וַיְהוֶה הַתְּאֲנִי־בִי עַל־דְּבִיכֶם וַיִּשָּׁבַע לְבַלְתִּי עִבְרֵי אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן וּלְבַלְתִּי־בֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אָלְהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ נַחֲלָה

Aaron] broke faith with Me among the Israelite people, at the waters of Meribah-kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin, by failing to uphold My sanctity among the Israelite people.”⁴

A cursory reading of the above four texts can leave the impression that two different parties are blamed for God’s denial of Moses: the first three appear to place the blame on the Israelites while the last places the blame on Moses himself. Why do these texts, located in the same book, present these different views? Are these texts contradictory with the opposing positions perhaps belonging to different sources?⁵ Were the passages blaming Israel an attempt to embellish Moses’ standing in order to make him appear better than he really was, and in so doing bring his reliability as a character in the narratives into question?⁶ Or is there some way these texts can be seen as

⁴ על אֲשֶׁר מְעַלְתֶּם בִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִרְיַת קָדֵשׁ מִדְּבָרְצִין עַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־קִדְשִׁתֶּם אוֹתִי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (Deut 32:51).

⁵ Among those holding to the presence of different sources, the vast majority assign the Numbers 20 and Deuteronomy 32 materials to P. See Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Text with the New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1996): 425; and P. D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, IBC (Atlanta: John Knox, 1989): 242-243. Addis speaks of Deut 1:37-38 as being of suspicious authenticity. See W. E. Addis, *The Documents of the Hexateuch Translated and Arranged in Chronological Order with Introduction and Notes* (London: David Nutt in the Strand, 1892, 1898; repr., n.p.: Kessinger Publishing, n.d.): 2:38.

⁶ Paul J. Kissling, *Reliable Characters in the Primary History: Profiles of Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha*, JSOTSup 224 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996): 32-68.

complementary?⁷ In a search for an understanding of the relationship between the various statements of blame, this thesis will focus on the material to which the Deuteronomy statements refer—the wilderness narratives of Exodus and Numbers. How do these narratives support or contradict the various statements in Deuteronomy?

Only one wilderness passage, Num 20:12, directly addresses the circumstances surrounding Moses' denial, and it explicitly places the blame on Moses and Aaron: “But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.’”⁸ Nowhere in Exodus or Numbers are the people explicitly blamed for Moses' denial. This fact supports the Deut 32 passage in blaming Moses, himself. But does this mean that Exodus and Numbers are in conflict with the statements in the early part of Deuteronomy which blame the people? Granted, as stated above, neither Exodus nor Numbers explicitly blame the people for the denial, but does the narrator tell the story in such a way that implies that the people had some roll in the denial? It is the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate that the narrator has expended significant effort to characterize both Israel and Moses, through their words and deeds, in

⁷ The most common articulation of a complementary solution is that some sin or sins of the people of Israel caused or led Moses into his own sin. See Nachmanides. Ramban (Nachmanides), *The Torah: With Ramban's Commentary*, trans. Yaakov Blinder, Nesanel Kasnett, et al., 7 vols., The Artscroll Series (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2008): 7:39. Ibn Ezra holds that Israel made Moses so angry that they caused him to poorly phrase his question to Israel in Num 20:8 leaving the impression that God was unable to produce the needed water. Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, trans. Allan R. Benyowitz, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: n.p., 2006): 3:402.

⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַתָּה־וְאַהֲרֹן יַעַן לֹא־הִאֲמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת־הַקֶּהֶל הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נָתַתִּי לָהֶם

such a way as to indicate that the Israelite people bear major responsibility for Moses' denial.

The Approach

This thesis will seek to accomplish the above goal by utilizing an approach often called narrative criticism.⁹ Chapter 2 will commence with a definition and the core characteristics of narrative criticism. Following this, there will be an examination of the techniques employed within narrative criticism. A full description of this topic is well beyond the scope of this thesis; therefore, focus will be centered on the two techniques most utilized by this thesis—characterization and mimesis. Brief descriptions will also be given to those techniques supporting the two main foci—viz., selectivity, repetition, point of view, and the narrator.¹⁰ Next will come a discussion of the motivations for using narrative criticism and a treatment of one potential problem: circular reasoning.

⁹ In non-biblical literary studies, the method in question is usually called “literary criticism,” but within biblical studies that term has a long history as an equivalent title to the historical-critical approach—a term representing multiple methods some of whom are not focused on the final form of the text. As a result, scholars have developed a variety of alternate titles. They include “composition criticism,” “holistic,” “literary analysis,” “literary approach,” “literary interpretation,” “narrative analysis,” “narrative approach,” “narrative criticism,” “narratology,” “poetics,” and/or “synchronic.” (The last term is in contrast to “diachronic” which is a synonym for the historical-critical method.) Some authors continue to use the term “literary criticism” but with the modifier “new” or “modern.” One of the rare examples of the title “literary criticism” without a modifier employed for “narrative criticism” is Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, trans. Yael Lotan (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001). In any case, readers should be aware that the method being espoused here is under several titles in the literature. Other than in quotations, the primary term employed in thesis is “narrative criticism,” with the terms “literary approach,” and “synchronic” used for variation in style.

¹⁰ The following topics within narrative criticism are not needed for this project and will not be discussed: motivation for biblical narrative techniques, management of time and space, the relationship between single stories and large narrative blocks, dialogue, and analogy. See the major manuals on narrative criticism for further details.

Following this discussion of method, the thesis will turn to the biblical text. This will be split into two parts. First, chapter 3 will deal with interactions between Moses and the Israelites (either as a whole or represented by one individual) prior to Sinai (as found in the book of Exodus). Second, chapter 4 will deal with interactions between Moses and the Israelites after Sinai (as found in the book of Numbers). This thesis will seek to demonstrate through the examination of these passages that the narrator has employed actions, speech, divine reaction, explicit statements, and comparative behaviors to establish two character benchmarks for Israel and Moses. On the one hand Israel is presented as exhibiting nearly unending disbelief, complaining, and making accusations against Moses. On the other hand, Moses, despite periods of discouragement and anger, is presented as working for Israel's benefit—unmotivated by power, wealth, or position. It will also be demonstrated that whenever Moses strays from his character benchmark, such variance is always accompanied by some difficult interaction with Israel. Finally, it will be demonstrated that as the narrative continues in time, the narrator presents increasing pressure by the people of Israel on Moses resulting, in the end, with Moses' own display of disbelief in Num 20. The net result of this examination is that the narrator of Exodus and Numbers has presented the story of the relationship between Israel and Moses in such a way as to assess asymmetrical blame for God's denial of Moses' entry into the Promised Land—explicit blame is placed on Moses while implicit blame is placed on the people.

Chapter 2

NARRATIVE CRITICISM AS A METHOD

Definitions and Core Characteristics of Narrative Criticism

The process of defining terms will begin with the most foundational level and move up through each concept dependent on the immediately lower level—in this case, the definition of a text, the definition of a narrative text, and the definition of a literary approach to a narrative text. Mieke Bal defines a “text” as follows: “...a *text* is a finite, structured whole composed of language signs.”¹¹ She then defines a “narrative” as follows: “A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent relates (‘tells’) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof.”¹²

Definitions of narrative criticism have subtle variances but for the most part they are focused on how a text tells a story. Robert Alter defines the approach as follows: “By

¹¹ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed., trans. Christine Van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997): 5; trans. of *De Theorie van vertellen en verhalen*, 2nd, rev. ed. (Muiderberg: Coutinho, 1980).

¹² Bal, *Narratology*: 5. Notice that all of her definitions are not confined strictly to written texts. Visual compositions, aural compositions, and architecture can also tell “stories.” Of course, since this thesis is concerned with a written text, its focus will be on the written dimension. Bal continues by defining the technical terms “story,” “fibula,” “event,” and many other terms. This level of detail is not needed for this thesis and will not be discussed.

literary analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else”¹³ Bal provides the following definition: “*Narratology* is the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story.’”¹⁴ John Barton gives this definition: “A poetics is an attempt to specify how literature ‘works’, how it enables us to perceive the meanings we do perceive in it.”¹⁵

The core characteristics of narrative criticism, as employed in this thesis, will consist of the following. (1) The method treats the text as a unit. This is in contrast to source criticism and its focus on determining and analyzing written sources of the final form of the text.¹⁶ And (2) the techniques of the method must be indigenous to ancient Hebrew narrative.¹⁷ The guiding philosophy for this thesis is that all writing is an attempt to communicate between two parties. On the foundational level, since the two parties are human, there will be a core of commonality in all writing. But, on a non-foundational level, since humans often come from different cultures, there will be

¹³ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981): 12.

¹⁴ Bal, *Narratology*: 3.

¹⁵ John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, rev. and enl. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996): 205.

¹⁶ Pauline A. Viviano, “Source Criticism,” in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application*, eds. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, rev. and exp. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999): 35-36.

¹⁷ By “indigenous” is meant the derivation of the principles from the text itself. Of course, this introduces the possibility of another problem—circular reasoning. A section at the end of this chapter is dedicated to this problem.

differences in styles of communication. Biblical scholars must take great care to distinguish those traits which are universal and therefore applicable to the biblical text, and those traits which are not and avoid imposing them on that text.¹⁸

Concepts and Techniques of Narrative Criticism

The entire roster of narrative criticism's concepts and techniques are too numerous to receive a full discussion within the scope of this thesis. Therefore, the focus of this section will be on those concepts and techniques needed for the accomplishment of the goal of this thesis. The primary focus will be on characterization; a secondary focus will be on mimesis. Supplementing these two foci will be treatments of other techniques utilized in characterization, viz., selectivity, repetition, and point of view, and of the individual telling the story—the narrator.

The Details of a Biblical Narrative: Selective

Biblical narrative is a "...selective representation."¹⁹ This fact has two dimensions. First, narrators do not report every event or conversation. Second, narrators select the means by which the story is told. All this is done to focus readers' attention on the proper point and shape readers' response.²⁰

¹⁸ Note the comment by Barton: "Nevertheless there is a danger that a 'literary' approach to the Bible could in its own way prove as anachronistic and inappropriate to the texts in question as other methods have been, by ignoring the difference between ancient and modern conceptions of literature." John Barton, "Reading the Bible as Literature: Two Questions for Biblical Critics," *Literature and Theology* 1 (1987): 151.

¹⁹ Berlin, *Poetics*: 97.

²⁰ Beck, *God*: 4; Fokkelman, *Reading*: 76.

A Tendency of Biblical Narrative: Repetition

Biblical narratives contain a large amount of repetition. Alter identifies five types of repetition. The sequence moves from smallest to largest. (1) *Leitwort* or keyword, (2) motif, (3) theme, (4) sequence of action, and (5) type-scene.²¹

Martin Buber defines a *Leitwort* as follows: “By *Leitwort* I understand a word or word root that is meaningfully repeated within a text or sequence of texts or complex of texts; those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed or clarified, or at any rate made more emphatic.”²² The meaning of a keyword may change over the course of the narrative.²³

Alter defines “motif” as when a “... concrete image, sensory quality, action, or object recurs through a particular narrative”²⁴ The motif can be symbolic or literal.

²¹ Alter, *Art*: 95-96.

²² Martin Buber, “*Leitwort* Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” in *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): 114; trans. of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*, 1936. Shimon Bar-Efrat clarifies that word repetitions do not always automatically indicate a keyword. “In this connection attention should be paid to three aspects: 1. how frequently the word is used in the Bible; 2. how frequently the word is used within the text or series of texts; 3. how near the repeated words are as regards their position in the text. The greater the frequency of the word in the Bible, the more densely should it occur (more often or with greater proximity); and the rarer it is, the less intensively need it occur (less often and at a greater distance).” Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson, JSOTSup 70, BLS 17 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989; repr. under series, *Understanding the Bible and Its World*, London: T&T Clark, 2004): 212.

²³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 214.

²⁴ Alter, *Art*: 95. As an example, Alter uses water in the Moses narratives. John Beck uses clothing in the Joseph narratives. John A. Beck, *God as Storyteller: Seeking Meaning in Biblical Narrative* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008): 86-87.

Theme is defined as: “An idea which is part of the value-system of the narrative—it may be moral, moral-psychological, legal, political, historiosophical, theological—[and] is made evident in some recurring pattern.”²⁵ They serve as a focal point and to unify the passage. They are rarely explicitly stated.²⁶ A sequence of actions is most commonly seen in “...three consecutive repetitions, or three plus one, with some intensification or increment from one occurrence to the next, usually concluding either in a climax or a reversal.”²⁷ Finally, there is the type-scene. “This is an episode occurring at a portentous moment in the career of the hero which is composed of a fixed sequence of motifs.”²⁸

Readers should give particular attention to small variances that are present when phrases are repeated.²⁹ These changes “...can point to an intensification, climactic development, acceleration, of the actions and attitudes initially represented, or, on the other hand, to some unexpected, perhaps unsettling, new revelation of character or plot.”³⁰

²⁵ Alter, *Art*: 95. As an example, Alter uses Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness.

²⁶ Shimon Bar-Efrat, “Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative,” *VT* 30 (1980): 168-169.

²⁷ Alter, *Art*: 95-96.

²⁸ Alter, *Art*: 96.

²⁹ Alter, *Art*: 97. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 162.

³⁰ Alter, *Art*: 97-98; Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992): 113; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, BLS 9 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983; repr., Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994): 136; David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, The Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993):148.

A specialized type of repetition is called “resumptive repetition.” It is utilized when narrators break-off a sequence of events to treat a parallel, often contemporary, sequence of events or some other matter and then return to the original sequence. It is signaled by repeating a part of the text utilized at the end of the first sequence at the beginning of the resumption of that same sequence.³¹

Readers of the wilderness narratives will observe multiple instances of characterization through repetition, e.g., Moses’ repeated intercessions, and Israel’s repeated complaints. They will also observe repeated keywords like לָן (“murmur”) and רִיב (“quarrel”). And they will see repeated sequences of action in the complaint, punishment, intercession, and abatement pattern—particularly in the book of Numbers. Num 16 (Korah’s rebellion) will utilize resumptive repetition to show the simultaneous threats under which Moses was operating.

Point of View³²

The “point of view” is the position or perspective from which a story is told.³³ Development of an accurate characterization of a player in the text is dependent on identification of the point of view of statements and actions used to formulate

³¹ For a full discussion of resumptive repetition see Burke O. Long, “Framing Repetitions in Biblical Historiography,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 385-399. Note also Robert Alter, “Introduction to the Old Testament,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987): 28; Berlin, *Poetics*: 75.

³² Only a brief treatment is given here. For more detailed discussions including debates on terminology and levels of point of view, see Bal, *Narratology*: 142-161; Berlin, *Poetics*: 43-82; and Gary Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative: Point of View in Biblical Exegesis* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007).

³³ Berlin, *Poetics*: 46.

characterization. Since point of view can move within a story (for example from narrator, to a character, to another character and back), readers must constantly work to make sure that their understanding of the point of view remain synchronized with the actual point of view of the text.

The Narrator³⁴

Characterization is communicated through narrators who utilize many of the above tools. Narrators are constructs within the narrative that tell the story.³⁵ They can be external to the tale itself—often called third-person narrators. This is the dominant narrative-type in the Bible, and the one utilized in the wilderness narratives. They can also be internal to the tale itself—often called first-person narrators. This method has a minority presence in the biblical corpus (see Nehemiah for an example).³⁶ Narrators have virtually total control of the story-telling process. Biblical narrators are selective,

³⁴ Considerably more could be written about this topic than is included in the following paragraphs. For full treatment of the topic of narrators see the following. Amit, *Reading*: 93-102; Bal, *Narratology*: 19-30; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 13-45; Beck, *God*: 55-67; Berlin, *Poetics*: 57-59, 99-101. Herbert Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 9-10; J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999): 55-72; trans. of *Vertelkunst in de bijbel: Een handleiding bij literair lezen* (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1995); Robert W. Funk, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, FF (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1988): 29-34; Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*: 52-63; Jean Louis Ska, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us': *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives*, SubBi 13 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1990): 43-54.

³⁵ Bal argues that they are the most important concept in analyzing a narrative. "The narrator is the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts. The identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character." Bal, *Narratology*: 19.

³⁶ Bal, *Narratology*: 22.

i.e., they determine what items to include and which to exclude. This selection process may be for the purpose of emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain facts or it may be to leave a gap of information for the purpose of drawing the reader into the process of building a judgment.³⁷ They determine the choice of words to report events—thereby connecting different stories, building themes, and showing changes in attitudes and character. They control the pace of narration—sometimes speeding it up to skip or de-emphasize certain particulars and sometimes slowing it down to emphasize others. They determine if facts should be given by telling (direct comment or description from the narrator) or by showing (the actions and words of the participant players). Narrators’ knowledge is at such a high level that they know the inner thoughts, motives, and feelings of all characters—including God. This is often referred to as narrators’ omniscience.³⁸ Narrators control the goals and methods of characterization. Narrators control the point of view—whether it be equivalent to or separate from a character’s point of view. Narrators build their stories with the goal of leading readers to come to the same point of view or judgment that they, the narrators, have.

The narrator controls what we see, what we hear, what we know, and when we know it. Characters are introduced and dismissed, details are revealed and hidden, our eyes are turned one direction then another. So either by editing our experience with the event or by directly offering an evaluation of the event, the

³⁷ Note Fokkelman’s comment: “Much more important, even crucial, is *the narrator’s value scale*, and here we find ourselves up against the problem ... that he is rarely willing to disclose the ‘moral of the tale’ at the end of the story. ... In fact, this process of weighing and guessing might be the very job the writer wants us to do. This draws us more actively into the story” Fokkelman, *Reading*: 148-149.

³⁸ This trait applies to third-person narrators only. First-person narrators have limited knowledge. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, “Some Methodological Considerations,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative II*, ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis and James S. Ackerman (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982): 18.

narrator is always controlling our experiences in a bid to shape our perception. Ultimately, this storyteller within the story controls our point of view.³⁹

Characterization

Characterization is the process of describing the traits of characters within a story. In the Bible, characterization is focused on the inner personality and its external manifestations through speech and act.⁴⁰ In contradistinction to typical Western literature, it is not focused on physical description.⁴¹ Methods of characterization in the Bible are usually classified within two groups: direct and indirect.⁴² Yairah Amit defines these two main groups as follows: “Direct characterization is provided by the narrator or by one of the persons in the story, while indirect characterization is the product of an analysis of the persona’s discourse and his/her actions and conduct.”⁴³

³⁹ Beck, *God*: 61.

⁴⁰ “The purpose of character description in the Bible is not to enable the reader to visualize the character, but to enable him to situate the character in terms of his place in society, his own particular situation, and his outstanding traits—in other words, to tell what kind of a person he is.” Berlin, *Poetics*: 36.

⁴¹ “Biblical narrative offers us ... nothing in the way of minute analysis of motive or detailed rendering of mental processes; whatever indications we may be vouchsafed of feeling, attitude, or intention are rather minimal; and we are given only the barest hints about the physical appearance, the tics and gestures, the dress and implements of the characters, the material milieu in which they enact their destinies. In short, all the indicators of nuanced individuality to which the Western literary tradition has accustomed us” Alter, *Art*: 114.

⁴² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 48.

⁴³ Amit, *Reading*: 74.

The Bible is very blunt in its characterization—detailing the good *and* the bad.⁴⁴ Because characterization is dependent on characters' words and actions, and these characters are capable of deceit, this raises the issue of reliability. How are readers to know whether a statement is true or an action is genuine and thus a reliable measure of a character's trait, versus a deliberately false, or mistaken, statement or self-serving action that would prove an unreliable source? This issue led Robert Alter to develop a scale of reliability.⁴⁵ At the bottom of the scale (level 4) are two methods of characterization: actions, and appearance. He assigns their reliability to the "realm of inference." The next layer up (level 3) contains two methods of characterization: direct speech by the character, and direct speech by another character. He gives their reliability a slightly higher rating but there is still room for unreliability.⁴⁶ The next layer up (level 2) is inward speech. He grades this level as "relative certainty."⁴⁷ The final, top layer (level

⁴⁴ Zvi Adar, *The Biblical Narrative*, trans. Misha Louvish (Jerusalem: Department of Education and Culture of the World Zionist Organisation, 1959): 135; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 91; Beck, *God*: 48.

⁴⁵ Alter, *Art*: 116-117. Since this, and any other, scale of reliability is developed by studying the same text on which it will be applied, the problem of circular reasoning once again arises, i.e., readers study a text in order to learn how to understand the same text. As stated before, a section at the end of this chapter is dedicated to this problem.

⁴⁶ Amit supplies some more detail on this point: "The figure's actions and external description serve as the basis for speculation that must be verified or disproved by means of other information supplied by the story." Amit, *Reading*: 76.

⁴⁷ Relative in the sense that "...there is certainty, in any case, about the character's conscious intentions, though we may still feel free to question the motive behind the intention." Alter, *Art*: 117.

1) is statements by narrators. He grades this level as “certainty.”⁴⁸ This scale forms the basis for readers to perform one of their most important parts in interpreting the text—determining character.⁴⁹

The following are comments on the methods listed in the above scale moving from those with the most certainty to those with the least.⁵⁰ Although the most reliable, explicit judgment statements by narrators (or even God) are very rare in the Bible.⁵¹ This is in accord with the Bible’s preference for showing rather than telling. When they are present, they are of high importance.

⁴⁸ Humphreys proposes a slightly modified “scale of means” by which a narrator can communicate character: “1. External description of the physical appearance, dress, social location, profession, and such of a particular character. / 2. What other characters in the story-world say of the character. / 3. Accounts of the actions of a character. / 4. The direct speech of a character. / 5. Reports on the inner thoughts or speech of a character. / 6. Direct statements by the narrator, either about the motives, attitudes, feelings, and values of a character; or that directly assert qualities of the character. ... It is on the basis of evidence of this sort in narratives that we readers make inferences leading to judgments in our constructing a character. ... I slightly rearrange the list and clump the six items into three pairs. The pairs move from outward to inward presentations of character. At the outward end of the scale we have evidence about a character that we must treat with some caution as we make inferences based on it. At the inward end of the scale we find evidence we can treat with greater confidence.” W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001): 8. The distinctions between the two systems will make for little difference within this thesis.

⁴⁹ “They [narrators] provide (and withhold) evidence with which readers must work as they construct characters through their reading.” Humphreys, *Character*: 14.

⁵⁰ Once again, it is well beyond the scope of this thesis to treat the vast literature on this topic. Emphasis will be placed on those aspects utilized in the thesis.

⁵¹ Alter, “Introduction to the Old Testament”: 22-23; Shimon Bar-Efrat “Literary Modes and Methods in the Biblical Narrative in View of 2 Samuel 10-20 and 1 Kings 1-2,” *Immanuel* 8 (1978): 23; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 54.

Regarding statements by characters, readers must understand that the statement of a character is not always and automatically equivalent to the narrator's point of view. There are times when the thoughts and values revealed by a character's statement may diverge from the thoughts and values of the narrator. Whenever this happens, readers need to be alert that the character's statement may be deceptive.⁵² Determining when the two viewpoints diverge, however, is often very difficult.

Repetition of actions and/or words is a critical component in establishing a decision on character.⁵³ The more a character practices an action, the more reliable the action is as an indicator of character. Note, however, that there are those cases where readers see a consistent block of actions indicating a character trait in one direction only to suddenly see an action pointing to a character trait in another direction. In these situations: "Only if someone repeats the same deed or similar ones several times is it possible to learn about the disposition and, in consequence, the character, while one single action need not necessarily show anything apart from a passing impulse."⁵⁴ Indeed, this understanding is the pivotal point of this thesis, i.e., Moses' behavior in Num 20 was out of accord with his previous behavior and readers should search for the cause of this deviation. In addition to actions as indicators of character, readers should note

⁵² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 54; Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*: 71-72.

⁵³ "When a character appears for the first time, we do not yet know very much about it. The qualities that are implied in that first presentation are not all 'grasped' by the reader. In the course of the narrative the relevant characteristics are repeated so often ... that they emerge more and more clearly. Repetition is thus an important principle of the construction of the image of a character." Bal, *Narratology*: 125. See also Beck, *God*: 43.

⁵⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 80.

that lack of action may also be an indicator. Once again, care should be taken since narrators are selective in what they include in the story; the lack of action may be an indicator of an unimportant detail as opposed to a lack of character.⁵⁵

Character can often be determined by comparing a main character's speech or action to those of other characters.⁵⁶ The following treatment of the wilderness narratives will demonstrate that Israel's speech and behavior often mimics the oppressing Egyptians while Moses' speech and behavior often mimics God's.

Whenever possible, characterization should be based on the evidence from multiple techniques as opposed to one technique.⁵⁷ Facilitating this principle is the fact that whereas the high-certainty, explicit judgment statements from the narrator are rare, the indirect methods are numerous. In other words, as Bar-Efrat points out, quantity makes up for lack of quality.⁵⁸

The quality of decisions on characterization is a function of the length of the narrative. Longer narratives yield a more robust and solid analysis of characters.⁵⁹ This does not, however, mean that a character will remain static over a period of time.⁶⁰ On

⁵⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 82-83; Beck, *God*: 44.

⁵⁶ Beck, *God*: 44; Berlin, *Poetics*: 40.

⁵⁷ "Characterization in biblical narrative is achieved through an artful combination of several or all of these techniques." Berlin, *Poetics*: 41.

⁵⁸ Bar-Efrat, "Literary": 23.

⁵⁹ Adar, *Biblical Narrative*: 131-132; Amit, *Reading*: 82.

⁶⁰ Bal, *Narratology*: 125; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 89-90; Berlin, *Poetics*: 40; Humphreys, *Character*: 15.

the contrary, characters often change between the beginning and end of a story, and the comparison of a character between these two poles can, itself, be another method for determining character traits.⁶¹ For those narratives that are short in length, readers should note that the shortness of a narrative may elevate the impression or importance of a particular action as a definer of character.⁶²

Implementation of all of the above techniques will often yield complexities and sometimes contradictions in a character's constitution.⁶³ In this sense, Hebrew narrative techniques are capable of taking readers through the process of determining the character of an individual very much like they do in real life.⁶⁴ In real life there are no divine pronouncements on the virtue of one individual or another and no access to the internal thoughts of others, but instead long periods of observation of actions and speech. These real-life observations often lead to complex understandings of real-life people; so it is with Hebrew narrative.⁶⁵ Such observations will never yield a perfect and complete

⁶¹ Note Humphreys: "If a figure appears one way at the beginning of a story and another way at the end, we seek recognizable patterns of growth or decay, and we seek causes both within the character and in the interaction of the character with happenings and other characters that explain the change." Humphreys, *Character*: 17. See also Bal, *Narratology*: 125.

⁶² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 80.

⁶³ Amit, *Reading*: 71; Beck, *God*: 39.

⁶⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*: 89.

⁶⁵ Auerbach, in his comparison of Greek and Hebrew writings, calls this "multilayeredness" of characters; "...the Jewish writers are able to express the simultaneous existence of various layers of consciousness and the conflict between them." Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953): 13.

picture of an individual, but they will yield enough information to allow individuals to make intelligent decisions on how to relate to the individual.

A Tendency of Biblical Narrative: Mimesis

While both aspects are present, biblical narrative has a strong preference for allowing the players to act out the story (often called “showing,” “enactment,” or “mimesis”) as opposed to narrators reporting the story (often called “telling,” or “recounting”).⁶⁶ As a general rule, the showing mode is used for important events because it facilitates the slowing, or decelerating, of narrative time which results in greater focus on the event while less important events are told in summary because it accelerates narrative time and offers less focus.

⁶⁶ Brichto gives a fuller description of “showing” in the following: “The art of narration ... lies largely in the narrator’s suppressing the ubiquity of his own voice, the consciousness of his presence behind the scenes he is evoking, by focusing the reader’s attention on the specifics, the concreteness, the spontaneity of characters and events. This aspect of narrative art is characterized as showing, as over against ... telling. ... The artistic control of the biblical narrator is ... revealed by the observation that his deployment of direct discourse is never accidental or capricious.” Brichto, *Toward*: 10-11. “Biblical stories are always a combination of reports, which are characterized by ‘telling,’ and discourses, the latter being mainly ‘showing.’” Amit, *Reading*: 50; Funk, *Poetics*: 156; Adele Berlin, “Point of View in Biblical Narrative,” in *A Sense of Text: The Art of Language in the Study of Biblical Literature: Papers from a Symposium at The Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, May 11, 1982*, JQRSup (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns): 75. Michelle J. Levine, *Nahmanides on Genesis: The Art of Biblical Portraiture*, BJS 350 (Providence: Brown University, 2009): 14.

Another aspect of biblical mimesis is its attempts to emulate real-life activities.⁶⁷

The biblical text marshals a host of features in its attempts to “mimic” the actions, sounds, sights, and mindsets of its characters’ lives. It often appears that the text is trying to create an environment where both characters and readers can, consciously or unconsciously, co-experience real-time, multi-sensory input. The following are examples of such techniques. The sound of simultaneous voices are recreated in 1 Sam 9:12-13.⁶⁸ The sound of verbal hesitancy is recreated in Ruth 2:7.⁶⁹ Indecision is recreated in Judg 3:26.⁷⁰ First Samuel 6:12 details the return of the ark from Philistia to Israel by clustering at least 5 different phrases emphasizing (mimicking) the cows’ direct path.⁷¹ Judges 19 has an unusually long amount of narrative devoted to the Levite’s delayed

⁶⁷ The phenomena here described lacks a consistent title in the literature. Buber calls the phenomena “anakoluthisch.” Martin Buber, “Die Erzählung von Sauls Königswahl,” *VT* 6 (1956): 126. Bullinger defines “anacoluthon” as a “...want of sequence or connection in a sentence, the latter part of which does not follow on or correspond with the former part.” E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated*, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968): 720. But the phenomena is more than just the bending or breaking of grammatical rules. Thus, the term “emulate” is employed here, with another appropriate title being “mimesis.” In the context of the ancient Near East, this phenomena is not restricted to biblical literature. For a discussion of mimetic literary techniques in Egyptian literature see Gary Rendsburg, “Literary Devices in the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor,” *JAOS* 120 (2000): 13-23.

⁶⁸ For discussion see Buber, “Erzählung”: 126; Avi Hurvitz, “Ruth 2:7—‘A Midrashic Gloss’?,” *ZAW* 95 (1983): 122; Gary A. Rendsburg, “Confused Language as a Deliberate Literary Device in Biblical Hebrew Narrative”: 3, doi:10.5508/jhs.1999.v2.a6; and Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986): 11.

⁶⁹ For discussion see Hurvitz, “Ruth 2:7”: 122-123.

⁷⁰ For discussion, see Jack M. Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014): 240.

⁷¹ Alter, *World*: 102-103.

departure from his father-in-law's house as if the long text mimics the long departure.⁷² Biblical stories set in Aram or involving Arameans often sprinkle Aramaic vocabulary to mimic the environment.⁷³ This feature of biblical narrative will play a vital role in Num 20 where the narrator clusters a significant quantity of vocabulary and repetition to emulate the extreme pressure under which Moses was operating—the pressure which ultimately caused him to deviate from his characteristic role of intercessor.

The Motivation for Using Narrative Criticism

With its emphasis on the final form of the text, narrative criticism has several attractive qualities as a method. The primary advantage is that it treats the text as a whole. This overarching advantage is worked out in a number of specific advantages. First, it gives an alternate explanation for many of the tensions, repetitions, and contradictions found in the text. Instead of assuming that these features are automatically signs of different sources, scholars now have to consider that they may be deliberate, rhetorical or communicative devices.⁷⁴

⁷² Licht, *Storytelling*: 106-107.

⁷³ Avi Hurvitz, "The Chronological Significance of 'Aramaisms' in Biblical Hebrew," *IEJ* 18 (1968): 236-239; Gary A. Rendsburg, "Some False Leads in the Identification of Late Biblical Hebrew Texts: The Cases of Genesis 24 and 1 Samuel 2:27-36," *JBL* 121 (2002): 23-46. Such local "flavoring" is akin to a modern movie meant for an American audience but which is set in France and has its actors playing French roles speaking English except for some universally understood French phrases like "bonjour," "au-revoir," and "merci."

⁷⁴ Berlin, *Poetics*: 112, 121; V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987): 52; Alter, *World*: 18. Related to this is the concept of the motivation for the state of the final form of the text. It may not be the case of redactors locked into some rule that forces them to preserve sources without any changes, but instead, may be redactors exercising choices on what to include and how to include it. Brichto, *Toward*: 252.

Second, the method allows for the treatment of larger units of narrative regardless of the issue of sources.⁷⁵ This is a counterbalance to exclusive focus on smaller units.⁷⁶ It allows an alternate approach to the juxtaposition of disparate material.⁷⁷

Third, it allows for a different motivation for multiple points of view. Dissonant positions no longer must be assigned to different sources. They may be deliberately included to provide different points of views.⁷⁸ It is argued here that this phenomena is seen in the verses of Deuteronomy which opened this thesis. The text is trying to assign blame to two parties without diluting the primary blame on Moses.

Fourth, it allows for the appreciation of the literary features and artistry of the text.⁷⁹ Finally, it imposes discipline in literary competencies. It is not enough to master

⁷⁵ Brichto, *Toward*: viii.

⁷⁶ Long, *Art*: 46-47.

⁷⁷ Robert Alter, "Sodom as Nexus: The Web of Design in Biblical Narrative," *Tikkun* 1:1 (1986): 30-31. Note Alter's treatment of the juxtaposition of Gen 38 (the story of Tamar and Judah) with Gen 37 and 39 (the story of Joseph). Alter, *Art*: 3-12. Culley speaks of juxtaposed divine and human points of view in Joshua 8. Robert C. Culley, *Themes and Variations: A Study of Action in Biblical Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992): 22-23, 120-121. Such a phenomena may be at work in Num 16 (Korah's rebellion) where two different rebellions are combined into one story as a memetic feature to convey the pressure under which Moses was operating in that crisis.

⁷⁸ Berlin, *Poetics*: 81-82.

⁷⁹ Richard Coggins, "Keeping up with Recent Studies X: The Literary Approach to the Bible," *ExpTim* 96:1 (October 1984): 13; Gros Louis, "Methodological": 15.

modern literary approaches, one must master ancient literary approaches as well.⁸⁰ As such, it is a method which augments other methods.⁸¹

The Issue of Circular Reasoning

Since narrative criticism builds its methods by observing the text, there exists the danger of circular reasoning. (A is true because B is true; and B is true because A is true.) In this instance, the danger arises from developing methods (“reading out”) from texts and then applying the rules (“reading in”) to the same text.⁸²

The issue of circularity is not a problem exclusive to narrative criticism; all approaches to the Bible face the same issue. Text critics study extant texts to develop rules for determining correct readings, then apply those rules to portions of the extant texts. Source critics study the biblical text to determine characteristics of various sources then apply their findings to determine the source of a particular piece of text.

Given this, the question remains: “So where does one begin the exegetical task? How can one enter the circle of textual meaning in a manner that is productive rather than

⁸⁰ Note the statement of Berlin on the need for the details of history: “One should view the Bible as the ancient literature which it is (this is the shortcoming of some modern critics); and use modern literary competence as a tool for uncovering an ancient literary competence. Modern competence alone is not enough; it must be balanced by knowledge of philology, scribal practices, ancient near eastern history, literature, etc.” Adele Berlin, “On the Bible as Literature,” *Proof 2* (1982): 326.

⁸¹ Beck, *God*: 8-9.

⁸² Berlin, “On the Bible”: 325. This can be stated another way: the whole is known via its parts, and the parts are known via the whole. Michael Fishbane, “Recent Work on Biblical Narrative,” *Proof 1* (1981): 101. Brichto indicates the same problem on another level: identifying literary genres. Interpreters need to read texts to define genre, then read passages to determine its genre. Brichto, *Toward*: 20.

self-serving, adventitious or redundant?”⁸³ Edward L. Greenstein suggests developing rules only from larger bodies of texts.⁸⁴ Fishbane suggests the use of theme-words.⁸⁵ Barton suggests that a careful movement back and forth from the whole to the part is mutually corrective of any problems.⁸⁶ Like the issue of subjectivity, the issue of circularity is always potentially present but, if treated with alertness, is insufficient to warrant the abandonment of narrative criticism.

⁸³ Fishbane, “Recent Work”: 101.

⁸⁴ Edward L. Greenstein, “The Torah as She Is Read,” *Response* 47 (1985): 27-28; Barton, *Reading the OT*: 18.

⁸⁵ Fishbane, “Recent Work”: 101.

⁸⁶ Barton, *Reading the OT*: 18.

Chapter 3

PRE-SINAI ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN MOSES AND THE ISRAELITES

The goal of this chapter is to begin the process of establishing character benchmarks for Moses and Israel by examining pre-Sinai passages where the two parties have significant interaction with each other. Parallel to this, the thesis will search for any deviations from the character benchmarks and the circumstances that surround those deviations. This is all designed to answer the following question: is there anything in Moses' character that would lead readers to conclude that he is solely responsible for his exclusion from the Promised Land or is there anything in Israel's character that, in its interaction with Moses, would lead readers to conclude that they bear a measure of blame for Moses' exclusion? The character benchmarks will be constructed using the following items: character actions, direct speech by the character and by other characters, comparison of the main characters' actions with those of other parties, and narrator statements. By the end of this chapter it will be demonstrated that the character of Moses is summarized as faithful intercessor while that of Israel is summarized as ungrateful complainer.

There are 7 occasions in Exodus where Moses and Israel had some disagreement or conflict to one degree or another: (1) Moses and two fellow Israelites who were

fighting (Exod 2:11-20), (2) Moses and the Israelite foremen (Exod 5:20-21), (3) the Israelites refusal to listen to Moses because of their extreme suffering (Exod 6:9), (4) the attack of Pharaoh at the sea (Exod 14:10-15, 31), (5) the bitter water at Marah (Exod 15:22-27), (6) Manna and quail in the Wilderness of Sin (Exod 16:1-30), and (7) water from the rock at Rephidim (Exod 17:1-7). This thesis will deal in detail only with those narratives extending beyond a few statements, viz., the two fighting Israelites (Exod 2), ים סוף (Exod 14), Marah (Exod 15), Wilderness of Sin (Exod 16), and Rephidim (Exod 17). The other two incidents (the foremen and the denial from exhaustion) provide some information for characterization of one party or the other, and will be mentioned briefly in the treatment of the ים סוף passage as a possible background, but their content is too small to warrant separate treatment. The only other passage with extensive interaction between Moses and Israel is Exod 32-33—the golden calf incident. Like the foremen and exhaustion passages, this narrative provides material for characterizing the main parties but it lacks an Israelite accusation toward Moses. Thus, it, too, will be omitted from this study.

Moses and the Two Fighting Israelites (Exod 2:11-20)

ויהי בימים ההם ויגדל משה ויצא אֶל־אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי מַכֶּה אִישׁ־עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו: וַיִּפֶן פֶּה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּדֹּף אֶת־הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל: וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁנִי וְהַגָּדוֹל שְׁנֵי־אֲנָשִׁים עֹבְרִים נָצִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָרֶשַׁע לָמָּה תִּכֶּה רֵעִי: וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שָׂמַךְ לְאִישׁ שֶׁר וְשִׁפְטָ עָלַיְנוּ הַלֵּהֲרֹגְנִי אִתָּהּ אָמַר פֶּאֶשֶׁר הֲרֹגְתָּ אֶת־הַמִּצְרִי וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן נֹדַע הַדָּבָר: וַיִּשְׁמַע פְּרָעָה אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהִרְגוֹ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי פְרָעָה וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ־מִדְיָן וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל־הַבְּעָרָה: וַיִּלְכְּתֵן מִדְיָן שְׁבַע בָּנוֹת וַתְּבַאנָה וַתִּדְּלְנָה וַתִּמְלְאנָה אֶת־הַרְהֻטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבִיהֶן: וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרְעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשַׁעַן וַיִּשְׁקֵן אֶת־צֹאנָם: וַתְּבַאנָה אֶל־רַעֲוֹאֵל אֲבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מַדּוּעַ מֵהֲרַתְּנָן בַּאֲדָמָה הַזֹּאת: וַתֹּאמְרֵן אִישׁ מִצְרִי הִצִּילָנוּ מִיַּד הָרְעִים וְגַם־דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁקֵן אֶת־הַצֹּאן: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־בְּנֹתָיו וַאֲיוֹ לָמָּה זֶה עֹבְרַתְּן אֶת־הָאִישׁ קְרָאֵן לוֹ וַיִּאכַל לֶחֶם: (Exod 2: 11-20)

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, “Why do you strike your

fellow?” He retorted, “Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock; but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock. When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come back so soon today?” They answered, “An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.” He said to his daughters, “Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break bread.” (Exod 2:11-20)

Exod 2:11-20 contains the first activities of Moses as an adult. The text records his first words, his first dialogue, his first encounter with an Israelite, and his first actions.⁸⁷ As such, this passage provides the initial contribution to the characterization of both Moses and Israel despite the fact that the conflict between the two parties is not on the corporate level—an individual Israelite acts as a type of proxy for the nation in this passage. By the end of this passage readers will see Moses established from the beginning as one who intercedes on behalf of others yet also as one who exhibits anger and violence. Israel, on the other hand, represented by its proxy the Israelite offender of Exod 2:13, is established as ones who question authority and whose actions are more like the oppressing Egyptians than the grateful Midianites.

The major positive character trait of Moses is his willingness to intervene on behalf of oppressed individuals. The narrator accomplishes this characterization by giving three thematically identical stories of Mosaic deliverance. The first story is

⁸⁷ It is Alter’s contention that the “...first dialogue assigned to a character in biblical narrative typically defines the character.” Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004): 314. If this is true (and at present there are no other proponents explicitly supporting this statement), this passage would gain even more importance.

located in Exod 2:11-12 where Moses “went out” to “see” his “kinsfolk.” From where did Moses “go out”? The narrator does not give his point of origin, but the fact that Moses was adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter indicates that he began his activity from the royal court.⁸⁸ The word “see” in verse 11 is literally “he looked into” (the root ראה plus the preposition כ) and does not indicate a simple observing of something but an investigation.⁸⁹ The focal point of Moses’ investigation is “their labors” (בְּסִבְלָתָם). This is the same word used in Exod 1:11 where the scope of their oppression is described. The

⁸⁸ James S. Ackerman, “The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story (Exodus 1-2),” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, ed. by Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, James S. Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974): 98; Martin Noth, *Exodus, a Commentary*, trans. by J. S. Bowden, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962): 35; trans. of *Das zweite Buch Mose, Exodus*, ATD 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959); Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986): 33-34.

⁸⁹ “The text reads: ‘He saw *into* their burdens’ not: ‘He saw their burdens’.” Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot (Exodus)*, trans. Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, The Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, [1981]): 1:48. See also Ramban (Nachmanides), *Torah: 2* (part 1): 27. Similar constructions are found in 1 Sam 1:11 and Gen 29:32. 1 Sam 1:11: “And she [Hannah] made this vow: “O Lord of hosts, if You will look upon the suffering [רָאָה תְּרַאֶה בְּעֵינַי] of Your maidservant” Gen 29:32: “Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben; for she declared, ‘It means: “The Lord has seen my affliction [רָאָה יְהוָה בְּעֵינַי]”....” See also Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes*, The Schocken Bible 1 (Dallas: Word, 1995): 264; Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus: A Holistic Commentary on Exodus 1-11*, ed. Jeffrey H. Tigay, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013): 38.

narrator does not explain how Moses knows that the Hebrews are his kinsmen.⁹⁰ Moses encounters an Egyptian (identity unknown but probably a foreman⁹¹) “beating” (נכה) a Hebrew (v. 11). He then proceeds to “beat” (נכה) the Egyptian and bury him in the sand (v. 12).⁹²

⁹⁰ The translation “kinsman” is in the Hebrew literally “his brothers” (אָחָיו). Houtman states that the term emphasizes the blood ties between Moses and the Hebrews. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, trans. Johan Rebel and Sierd Woudstra, 4 vols., HCOT (Kampen: Kok, 1993): 1:297. Point of view must be considered here, however. Is this an instance where the narrator is relaying information from Moses’ point of view meaning that both the character Moses and the narrator are aware of the kinship ties, or is this an instance where the narrator is relaying information from the narrator’s point of view meaning that Moses was not aware of the kinship relationship while the narrator and readers were? If the former is true, Moses’ role in the story would be from an Egyptian orientation while if the latter is true, his role would be from an Israelite orientation. It seems incongruent for someone from an Egyptian orientation to kill another Egyptian. For that reason it is here held that Moses was aware of some kinship relationship. Regardless, in either case, Moses quickly enters the plot and takes the role of one having authority—a supervisor or overseer.

⁹¹ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus: In the Revised Version with Introduction and Notes*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911; repr., n.p.: Kessinger Publishing, n.d.): 13; J. H. Hertz, ed., *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation, and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1960): 211; Houtman, *Exodus*: 1:297; George Rawlinson, “Exodus,” *PC* 1:35. Murphy suggests a private individual but the context seems to prefer someone in a supervisory role. James G. Murphy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Exodus, with a New Translation* (repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997): 29.

⁹² The details of this account will be discussed under the negative characteristics of Moses.

The second story has Moses intervening in some sort of altercation between two Hebrews (v. 13).⁹³ In this case Moses confronted the wrongdoer.⁹⁴ Readers are left with the impression that Moses broke up the fight but only after his authority is questioned and he comes to the realization that the knowledge of his prior treatment and disposal of the Egyptian has become widespread (v. 14). He then fled Egypt in fear (v. 15).

The third story has Moses intervening on behalf of seven Midianite shepherdesses (v. 16). They had exerted considerable effort to fill the watering troughs for their flocks, but before the flocks were cared for they were driven off by another group of shepherds (v. 17). Moses intervened to halt the confiscation of the shepherdesses' work (v. 17).⁹⁵ These three interventions provide coverage for three of the four possible ethnic combinations: foreigner against kinsman, kinsman against kinsman, and foreigner against

⁹³ The verb נִצַּח essentially means “struggle” or “fighting” and is here employed in the *niphal* stem indicating reciprocity—fighting with one another. Its range of meaning, however, can yield ambiguity. Does this verb indicate activity equivalent to the level of הָרַג (“kill”) in the following context (v. 14) or to the level of נָכַח (“strike”) in the preceding context (v. 11)? The ambiguity of meaning remains even in a broader context. The word נִצַּח is used in Exod 21:22 and Deut 25:11 where it appears both parties survive. In contrast, the same word is used in 2 Sam 14:6 where one combatant dies during a struggle. Houtman suggests that for this Exod 2 passage the odds are that the contest will result in a death. Houtman, *Exodus*: 1:302.

⁹⁴ Readers are not told how Moses knows this fact.

⁹⁵ The Hebrew text appears to simulate the level of work expended by the shepherdesses in drawing the water by concentrating verbal forms in verses 16 and 19. Note Ackerman, “Literary”: 103: “... the narrative is far more detailed in describing how the daughters watered their flock. There are two possible explanations: to convey the bustling, energetic, activity of the young women—establishing their attractiveness for the listeners. Or, more likely, to convey the backbreaking effort involved in watering the flock—establishing even greater outrage among the listeners when the rowdy shepherds come along and drive them away from their hard-gained water.” Note also Alter, *Five*: 316.

foreigner.⁹⁶ This observation shows the broadness of Moses' intercessions—not only are his actions repeated but they are directed to anyone needing assistance.

Having seen the positive aspects of Moses' character, is there anything negative about his character? Is there any foundational flaw that, years later, would arise and cause his own, unassisted downfall? Some have presented Moses as faultless (or near faultless). The biblical presentation, however, is much more nuanced, as will be seen presently.⁹⁷

The negative characterization of Moses is not as evident as his positive characterization. Indeed, at nearly every point it is somewhat ambiguous. The first question regards Moses' treatment of the Egyptian. Specifically, did Moses commit

⁹⁶ Greenberg, *Exodus*: 46. The one missing combination is kinsman as oppressor against foreigner, which combination would not be applicable here since Israel was in the position of slave.

⁹⁷ One example of this is Rashi who states that the Hebrew being beaten by the Egyptian was the husband of the wife with which the Egyptian was having relations. When the Egyptian suspected that the Hebrew husband knew this, he started to mistreat him. Rashi, *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated*, ed. Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg, The ArtScroll Series / The Sapirstein Edition (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1994): 2:16. See also Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold, 7 vols. (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1948); rpt., (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998): 2:279-280. Calvin, although admitting of some infirmity on Moses' part, speaks of Moses being inspired by the Holy Spirit to have courage to perform his act of striking. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham (rpt., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009): 1:47. Bush speaks of a divine commission. George Bush, *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Exodus: Designed as a General Help to Biblical Reading and Instruction* (N.p.: Mark H. Newman, 1843; rpt., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005): 1:30. Similarly, Maimonides speaks of the force of the spirit of the Lord not abandoning Moses at the crisis moment. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. by Shlomo Pines, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963): 2:397. In a slightly different manner, there is the case of Josephus who, in order to present as positive a case as possible to his Greek readers, neglects to even mention the fact that Moses killed someone. W. H. Bennett, *Exodus*, NCB (Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1908): 50.

murder? Unlike 2 Sam 12:1 where, in the midst of the David/Bathsheba/Uriah incident, the narrator explicitly states “but the Lord was displeased with what David had done” the narrator here gives no explicit ruling on the rightness or wrongness of Moses’ action.

Readers are left to ponder the question whether the lack of written judgment on the morality of Moses’ act is merely an indication that the narrator considered the question unimportant in the greater scheme of things or whether the narrator has an opinion but is leaving it up to the readers to reconstruct the proper content of this informational gap.⁹⁸

The latter option is the path taken here.

Verse 11 states that the Egyptian was “beating” (נכה) the Hebrew. What was the nature of this “beating”? Like the word נצה, the word נכה can mean a non-fatal striking or a fatal blow.⁹⁹ Was the Egyptian trying to kill the Hebrew or merely inflicting some form of corporal punishment? In verse 12 Moses “struck” the Egyptian where the same

⁹⁸ Sternberg notes that missing information is part of all biblical narratives. He classifies this missing information in two ways: a “gap” which deals with information necessary to the narrative and which the reader must reconstruct, and “blank” which deals with information incidental to the narrative. Distinguishing between the two is often difficult. See Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985): 183, 186-187, 236-237. For support of the position that the incident at hand is simply a part of the logistics of the story to explain Moses’ movement out of Egypt (i.e., a “blank”) and, as such, requires no further judgment by the reader, note Coggins: “The episode [Moses striking the Egyptian] is described in a way which we may feel is almost casual. Moses apparently simply went up to the man and killed him. Our text scarcely regards it as murder; it is as if it were simply a literary device to lead into the next episode.” Richard Coggins, *The Book of Exodus*, Epworth Commentaries (Peterborough: Epworth, 2000): 11.

⁹⁹ The word נכה occurs in the HB approximately 500 times. Examples of a striking not resulting in death are Exod 21:18 (in the context of fighting), Exod 5:14, 16; Jer 20:2; 37:15; Zech 13:6 (these 5 references in the context of corporal punishment), Isa 50:6; 58:4; and Prov 23:35. Examples of striking resulting in death are Exod 21:12, 20, and 21:1. See J. Conrad, “נכה *nkh*; מכה *makkâ*; נקה *nākeh*; נכא *nk*,” TDOT 9:415-423; Coggins, *Exodus*: 11; and Houtman, *Exodus*: 1:297-298.

word נכה is used. The fact that Moses “hid him in the sand” (v. 12) and that the next day’s Hebrew wrongdoer would use the term “kill” (v.14, הרג) when referring to Moses’ action, argues that Moses did, indeed, kill the Egyptian. Some have used this certainty to argue that the first instance of נכה must also mean kill, and, thus, the Egyptian’s intent was to kill the Hebrew.¹⁰⁰ If this is true, then Moses’ actions could have some basis for justification. Equivalent meanings of the two instances of נכה may not be accurate, however. One could argue that Moses’ נכה was equivocation not equivalency, i.e., while the Egyptian’s נכה was meant to inflict only corporal punishment, Moses’ נכה was, asymmetrically, intended to kill.¹⁰¹ If the latter is true, Moses cannot be seen as purely righteous.

Another indicator in the text meant to aid the reader in filling in the moral information gap is Moses’ turning “this way and that” (v. 12). Some have argued this action indicated that Moses was looking for a deliverer to rectify the situation but when he found none, he correctly took matters into his hand.¹⁰² This seems at odds with the

¹⁰⁰ Lester Meyer, *The Message of Exodus: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981): 38: “He [Moses] strikes the Egyptian in the same way (the same Hebrew word is used) and kills him.” See also Noth, *Exodus*: 35-36. In contrast, Osborn is critical of translations that import the meaning “kill” back into verse 11 from verse 12. Noel D. Osborn, and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series, Helps for Translators (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999): 38.

¹⁰¹ This is Houtman’s position: “What he sees so enrages Moses that he resorts to an act of violence which stands in no proportion to the wrong of the Egyptian.” Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:298.

¹⁰² Ginzberg, *Legends*: 2:280; Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*, trans. with an introduction by Walter Jacob (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1992): 37-38; Greenberg, *Exodus*: 38; James K. Bruckner, *Exodus*, NIBCOT (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008): 31-32. Interpreters often site Genesis Rabbah using Isa 59:16 as a basis for the argument.

tenor of the phrase. When one is seen looking both ways, it usually indicates an attempt to insure that there are no eyewitnesses to some immoral or illegal activity that is about to occur.¹⁰³

Certainty is missing on the issue of the moral quality of Moses' actions toward the Egyptian. On balance, it appears that Moses intended to kill the Egyptian, but even if he did not, Moses has exhibited untamed passion and/or anger. In either case, the picture of Moses as pure intercessor on behalf of the oppressed must be qualified.

The second instance of negative characterization occurs in the midst of the second incident. When Moses confronts the Hebrew wrongdoer (vv. 13-14), he is confronted with the reply "who made you chief and ruler over us?" Moses is left speechless and, after some internal pondering, decides to flee the country for his safety (vv. 14-15). Although the question shows ingratitude, it was accurate. At this point Moses did not have authority to practice such measures.¹⁰⁴

Turning now to the characterization of Israel, as represented by its proxy, much of the characterization of the wrongdoer is accomplished by comparing his actions and words with those of other characters in the account. He was perfectly content to act like

¹⁰³ Childs expands on this thought as follows: "Moses is anxious that his act be done in secrecy. The sequence indicates that the slaying was not initiated in a burst of passion or following a vain attempt to dissuade the oppressor (so Benno Jacob). Verse 12 emphasizes the note of secrecy and stealth in the piling up of clauses: he looked both ways; he observed no one; he struck him (there was no struggle as in v. 13); he buried him quickly because the ground was sandy." Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970): 165.

¹⁰⁴ "The guilty Hebrew's question is well taken, even if the source is personally objectionable" William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1999): 168. See also Childs, *Biblical*: 166; Houtman, *Exodus*: 1:294.

an Egyptian oppressor in his scuffle with his fellow Hebrew (v. 13) and to question Moses' authority (v 14) when Moses dared to confront him about it. His behavior is even more egregious when it is compared with the Midianites' reaction to Moses' intervention in the following incident (vv. 16-20). When considering the Midianite episode, Fretheim writes:

There is an ironic relationship between this story and the preceding one. Moses is not welcome in the Israelite community, but here Moses is shown considerable hospitality by *strangers* Israel does not appreciate his acts of justice on its behalf; the Midianites welcome it. Israelites engage in accusations of Moses; the daughters of Reuel publicly sing his praises.¹⁰⁵

The volume of text dedicated to the characterization of this single Hebrew is minor in comparison to the characterization of Moses, but when future considerations are included, these traits loom large. As Moses would continue to act as a deliverer in the future (this time with divine authority), so would the Israelites continue to question the

¹⁰⁵ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1991): 44. Note also Dozeman who points out that while the fellow-Hebrew wrongdoer categorizes Moses as one who “kills” (הרג), the foreigner Midianites categorize him as one who “rescues” (נצל). Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009): 90. Note also Childs: “Jethro’s three remarks, each of which reflects a slightly different emotion ... also work as a literary device to enhance the contrast in response between an earlier example of aid that had been rejected and one of true gratitude.” Childs, *Biblical*: 167. See also Rita J. Burns, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers: With Excursus on Feast/Ritual and Typology*, OTM 3 (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1983): 38-39.

authority and competence of Moses and to yearn for things Egyptian.¹⁰⁶ This behavior would ultimately be a major contributor to the exclusion of Moses from the Promised Land.

In summary, Exod 2 describes the first encounter between Moses and an Israelite. While the account lacks explicit judgment on the character of the various players, the narrator does utilize the players' own actions and words to implicitly characterize the participants. Moses' repeated interventions on behalf of an abused party characterizes him as willing to sacrifice in order to help the oppressed. In contrast, the Israelite's fighting another Israelite and rejecting Moses' intervention is behavior more aligned with the behavior of the oppressing Egyptians and less aligned with the gratefulness of the foreign Midianites. Yet, there is enough ambiguity in the account to conclude that the characterization of Moses and the offending Israelite is not a case of good vs. evil. For all the positive things that can be said about Moses, the reader leaves the account with the

¹⁰⁶ Concerning foreshadowing, Fretheim notes the following regarding the wrongdoer's reaction to Moses: "Moses' action anticipates issues facing a leader in Israel. ... Though an Israelite, he is not recognized as a judge over 'us' This relates ahead to the refusal of the Israelites to listen to Moses (6:9-11; cf. 4:1) and to disputes concerning Moses' authority (5:21; 14:11-12; cf. Num. 16:12-14). They would rather serve the Egyptians! As the Hebrew accused Moses of trying to kill him, so also would the Israelites in the wilderness (16:2-3; 17:3-4). This language also anticipates questions regarding Moses' judgments in 18:13-26. In a more general way, it anticipates conversations between God and Moses regarding his abilities to assume the call." Fretheim, *Exodus*: 43-44. See also Ackerman, "Literary": 99; Alter, *Five*: 314; John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus* ([Darlington, England]: Evangelical Press, 2000): 1:68; Gordon F. Davies, *Israel in Egypt: Reading Exodus 1-2*, JSOTSup 135 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992): 128; David Daiches, *Moses: The Man and His Vision* (New York: Praeger, 1975): 41; Fox, *Five*: 265; Greenberg, *Exodus*: 38; Meyer, *Exodus*: 39; Propp, *Exodus*: 168; J. Coert Rylaarsdam and J. Edgar Park, "Exodus," *IB* 1:863.

fact that Moses failed in his attempt to end oppression among the Israelites. Propp states this as follows:

It is not killing per se that disturbs the author; the Torah is no pacifist tract. There are military victories and bloody executions There is, however, a world of difference between killing in obedience to Yahweh and killing to avenge a beating. And Moses does not even sin boldly. The Levites and Phinehas do not peer this way and that before striking.¹⁰⁷

Finally, the interaction of the delivering Moses and the questioning Israelite foreshadows the next few decades of the relationship between Moses and the nation of Israel and feed directly into the question of who is to blame for Moses' exclusion. At this point, there is not sufficient information to fully answer the question of assessment of blame, but the narrator will continue to build on this base in the following narratives.

The Attack of Pharaoh at the ים סוף (Exod 14:10-15, 31)¹⁰⁸

ויפְרֹעַה הַקָּרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲנִה מִצְרַיִם נֹסֵעַ אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הַמִּבְּלִי אֵיךְ־קָבְרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ לְמוֹת בְּמִדְבָּר מֵהַזֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לָנוּ לְהוֹצִיאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם: הַלֹּא־זֶה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְנוּ אֵלֶיךָ בְּמִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר חַדְל מִמְּנֹנוּ וְנַעֲבֹדְךָ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם כִּי טוֹב לָנוּ עֲבַד אֶת־מִצְרַיִם מִמִּתְּנוּ בְּמִדְבָּר: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם אֶל־תִּירְאוּ הַתִּצְּבֹו וַיֵּרָאוּ אֶת־יְשׁוּעַת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲשֶׁר רְאִיתֶם אֶת־מִצְרַיִם הַיּוֹם לֹא תִסִּיפוּ לְרַאתָם עוֹד עַד־עוֹלָם: הַיְהוּ יִלְחַם לָכֶם וְאַתֶּם תַּחֲרִישׁוּן: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִהִתְצַעֵק אֵלַי דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ: (Exod 14: 10-15)

וַיֵּרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ בֵּיהוָה וּבְכַמֶּשֶׁת עַבְדוֹ: (Exod 14: 31)

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the Lord. And they said to Moses, “Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’” But Moses said to the people, “Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom

¹⁰⁷ Propp, *Exodus*: 167.

¹⁰⁸ Please note that the block quotes of Hebrew text and of English translation used in this thesis will not always have every verse included. Consult the English translation for a listing of which verses are excluded.

you see today you will never see again. The Lord will battle for you; you hold your peace!” Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ... [Vv. 16-30 omitted.] ... And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and in His servant Moses. (Exod 14:10-15, 31)

Exodus 14 tells the story of Israel’s approach to and positioning by the sea as they left Egypt; it contains the first corporate complaint from Israel to Moses. The narrator continues building the picture of the characterizations of Moses and Israel. Readers will continue to see Moses as intercessor, but they will also have to ponder a possible flaw—disbelief in God’s abilities—a theme close to the heart of God’s pronouncement of exclusion in Num 20. At the same time, readers will see the expansion of Israel’s negative behavior from merely questioning authority to complaint and criticism toward Moses, and they will also have to ponder a possible new flaw—lying.

The pertinent text begins at verse 10 with Israel’s sudden recognition of the arrival of Pharaoh’s army. In their great fear (וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד), Israel “cried out” (וַיִּצְעֲקוּ) to the Lord. When considering the question of the Israel’s characterization, how should readers view these actions? Do they signal some kind of moral flaw and thus serve as criticism of the nation, or are they a quite reasonable response to the situation? Given that the same word, צעק, is used by the Israelites in 2:23 when they pleaded for help while under heavy Egyptian bondage and there is no hint of criticism in that passage, and that Israel found itself in a dire situation here in 14:10, many scholars have found Israel’s reaction quite normal and expected.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1987): 191; Noth, *Exodus*: 112.

This conclusion is complicated by what immediately follows: the sarcastic questioning of Moses (v. 11): “And they said to Moses, ‘Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?’” The question opens with a double negative (הִמְבִּילֵי אֵין). In many modern languages the second negative cancels the first negative leaving a positive statement. In Hebrew, however, such a construction was used to emphasize the negative.¹¹⁰ Friedman expands on this as follows: “The redundancy dramatizes the question ... as if to say, ‘Was it because of a complete and utter lack ...’—the way people speak when accusing someone of doing something completely senseless.”¹¹¹ Sarcasm fills the question as Walter Kaiser explains: “They mocked in the most satirical tone possible (since Egypt specialized in graves and had about three-fourths of its land area available for grave sites).”¹¹² Regarding the second question, Cassuto notes a parallel between Israel’s question (“what have you done to us”) and the Egyptian question in verse 5 (“what is this we have done, releasing Israel ...”). “At this fateful moment both peoples regret what

¹¹⁰ GKC §152:y. Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976): §394. Note the exact same construction in 2 Kgs 1:3: “Is there no God in Israel that you go to inquire of Baal-zebub ...? (Also repeated in 2 Kgs 1:6, 16.)

¹¹¹ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: With a New English Translation* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001): 216. The CEV translation has “Wasn’t there enough room in Egypt to bury us?”

¹¹² Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” *EBC* 2:387. See also Jacob, *Exodus*: 397; Brukner, *Exodus*: 130.

they have done; as yet they do not understand that it is all the work of Providence.”¹¹³

Once again, readers find the Israelites mimicking the behavior of the Egyptians.

Israel’s complaint continues in verse 12: “Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’” Was this claim true? Israel’s quotation is not to be found in any prior passage. The closest passages to this are 5:21 and 6:9.¹¹⁴

Reactions to this absence are mixed. Some see the lack of corresponding text as no problem. Israel may have actually spoken these words but they were never narrated, and their recitation at this point is reasonable.¹¹⁵ Some see the claim as a literary device to heighten dramatic effect.¹¹⁶ Some see it as a “delayed narrative exposition” that explains that while they never said these words they accurately reflect what they *would* have

¹¹³ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967): 164; first English ed. of *פירוש על ספר שמות* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1951). Propp’s comment “...the Hebrews are the Egyptians’ equals for obtuseness ...” is also appropriate. Propp, *Exodus*: 494. Note also Alter, *Five*: 392 and Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster, 1974): 226.

¹¹⁴ Exod 5:21: “...and they [the Israelite foremen] said to them [Moses and Aaron], ‘May the Lord look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers—putting a sword in their hands to slay us.’” Exod 6:9: “But when Moses told this [that God was about to deliver them from Egypt] to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.”

¹¹⁵ Currid, *Exodus*: 1:294; Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991): 72; Rawlinson, “Exodus,” *PC* 1:327; Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011): 215. Propp, *Exodus*: 495, seems also to prefer this solution. The Samaritan Pentateuch, in order to harmonize the passages, inserts the text of 14:12 in Exod 6:9.

¹¹⁶ Coggins, *Exodus*: 59.

said.¹¹⁷ Still others see them as gross exaggerations or a downright lie.¹¹⁸ Certainty is lacking, but the thought of Exod 2:12 is a reasonable derivation from the thoughts contained in Exod 5:21 and 6:9. Thus, readers should probably give Israel the benefit of a doubt and not accuse the nation of gross exaggeration or falsehood.

Another aspect of Israel's complaint is its points of emphases. In their accusation against Moses, "Egypt" or "Egyptians" are mentioned five times, and "wilderness" is mentioned twice. Jacob observes: "When they [Israel] saw the Egyptians approaching they were so upset that they could hardly mention 'Egypt' sufficiently often."¹¹⁹ Running parallel with this is Israel's focus on Moses. The personal pronoun "you" referring to Moses is used three times; meanwhile, Yahweh is never mentioned thus indicating that their focus was in the wrong place.¹²⁰

The activities of verses 11 and 12 call for a reconsideration of the "crying out" in verse 10. On the one hand, readers encounter a nation that seems to be sincerely crying out to God for help (verse 10), but on the other hand who is rather viciously attacking the

¹¹⁷ Alter, *Five*: 392. Similarly, see R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973): 120.

¹¹⁸ "The exaggeration of their recollection of a doubt formerly expressed reaches the pitch of falsehood." John Peter Lange, "Exodus, or the Second Book of Moses," *Lange* 1:49. Cook sees a "gross exaggeration" F. C. Cook and Samuel Clark, "Exodus," *CookComm* 1:308. Osborn, *Exodus*: 337, does not label them an outright lie but does believe that they were spoken for the first time in Exod 14.

¹¹⁹ Jacob, *Exodus*: 397. Buber points out that these seven references all occur in closing positions in their respective clauses. Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (N.p.: n.p., 1946); repr. (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998): 86.

¹²⁰ Fox, *Five*: 331; Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," *NIB* 1:793; Friedman, *Commentary*: 216.

supposed representative of this God (verses 11-12). Which picture is accurate or dominant? Is Israel being characterized as sincere and trusting or is it being characterized as doubting and attacking? As expected, this dichotomy has garnered much comment. Nachmanides gives several suggestions involving various combinations of all or part of the nation complaining to either God or Moses within an immediate or delayed time span.¹²¹

Considering the question-at-hand—the characterization of Israel—it appears that no matter what solution is chosen, the nation, in whole or in vast majority, is depicted in less than favorable light. They attack the person who had performed numerous signs in their sight; they show no memory of God’s miraculous works on their behalf or of their oppressive treatment at the hands of the Egyptians. They seemingly know more about Pharaoh’s intent than God’s.¹²² And, most seriously, by preferring a permanent stay in Egypt over a temporary passage through a wilderness, they were rejecting God’s plan for their deliverance.¹²³ In the mildest terms readers would have to conclude that Israel’s faith in God is short-lived. In the severest terms readers would have to conclude Israel is in outright rebellion.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Ramban (Nachmanides), *Torah*: 2 (part1):314-317.

¹²² Fretheim, *Exodus*: 155.

¹²³ George W. Coats, *Exodus 1-18*, FOTL 2A (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): 115.

¹²⁴ “To appeal to God is to appeal to Moses. The two are not the same. But the act is the same. To rebel against Moses is to rebel against God.” George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God*, JSOTSup 57 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988): 164.

Turning now to the characterization of Moses, in the face of all the criticism levelled at him, Moses responds not with self-defense or a counter-attack but with assurance. “The three rhetorical and challenging questions of his people are answered with three successive and reassuring imperatives.”¹²⁵ Considering this evidence, the narrator seems to characterize Moses well.

Beginning with verse 15, however, readers now have to consider—or perhaps, like the Israelites, reconsider—the character of Moses. Moses issues the statement of reassurance in verses 13-14 but verse 15 contains, God questioning Moses as to why he, Moses, was crying out to Him. Is this a case where Moses gave assurance to the nation but then had subsequent doubts? Solutions to this question usually revolve around three issues. (1) To whom is God addressing the question in verse 15—Moses or Israel through Moses? (2) What is the nature of God’s question—a sharp criticism or a mild prodding? And (3) what is the chronology of events—does the “crying out” in verse 15 occur before or after Moses’ assurance to the people? The answers to these questions will guide readers as they ponder the question of whether a character flaw of Moses is present.

The issues of addressee and nature will be treated together. While many scholars are united in the view that Moses, as the representative of the people, is seen as one with the people in their original petition (v. 10), opinions on the two questions at-hand

¹²⁵ Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 114. Exod 14:13: “...But Moses said to the people, “Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today ...”

diverge. Some hold that the question is a rebuke through Moses aimed at the people.¹²⁶ Some hold that the question is a rebuke aimed at Moses, the gist being that the urgency of the situation indicates that the time for prayer is over—it is time to get going!¹²⁷ Some hold that the question is not a rebuke but an encouragement aimed at Moses.¹²⁸

Regarding the issue of chronology, if Moses' "crying out" is after his assurances to the people, it could be construed as indicating doubt on his part—and thus, a character flaw. The usual sequence of steps for a wilderness crisis are (1) the people make a demand of Moses, (2) Moses petitions God, (3) God responds to Moses, (4) Moses instructs the people, and (5) provision is made. If the chronology of events for the crisis in Exod 14 is straightforward, it would appear that step 2 (petition) is after step 4 (instructions). Scholars have made numerous proposals to address this issue. Some insert some added steps into the above scheme, viz., that after step 4, Moses continued to

¹²⁶ "The rebuke is clearly aimed over the head of Moses against the people" Brueggemann, "Exodus," *NIB* 1:794. See also Currid, *Exodus*: 1:298; Dozeman, *Exodus*: 314; Noth, *Exodus*: 113.

¹²⁷ Cassuto, *Exodus*: 165; Freitheim, *Exodus*: 157-158; Jacob, *Exodus*: 398; Meyers, *Exodus*: 115; Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage*, *The Bible Speaks Today: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005): 161; Rashi, *Torah*: 2:155; Sarna, *Exodus JPS*: 73. Note Mek. 216:5: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: 'Moses, My children are in distress ... and you stand there reciting long prayers. ... There is a time to be brief in prayer and a time to be lengthy.'"

¹²⁸ Jamieson states that the nature of the encouragement was knowing how God would affect the deliverance. "When, in answer to his prayers, he received the divine command to go forward, he no longer doubted by what kind of miracle the salvation of his mighty charge was to be effected." Robert A. Jamieson, A. R. Faussett, and David Brown, *A Commentary Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, 3 vols. (N.p., n.d.; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989): 1:327. Keil sees it as "...an admonition to resolute action." C. F. Keil, and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin, vol. 1 of *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans): 2:45; repr. of *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (n.p., n.d.).

petition God with unrecorded, private prayers.¹²⁹ The Syriac version retains the concept of Moses' continued petitions but dispenses with the idea of private prayers by adding the phrase "and Moses cried out to Yahweh."¹³⁰ Calvin holds that verse 15 should be in the pluperfect—Yahweh had said to Moses.¹³¹ Targum Onqelos changes the question into a statement: "Your prayer has been accepted."¹³² Yet another group holds that the seeming lack of chronology is caused by a change in sources.¹³³

In the face of all these proposals, a tentative solution centered on the theme of urgency is attempted. The text appears to expend some effort reconstructing the size and speed of Egypt's approach toward Israel. "The writer passes over their route and trek and only reports their arrival—the brevity of the narration matches the presumed speed; in the blink of an eye they are there."¹³⁴ At this point it is interesting to note that Yahweh's question of Moses in verse 15 is not the only variance from the 5-step crisis sequence.

¹²⁹ Bruckner, *Exodus*: 131; Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments: The Text Printed from the Most Correct Copies of the Present Authorized Translation, Including the Marginal Readings and Parallel Text, with a Commentary and Critical Notes Designed as a Help to a Better Understanding of the Sacred Writings*, 6 vols. (NY: Bangs & Emory, 1827): 1:354; Bush, *Exodus*: 1:176. Cook speaks of an omitted intercession. Cook and Clark, "Exodus," *CookComm* 1:308.

¹³⁰ Currid, *Exodus*: 1:298; Durham, *Exodus*: 189.

¹³¹ Calvin's translation is "*Dixerat autem Jehova ad Mosen, Quid clamas ad me?*" Calvin, *Commentaries*: 1:243, 246

¹³² Israel Drazen, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus: An English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary (Based on the A. Sperber and A. Berliner Editions)* (N.p.: Ktav, 1990): 143.

¹³³ Driver, *Exodus*: 118 who attributes it to E; Propp, *Exodus*: 479 who attributes it to P.

¹³⁴ Houtman, *Exodus*: 2:226-227.

Israel's normal recipient of demands is Moses. But in the sequence of Exod 14:10 they bypassed Moses and petitioned God. It is suggested that the theme of urgency is continued by the Egyptian's sudden arrival shocking Israel, at least temporarily, out of their usual pattern. They were desperate for an immediate answer and they went straight to God and not Moses. Shortly thereafter, however, they reverted to the usual pattern and began railing against Moses (vv. 11-12) who then gives the reassurance to the people (vv. 13-14). It is proposed, in agreement with some of the above solutions, that Moses did petition God between verses 12 and 13 but that the narrator, rather than further bogging down the account of Egypt's rapid advance, omitted the petition and recorded God's response in verse 15. This accomplished two things: (1) it left the sense of urgency unencumbered, and (2) it provided a seamless transition to the account of the crossing.¹³⁵

All of the above discussion leaves the main question unanswered—how should readers construct the characterizations of Moses and Israel? The following are some summary statements. The account lacks direct characterization from the narrator. Character can be inferred indirectly via God's question in verse 15; the straightforward reading of the question is that it is a mild rebuke issued to Moses revolving around the issue of urgency—not disbelief. Thus, the characterization of Moses, while not perfect, does appear to continue to be positive. Regarding Israel, the evidence is insufficient to accuse them of lying. The nation began the account in a positive light with their petition

¹³⁵ Note Dozeman: "The divine complaint against Moses (v. 15) provides a transition to the command that the Israelites journey toward the sea." Dozeman, *Exodus*: 317. Also note Durham: "The inquiry of v 15 is best left in its present location and assumed to be a response to a complaint of Moses that is now lost. What follows the inquiry, Yahweh's instruction to Moses, and through Moses, to Israel, fits the sequence perfectly." Durham, *Exodus*: 192.

directly to God, but they quickly revealed their flaws with their verbal attack on Moses. Israel's complaints leveled against Moses in Exod 14 are the first of a long series of complaints against Moses—a phenomena referred to as the “murmuring motif.”¹³⁶ As will be seen, this unending chain of complaints eventually wore down Moses and played a significant role in his exclusion from the Promised Land.

The Bitter Water at Marah (Exod 15:22-27)

וַיִּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם־סוּף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל־יַמְדֵּבַר־שׁוּר וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹש־יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר וְלֹא־מָצְאוּ מַיִם:
 וַיָּבֹאוּ מַרְתָּה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לִשְׁתּוֹת מֵיָם מִמַּרְתָּה כִּי מַרִּים הֵם עַל־כֵּן קָרָא־שְׁמָהּ מַרְתָּה: וַיִּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל־מֹשֶׁה
 לֵאמֹר מַה־נִּשְׁתָּה: וַיִּצְעַק אֶל־יְהוָה וַיִּזְרְהוּ יְהוָה עַץ וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֶל־הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם שֵׁם לוֹ חַק
 וּמִשְׁפַּט וְשֵׁם נִסְהוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַע לְקוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִיָּשֵׁר בְּעֵינֶיךָ תַעֲשֶׂה וְהִצַּלְתָּ
 לְמִצְוֹתָיו וְשָׁמְרָתָּ כְּלִי הַחַיּוֹת כְּלֵי־הַמַּחֲלָה אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא־אֲשִׁים עָלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה רַפְּאֵךְ:
 (Exod 15:22-27) וַיָּבֹאוּ אֵילְמָה וְשֵׁם שְׁתַּיִם עָשְׂרָה עֵינַת מַיִם וְשִׁבְעִים תְּמָרִים וַיִּחַנְדְּרוּ שָׁם עַל־הַמַּיִם:

Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses saying, “What shall we drink?” So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There He made for them a fixed rule, and there he put them to the test. He said, “If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I the Lord am your healer.” And they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there beside the water. (Exod 15:22-27)

¹³⁶ Alter, *Five* 392; Coggins, *Exodus*: 59; Hertz, *Pentateuch*: 267; Jeffrey H. Tigay, “Exodus,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 126; Dewey M. Beegle, *Moses, the Servant of Yahweh* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972): 159; Dozeman *Exodus*: 314; Fox, *Five*: 331; D. M. G. Stalker, “Exodus,” in *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*, eds. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1962): 222. For a discussion of the concept of the “murmuring motif” see George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968): 15-17. Also see Marc Vervenne, “The Protest motif in the Sea Narrative (Ex 14,11-12): Form and Structure of a Pentateuchal Pattern,” *ETL* 63 (1987): 257-258.

Exodus 15 contains the narrative of Israel's lack of water at Marah. The text continues the two main characterization themes: Moses as intercessor and Israel as complainer. The narrative expands the vocabulary of complaint with a new term--לִן.

After Israel's celebration of divine deliverance at the ים סוף recorded in the first part of chapter 15, the nation begins its trek into the wilderness. They traveled three days into the wilderness and found a location, Marah, where water was found but it was bitter (vv. 22-23). The people then complained to Moses and asked him how they could address their thirst (v. 24). Moses then seeks an answer from Yahweh who instructs him to toss a piece of wood into the water which then causes the water to be sweet (v. 25).

Of the two major characters, the characterization of Moses is the simplest and will thus be handled first. The characterization of Moses in this passage is somewhat subdued. Moses receives the request, takes it to God, and implements the divine remedy. This incident marks the first time in the wilderness that Moses is explicitly recorded acting as a mediator for the people.¹³⁷ Moses does not respond with rebuke of the people but with intercession to God.¹³⁸ Thus, indirect characterization methods of speech and actions give a picture of Moses in a very positive light.

¹³⁷ Dozeman, *Exodus*: 369.

¹³⁸ John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in the Book of Exodus*, *Old Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971): 178; Brueggemann, "Exodus," *NIB* 1:806-807.

Israel's behavior in Exod 15 is described in a new vocabulary word: לון. The basic meaning of the word is "murmur against."¹³⁹ With the exception of Josh 9:18 and Psa 59:16, the word's usage is confined to the wilderness narratives with this occurrence in 15:24 being the first.¹⁴⁰ At first glance, Israel's לון appears to be reasonable—people do need usable water. But the texts provides some clues that Israel's behavior is not fully justified. First, the same people who three days earlier were singing the praise of Yahweh with words like "You will bring them [your people] and plant them in Your own mountain ...[Exod 15:17]" are now raising questions about their survivability. Israel failed to see the connection: how could a people be established at a future location when

¹³⁹ HALOT 2:524-525. There is an extended debate among commentators regarding the understanding of לון. Coats examines every occurrence of the word in the wilderness period—both pre- and post-Sinai—and levels out the meaning across all periods to mean 'rebellion'. "But the combination ... לון על is not adequately defined by 'to murmur against.' The difficulty ... is that the specification effected by the preposition על moves the action described by the verb from an inarticulate complaint to a well-defined event. The preposition is always present, and in each case it must be interpreted in its hostile sense. The event itself consistently involves a face to face confrontation between the murmurers and the object of the preposition. The precise nature of this hostile event is defined in Num. 14:9 and 17:25 by the roots מרה and מרה These words refer to the same acts which were initially described by לון and suggest a common connotation of an open act of rebellion." Coats, *Rebellion: 23-24*. Currid (*Exodus: 1:329*) and Houtman (*Exodus: 2:307-308*) follow suit with the latter expressing dissatisfaction with the usual translations "grumble" or "complain" because they are too weak, and instead utilizing the much stronger terms "rant" or "rage". On the other hand, Dozeman takes the latter, exclusively pre-Sinai context and argues that the term has the less negative nuance of "test" pre-Sinai vs. the more negative meaning "rebellion" post-Sinai. Dozeman, *Exodus: 368*. Childs follows this path with his comment that the people directed their discontent, not rebellion, to Moses. Childs, *Exodus: 268*. This debate only affects the degree of Israel's behavior.

¹⁴⁰ Childs, *Exodus: 266*; Houtman, *Exodus: 2:300*.

that same population sees themselves presently dying of thirst in the wilderness? ¹⁴¹

Second, the characterization of Israel might be clarified by the characterization of the third major player in the narrative—God. God hears Moses' request and quickly supplies the need without a word of criticism. But God does add a comment at the very end of the episode. The Deity places a test before Israel: if they fully obey divine law they will be free of all the diseases placed upon Egypt (vv. 15:25b-26).¹⁴² In other words, Yahweh was probing to find the degree of Israel's trust—thus implying that that virtue was not in full supply. Finally, considering a slightly wider context, Culley makes a comparison between Israel at Marah and a later incident involving Israel at Jericho.

Yet, the people did not come to Moses as the men of Jericho came to Elisha ... asking that the leader, by virtue of his special relationship to Yahweh, would bring supernatural power to bear upon the problem. The people here act more like members of a tour storming up to the tour leader with a complaint about the accommodation. Complaint rather than appeal is the tone.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Coggins aptly describes the briefness of the period with the following comment: "...the happy relation between God and people described at 14.31 was short-lived. *Three days* was enough ...". Coggins, *Exodus*: 65. The same people's short-lived happy relation could be extended to Yahweh's appointed leader—Moses. Brueggemann, "Exodus," *NIB* 1:806.

¹⁴² Alter points out the implied link between the plague narratives and Exod 15: both speak of undrinkable water. Alter, *Five*: 403. The difference being that whereas God made good Egyptian water undrinkable, he is here making bad wilderness water drinkable.

¹⁴³ Robert C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative*, SemeiaSup 3 (Philadelphia: Fortress; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976): 80.

Considering all things, it is here argued that Exod 15 provides continuing examples of Israel's forgetfulness and doubt. These traits will grow more ominous in following encounters.¹⁴⁴

Manna and Quail in the Wilderness of Sin (Exod 16:1-30)

ויסעו מאילם ויבאו כל־עדת בני־ישראל אל־מדבר־סין אשר בין־אילם ובין סיני בחמשה עשר יום
 לחדש השני לצאתם מארץ מצרים: וילוו כל־עדת בני־ישראל על־משה ועל־אהרן במדבר:
 ויאמרו אלהם בני ישראל מייתן מותנו ביד־יהוה בארץ מצרים בשבתנו על־סיר הפֶּשֶׁר באֶכְלֵנו
 לחם לשבע פִּיהוֹצֵאתָם אֲתָנוּ אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְהָמִית אֶת־כָּל־הַקֶּהֱל הַזֶּה בְּרָעַב: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־
 מֹשֶׁה הֲנִי מִמַּטִּיר לָכֶם לֶחֶם מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֵּצֵא הָעָם וְלָקְטוּ דְבָרִיּוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ לְמַעַן אֲנֹסְנוּ הַיֶּלֶךְ בְּתוֹרַתִי
 אִם־לֹא: וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי וְהָכִינוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר־יִבְיִאוּ וְהָיָה מִשְׁנֵה עַל אֲשֶׁר־לָקְטוּ יוֹם יוֹם: וַיֹּאמֶר
 מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרַב וַיִּדְעֹתֶם פִּי יְהוָה הוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: וַיִּבְקֹר וַיִּרְאִיתֶם
 אֶת־כְּבוֹד יְהוָה בְּשָׁמְעוֹ אֶת־תְּלִנְתֵיכֶם עַל־יְהוָה וַנַּחֲנוּ מָה כִּי תִלִּינוּ עֲלֵינוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּתַת יְהוָה
 לָכֶם בְּעָרֵב פֶּשֶׁר לְאָכֹל וְלֶחֶם בְּבִקְרָה לְשַׁבֵּעַ בְּשָׁמְעַע יְהוָה אֶת־תְּלִנְתֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־אַתֶּם מְלִינִם עָלָיו וַנַּחֲנוּ
 מָה לֹא־עֲלִינוּ תְּלִנְתֵיכֶם כִּי עַל־יְהוָה: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן אָמַר אֶל־כָּל־עַדְת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל קְרִבוּ לִפְנֵי
 יְהוָה כִּי שָׁמַע אֶת תְּלִנְתֵיכֶם: וַיְהִי כַּדָּבָר אֲהָרֹן אֶל־כָּל־עַדְת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּפְנוּ אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר וְהָיָה כְּבוֹד
 יְהוָה נִרְאָה בְּעֵנָן: וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: שְׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־תְּלִנְתֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל דְּבַר אֲלֵהֶם לֵאמֹר
 בֵּין הָעַרְבִים תֹּאכְלוּ בָשָׂר וּבִבְקָר תִּשְׁבַּעוּ לָחֶם וַיִּדְעֹתֶם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: (Exod 16: 1-12)
 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אֱלֵיוֹתָר מִמֶּנּוּ עַד־בִּקְרָה: וְלֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּותְרוּ אֲנָשִׁים מִמֶּנּוּ עַד־בִּבְקָר
 וַיָּרֶם תוֹלְעִים וַיִּבְאֵשׁ וַיִּקְצַף עֲלֵהֶם מֹשֶׁה: (Exod 16: 19-20)
 שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תִּלְקָטוּהוּ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת לֹא יִהְיֶה־בוֹ: וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יָצְאוּ מִן־הָעָם לִלְקָט וְלֹא
 מָצְאוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עַד־אַנָּה מֵאַנְתֶּם לְשֹׁמֵר מִצְוֹתַי וְתוֹרֹתַי: (Exod 16: 26-28)

Setting out from Elim, the whole Israelite community came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. In the wilderness, the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.” And the Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day’s portion—that I may test them, to see whether they will follow My instructions or not. But on the sixth day, when they apportion what they have brought in, it shall prove to be double the amount they gather each day.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “By the evening you shall know it was the Lord who brought you out from the land of Egypt; and in the morning you shall behold he Presence of the Lord, because he has heard your grumblings against the Lord. For who are we that you should grumble against us? Since it is the Lord,” Moses continued, “who will give you flesh to eat in the

¹⁴⁴ Propp may provide a fourth item hinting at a negative connotation to Israel's behavior when he notes that the name of the location could be a subtle pun with the word “rebel”: מרה vs. מרר vs. מרי. Propp, *Exodus*: 576.

evening and bread in the morning to the full, because the Lord has heard the grumblings you utter against Him, what is our part? Your grumbling is not against us, but against the Lord!” Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole Israelite community: Advance toward the Lord, for He has heard your grumbling.” And as Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned toward the wilderness, and there, in a cloud, appeared the Presence of the Lord. The Lord spoke to Moses: “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Speak to them and say: By evening you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; and you shall know that I the Lord am your God.” ... [Vv. 13-18 omitted.] ... And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” But they paid no attention to Moses; some of them left of it until morning, and it became infested with maggots and stank. And Moses was angry with them. ... [Vv. 21-25 omitted.] ... “... Six days you shall gather it; on the seventh day, the sabbath, there will be none.” Yet some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found nothing. And the Lord said to Moses, “How long will you men refuse to obey My commandments and My teachings? ... [Vv. 29-30 omitted.]” (Exod 16:1-30)

Exodus 16 deals with a lack of food in the Wilderness of Sin. The confrontation begins in verse 2 and there are indications that Israel’s tendencies for accusations and complaints have expanded. First, the participants are not just “the people” but “the whole congregation.”¹⁴⁵ Second, the focus of their complaints is not just Moses but Moses and Aaron.¹⁴⁶ Third, their grumbling is long-lasting; the verb describing Israel’s actions, נָלַל, appears seven times in verses 1-12.¹⁴⁷ Fourth, their focus appears to shift from needs to wants. Childs notes the following:

It is more important to recognize that the story does not begin with a genuine need as does 15.22 and 17.1. Rather, the author begins with the grumbling and thus casts the complaint immediately in a negative light. Israel is not presented as

¹⁴⁵ Cassuto insists that the word “whole” not be taken literally but as a “hyperbolic generalization.” Cassuto, *Exodus*: 189. It seems more likely, however, that the slight modification does indicate something different. Currid, *Exodus*: 1:334; Hamilton, *Exodus*: 250; Houtman, *Exodus*: 2:328; Sarna, *Exodus JPS*: 86.

¹⁴⁶ Lange, “Exodus,” *Lange* 1:61; Ibn Ezra, *Pentateuch*: 2:476.

¹⁴⁷ Meyers, *Exodus*: 130.

starving to death and crying out for bread. Instead, the people long for the ‘fleshpots of Egypt’ and for ‘bread aplenty’.”¹⁴⁸

Houtman gives an apt summary of Israel’s behavior:

The reader witnesses how the Israelites, as it were with the sound of the promise of 15:26 still ringing in their ears, the taste of the pleasant life in dependence upon YHWH in Elim still in their mouth (15:27), and in anticipation of the encounter with YHWH at the Sinai (Exod. 19), are complaining to Moses (16:2).¹⁴⁹

The specific content of Israel’s complaint is recorded in verse 3: “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.” Israel’s thinking in these statements reveals even more words characterizing them in a negative light. First, they wished they had died in Egypt as opposed to facing the present crisis. Indeed, they even wished that the Deity who delivered them had done the mortal deed.¹⁵⁰ Second, they pined for the food they had in the land of oppression. Coats is correct in stating that the point here is not that they missed the food, but that they wished the exodus had never occurred.¹⁵¹ Childs gives an idea of the seriousness of the strained relationship between Israel and God: “If God had made himself known in the deliverance from Egypt, then Israel’s repudiation of this deliverance obviously struck at the heart of the relationship. ... In short, the people’s complaint is not a casual ‘gripe,’ but unbelief which has called into question God’s very

¹⁴⁸ Childs, *Exodus*: 284.

¹⁴⁹ Houtman, *Exodus*: 2:316.

¹⁵⁰ Currid, *Exodus*: 1:334-335.

¹⁵¹ Coats, *Rebellion*: 90.

election of a people.”¹⁵² Finally, they blamed Moses for causing their predicament—apparently neglecting the fact that the deliverance ultimately came from Yahweh—a fact that Moses reminded them of in verses 6, 7 and 8.

The characterization of Israel is further clarified by God’s reactions to Israel. First, at a later time in the passage (vv. 27-28) where the Israelites were commanded to not search for manna on the Sabbath but several did so, God asks “How long will you men refuse to obey My commandments and My teachings?” Second, in describing God’s two-fold response to Israel’s complaint—quail and manna—the narrative has a significantly larger proportion of the text dedicated to the manna than to the quail. It is suggested that this is indicating that while God is providing for their want, He is more focused on providing their need.¹⁵³ This distinction was not displayed by Israel. Third, in providing the manna, God issued some instructions to test whether the people would obey or not (v. 4). The fact that Israel failed twice—once regarding not storing the manna overnight (v. 20) and once not searching for manna on the Sabbath (vv. 27-28)

¹⁵² Childs, *Exodus*: 285.

¹⁵³ Sarna, *Exodus JPS*: 88. Notice Honeycutt’s statistics: “The account concerning the quail utilizes only 10 words, while the manna narrative extends over the entire 22 verses remaining in the chapter.” Roy L. Honeycutt, “Exodus,” *BBC* 1:381.

indicate that Israel was prone to disobedience.¹⁵⁴ In short, there are a large number of indirect and direct methods of characterization that place Israel in a negative light.¹⁵⁵

Regarding the characterization of Moses, he scolds the people practically and theologically. He is angry that some members attempted to keep the manna overnight. God issues a question through him (v. 28) but it seems to be directed at the Israelites as opposed to Moses. There is nothing in these items that could be cited in major criticism of Moses. In summary, the actions of Moses and the reactions of God characterize Moses in a positive light.

On the whole, Exod 16 displays a greatly expanded version of Israel's complaining. It appears to be universal (v. 2), to have an expanded list of recipients for their complaints (v. 2), to be repetitive, and to focus on luxuries not needs. Indeed, their behavior has deteriorated so much that it has an effect on two other characters: Moses' anger returns in v. 20 and God is asking how long their disobedience will persist (v. 28). It is important to note that both Moses and God shifted out of their normal roles of intercessor and provider because of Israel's conduct. This cause-and-effect relationship will be seen again in the account of Moses' exclusion in Num 20.

¹⁵⁴ “Here again, the patterns of belief-disbelief and obedience-disobedience recurrent in the mighty act sequence and indeed in the narrative sequence of the entire Book of Exodus stand out in bold relief. ... Yahweh provides for physical needs each day, only to have some of his people attempt to hoard for the next day. Yahweh provides for the spiritual growth of his people by setting one day apart as special, only to have some lose the benefit by ignoring the day.” Durham, *Exodus*: 226.

¹⁵⁵ “In the rest of the Torah, whenever the people rebel against Moses and God, we must imagine them rising in the morning, collecting their daily Manna and—incredibly!—complaining. Their wonder and gratitude grow dull by familiarity” Propp, *Exodus*: 599.

Water from the Rock at Rephidim (Exod 17:1-7)

וַיִּסְעוּ כָּל־עַדְת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּדְבַּר־סִינַי לְמִסְעֵיהֶם עַל־פִּי יְהוָה וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּרִפְדִּים וְאִין מַיִם לְשָׁתֵת הָעָם:
וַיִּרְב הָעָם עִם־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ תְנֹד־לָנוּ מַיִם וְנִשְׁתֶּה וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם מֹשֶׁה מַה־תִּרְיֹבִין עִמָּדִי מַה־תִּנְסֹון אֶת־
יְהוָה: וַיִּצְמָא שָׁם הָעָם לַמַּיִם וַיִּלֶן הָעָם עַל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶה הַעֲלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהָמִית אֹתִי
וְאֶת־בְּנֵי וְאֶת־מִקְנֵי בְצָמָא: וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר מַה אֶעֱשֶׂה לָּעָם הַזֶּה עוֹד מְעַט וּסְקֹלְנִי:
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם וְקַח אֶתְךָ מִזֶּקֶנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִטֶּדֶךָ אֲשֶׁר הִכִּיתָ בוֹ אֶת־הַיָּאֵר קַח
בְּיָדְךָ וְהִלַּכְתָּ: הֲנִי עֹמֵד לִפְנֶיךָ שָׁם עַל־הַצּוּר בְּחָרֵב וְהִפִּיתָ בַּצּוּר וַיִּצְאוּ מִמְּנוּ מַיִם וְשָׁתָה הָעָם וַיַּעֲשׂ
כֵּן מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי זֶקֶנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם מַסָּה וּמְרִיבָה עַל־רִיב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל נִסְתָּם אֶת־
יְהוָה לֵאמֹר הֲיֵשׁ יְהוָה בְּקִרְבָּנוּ אִם־אֵינִן: (Exod 17: 1-7)

From the wilderness of Sin the whole Israelite community continued by stages as the Lord would command. They encamped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses. “Give us water to drink,” they said; and Moses replied to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you try the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “What shall I do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!” Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pass before the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile, and set out. I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. The place was named Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and because they tried the Lord saying, “Is the Lord present among us or not?” (Exod 17:1-7)

In Exod 17 the Israelites continued their journey and eventually encamped at Rephidim. Here they encountered a new problem—there was no water (v. 1). The text here introduces a new word in the Moses-Israel relational vocabulary—ריב. “The people quarreled (וַיִּרְב) with Moses” (v. 2). The base meaning of the word ריב is “quarrel,” but it has several aspects to it. In a non-legal sense it can mean a physical fight or “brawl”; in a pre-legal sense it can mean “strife”; in a legal sense it can mean “lawsuit.”¹⁵⁶ Both

¹⁵⁶ HALOT 3:1224-1226.

Dozeman and Rylaarsdam propose the legal nuance as the proper meaning in Exod 17.¹⁵⁷ But considering that this incident occurs before the formal ratification of the Sinai covenant, it seems better to forgo the sense of a formal lawsuit in favor of an informal one—a general demanding of a right, what Durham calls a “prelegal sense” or Sarna calls “quasi-legal.”¹⁵⁸ In other words, the scene is not a staid presentation of a formal lawsuit requesting provision of a duly agreed upon item but a near-mob demanding their rights be met. The word here carries a sense of hostility.¹⁵⁹ It was more than לן “grumbling;” it was combative.¹⁶⁰

At this point Moses asks two questions of the Israelites: (1) why were they attacking him? And (2) why were they testing God? The word “test” (נסה) is the same word used in Exod 15:25 and 16:4 where God puts the nation through a test to see if they are faithful. Here the nation reverses the roles; it is as if they are saying “if You can test us, we can test You!” This tit-for-tat attitude of Israel is totally opposite their proclamation in Exod 15:13: “In Your love You lead the people You redeemed” The word for “love” in this passage is אהבתך (literally “in your covenant-faithfulness”). In

¹⁵⁷ Dozeman suggests the earlier encounters between Israel and Moses/Yahweh as a main contributor to interpreting the word. “During the crisis of diseased water Yahweh proposed law as the basis by which the Israelites would interact with God (15:22-26). Yahweh employed law to test the Israelites in the story of manna (chap. 16). The Israelites now exercise their legal rights, presenting God with a lawsuit over the absence of water.” Dozeman, *Exodus*: 389. See also Rylaarsdam and Park, “Exodus,” *IB* 1:958.

¹⁵⁸ Durham, *Exodus*: 230; Sarna, *Exodus JPS*: 94.

¹⁵⁹ Currid, *Exodus*: 1:359.

¹⁶⁰ Currid, *Exodus*: 1:359; Hamilton, *Exodus*: 262-263; Meyers, *Exodus*: 134; Osborn, *Exodus*: 412.

other words, Israel was proving to be unfaithful to their own proclamation of God's faithfulness. "It [Moses' question] is a rhetorical question: the point is that there is no reason to test God. It is presumptuous, because God can be counted upon."¹⁶¹ Indeed, He has proven faithful. "In less than six months they had witnessed ten plagues, the pillar of cloud and fire, the opening and shutting of the Red Sea, the miraculous sweetening of the water, and the sending of food and meat from heaven; yet their real question came down to this: 'Is the Lord among us ... or not?'"¹⁶² Israel was, in essence putting God on probation—"withholding trust pending evidence."¹⁶³ This can easily deteriorate into the coercion of God.¹⁶⁴ Also, in v. 3, Israel resurrects the charge that Moses brought them out of Egypt to kill them in the wilderness.

The reaction of God during the latest crisis continues to be remarkably gracious. Yahweh does not respond to Israel's insults with anger or correction but with supplying the water. Likewise, as will be shortly seen, Yahweh does not directly respond to Moses'

¹⁶¹ Friedman, *Commentary*: 226. The issue of theodicy may be relevant here. Israel could complain that God had proven to be unreliable in that it took hundreds of years to release His people. Theologians and philosophers have wrestled with God's long delays for centuries and the scope of this thesis is far too constrained for any such discussion here. The point here is that Israel was on the move, they had immediate, life-sustaining needs, and God had consistently proven faithful in meeting those needs.

¹⁶² Kaiser, "Exodus," *EBC* 2:406-407.

¹⁶³ Motyer, *Exodus*: 182.

¹⁶⁴ Fretheim, *Exodus*: 189. "Essentially, they tried to train God to be at their beck and call." Bruckner, *Exodus*: 156.

concern about his personal safety with correction or encouragement but with instructions on how to supply the water (vv. 5-6).¹⁶⁵

Regarding the characterization of Moses, his actions reveal a slight change. Like prior encounters, Moses questions Israel's actions but unlike before, he goes before Yahweh with his fear that the people are ready to stone him (v. 4). Rylaarsdam characterizes Moses' activity as demonstrating "impatient petulance and self-pity."¹⁶⁶ It is true that Moses is petitioning God on his own behalf instead of on behalf of the people, but Moses' reaction seems reasonable given the situation. Israel's attitude was no longer just grumbling (לִזְנוּ), but grumbling (לִזְנוּ) and complaining/striving (רִיב) and testing (נִסָּה). Sarna seems to capture the scene Moses faced: "This situation has deteriorated. The language of the mob is unrestrained, the ugly mood is explosive, and a riot may break out any moment."¹⁶⁷ The only aspect that readers might question is Moses not ignoring Israel's insults as God did. But, on the other hand, Moses did what Israel failed to do—he took his concern directly to God.

In summary, Exod 17 shows a further deterioration in Israel's behavior in that they are becoming more aggressive. Their additional pressure is enough to cause Moses to take his concern for his personal safety to Yahweh. Once again, note the cause-and-effect: Moses varies from his usual behavior only because of the pressure being applied by Israel.

¹⁶⁵ Brueggemann, "Exodus," *NIB* 1:817.

¹⁶⁶ Rylaarsdam and Park, "Exodus," *IB* 1:958.

¹⁶⁷ Sarna, *Exodus JPS*: 420.

Summary of Pre-Sinai Encounters

At this point it would be beneficial to summarize the characterizations of Israel and Moses during their pre-Sinai encounters using Alter's scale of reliability. At level one (statement by narrators), there are no direct statements from the narrator regarding the character of Israel or of Moses. At level two (inward speech), the only inward speech in the accounts is that of Moses prior to his flight from Egypt (Exod 2:14), but its content has little application to the topic at hand. It is at levels three (direct speech of a party or that of another character regarding that party) and four (actions and appearances) that evidence begins to appear.

Israel's direct speech is characterized by grumbling (לון, Exod 15; 16; 17) and then escalates to striving (ריב, Exod 17). They question the competence and/or motivation of Moses (Exod 14; 17). They question Moses' authority in Exod 2. This theme does not occur again in the pre-Sinai encounters but it will become a major topic in the post-Sinai interactions.

Israel's actions include the following. They behave more like oppressing Egyptians than grateful Midianites (Exod 2). This pattern of ungratefulness continues throughout the period. It appears in the form of arrogant demands instead of respectful requests. They yearn for Egypt (Exod 14; 16). With the exception of Exod 14 (and even here their behavior quickly changed), they never take their petition directly to God. It almost seems they want no direct contact with the Deity. They show no discrimination between needs and wants (Exod 16). They even resort to testing the faithfulness of God (Exod 17). Their actions and speech deteriorate over time with the last encounter (Exod 17) showing a clustering of verbal actions and an elevation in the verbal attacks.

God's comments on Israel's behavior are manifested in two ways. Yahweh has enough doubts concerning Israel's behavior that He institutes two tests (Exod 15; 16). God also questions how long Israel will fail to keep His commands (Exod 16). In short, the characterization of Israel is highly negative.

Regarding Moses, his speeches question Israel's behavior (Exod 16; 17). Moses' actions are as follows. He intervenes on behalf of the oppressed (Exod 2). This activity occurs for the first time on the corporate level in Exod 15. He left comfortable surroundings to aid his people (Exod 2). When he has a need, he respectfully petitions God (Exod 17). At first, he lacked authority for his actions but that was rectified in Exod 3. His anger is inferred by the killing of the Egyptian in Exod 2. That emotion does not appear in extreme form again in the pre-Sinai encounters but will become a major theme in the post-Sinai encounters. With the possible exception of Exod 14, God does not question any of the actions of Moses. In all, with the exception of his latent anger, Moses is characterized in a positive light in the pre-Sinai encounters. All of this is threatened, however, with the move to the post-Sinai encounters.

Regarding the question of the assessment of blame for Moses' exclusion, the pre-Sinai encounters between Moses and Israel lay a solid foundation and even preview the events that culminate in Num 20. (1) By Exod 17, Moses main characterization as intercessor is firmly established by his repeated actions. (2) By Exod 17, Israel's main characterization as complainer is also firmly established by repeated actions and statements. (3) Throughout the episodes of Exodus, Israel's strivings with Moses slowly escalate. And (4) this increasing pressure from Israel caused both Moses and God to deviate from their usual roles of intercessor and provider. As will be seen, this same

pattern will continue in the post-Sinai encounters in Numbers. Moses will continue to be an intercessor and Israel will continue to be a complainer. Israel's behavior and the resultant pressure will continue to escalate. This time, however, it will reach such a peak that both Moses and God are severely deviating from their usual roles—with the latter threatening to annihilate the people while the former yields to his latent anger, leading to his downfall in Num 20.

Chapter 4

POST-SINAI ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN MOSES AND THE ISRAELITES

The goals of this chapter are three: (1) continue the process of establishing character benchmarks for Moses and Israel by examining post-Sinai passages where the two parties have significant interaction with each other and focusing on character actions, direct speech by the character and by other characters, comparison of the main characters' actions with those of other parties, and narrator statements; (2) document any deviations on the part of Moses from his character benchmark and the circumstances that surround those deviations; and (3) demonstrate that any Mosaic deviations in character are inextricably bound to pressure from Israel's character behavior. These observations will yield a final answer to the question of whether blame for Moses' exclusion from the Promised Land lies strictly with him or must Israel also share in the blame.

There are 7 occasions in Numbers where Moses and Israel had major disagreements or conflicts with one another: (1) general complaining at Taberah (Num 11:1-3), (2) the quail at Kibroth-hattaavah (Num 11:4-35), (3) the refusal of the Israelites to enter the Promised Land from Kadesh (Num 13:1-14:45), (4) Korah's rebellion (Num 16:1-17:15 [Eng. 16:1-50]), (5) Aaron's budding rod (Num 17:16-28 [Eng. 17:1-13]), (6) the sin of Moses (water from the rock) at Kadesh (Num 20:1-13), and (7) the bronze

serpent (Num 21:4-9).¹⁶⁸ This thesis will only treat the first six instances since they are the ones leading up to and culminating in Moses' sin. Although the narrative of Num 12 does not contain a conflict directly between Israel and Moses (it is instead a conflict within the family of Moses), this thesis will briefly treat this story because it contains a rare explicit character statement by the narrator and because its theme of leadership sets the stage for most of the next few chapters of Numbers.

The immediate background for these seven incidents was the one year stay at Sinai where the covenant between God and Israel was ratified and where God gave the Law to the people. In the midst of this period was the Golden Calf incident (Exod 32-33).¹⁶⁹ Unlike the pre-Sinai encounters where God reacted to Israel's demands with patience, Yahweh was livid and intended to destroy the nation and start over with the descendants of Moses (Exod 32:10). Moses then performed his greatest act of intercession on behalf of the nation and convinced God to not judge the people with their immediate destruction. After receiving further regulations, the nation finally prepares to resume its movement toward Canaan in Num 10. It is here the narrative interactions renew.

¹⁶⁸ Please note that the versification scheme of Numbers 16 and 17 non-Hebrew bibles vs. Hebrew Bible, diverge: (Num 16:36-50 = MT 17:1-15; Num 17:1-13 = MT 17:16-28). The versification for this block of text will be based on the MT.

¹⁶⁹ The exact purpose of this image is debated. Some state that it was meant to be a symbol representing "immanent divinity." Sarna, *Exodus JPS*: 203. Others see it as a substitute for Moses. Cassuto, *Exodus*: 411; Childs, *Exodus*: 564. Meyers notes the problem of using a calf-image in an ancient near eastern context. Meyers, *Exodus*: 259.

General Complaining at Taberah (Num 11:1-3)

וַיְהִי הָעָם כְּמִתְאַנְנִים רַע בְּאַזְנֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה וַיַּחֲרֹ אַפּוֹ וַתִּבְעַר־בָּם אֵשׁ יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל בְּקֶצֶה
הַמַּחֲנֶה: וַיִּצְעַק הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה וַתִּשְׁקַע הָאֵשׁ: וַיִּקְרָא שְׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא
תַּבְּעָרָה כִּי־בָעָרָה כָּם אֵשׁ יְהוָה: (Num 11:1-3)

The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord. The Lord heard and was incensed: a fire of the Lord broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. That place was named Taberah, because a fire of the Lord had broken out against them. (Num 11:1-3)

The post-Sinai narratives commence with the rather ominous statement “The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord.” After the joyous preparation for the march to the Promised Land, readers are surprised to see such negative behavior.¹⁷⁰ The Hebrew vocabulary and construction is somewhat rare and the meaning debated. The word *כְּמִתְאַנְנִים* is a *hithpoel* participle with the prefix כ. Its root has been identified as either אנן (“to sigh or complain”) or אנה (“to lament”).¹⁷¹ Most scholars opt for the first root, אנן.¹⁷² If this is the correct root, this is one of only two locations in the Hebrew

¹⁷⁰ “The scene in 10:1-35 is dramatic, pulsating. Flags are flying. God’s presence is distinctly manifest. Conquest is on everybody’s mind. One is hardly prepared for the rude shock, then, that meets him in chapters 11 and 12. Far from there being a mood of optimism and gallantry, there is instead the ugly spectacle of divisiveness, complaints, depression, bewilderment, and divine judgment as the appropriate response.” Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982): 333-334. Also Stephen K. Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002.): 152.

¹⁷¹ HALOT 1:70, 72.

¹⁷² Ronald B. Allen, “Numbers,” *EBC* 2:787; Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, WBC 5 (Waco, TX: Word, 1984): 119; Thomas B. Dozeman, “Numbers,” *NIB* 2:104; Sherwood, *Numbers*: 153. Ibn Ezra proposes the root as און “to sin.” Ibn Ezra, *Pentateuch*: 3:330. Levine mentions the possibility of אנה “to mourn.” Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1993): 320.

Bible where the word appears (the other being Lam 3:39). If the latter root, אנה, is selected, it might be related to the Akkadian *unninu* (“to sigh”).¹⁷³ The *hithpolel* stem could indicate reflexive action (“they made themselves complainers”)¹⁷⁴ or continuous action (“they were continuously complaining”).¹⁷⁵

The cause of the sighing or complaining is not declared. It is usually associated with some specific or general aspect of their journey such as length, self-pity, or fatigue.¹⁷⁶ Friedman suggests that the lack of specific cause has a purpose. “The story’s function, therefore, is not to point to any of the obstacles in the wilderness but rather to indicate the people’s state of mind: negative, volatile, unconfident.”¹⁷⁷

Although a cause is not stipulated, the text does characterize what the people said—it was רע. Options for its meaning are also numerous. Some take it as an adverb modifying the complaining/sighing action (“complaining bitterly” NJPS). BHS proposes emending the word to רעב (“to hunger”). But there is no support for such a change. Allen holds that the word applies to the following clause, i.e., “it [the complaining] was evil in

¹⁷³ Allen, “Numbers,” *EBC* 2:787; Budd, *Numbers*: 119.

¹⁷⁴ Note Luther’s “made themselves impatient,” as found in George Bush, *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Numbers: Designed as a General Help to Biblical Reading and Instruction* (New York: Ivison & Phinney, 1858; rpt., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005): 146.

¹⁷⁵ John Joseph Owens, “Numbers,” *BBC* 2:114; Sherwood, *Numbers*: 153.

¹⁷⁶ Clarke cites Jerome supporting length. Clarke, *Holy*: 1:624; Ramban (Nahmanides), *Torah*: 6:201 (self-pity); Thomas Whitelaw and R. Winterbotham, “Numbers,” *PC* 2:102 (fatigue).

¹⁷⁷ Friedman, *Commentary*: 460.

the ears of the Lord.”¹⁷⁸ Many translate the word “misfortune” but such a low-key transgression seems disproportional to God’s response; something more serious is indicated by the word.¹⁷⁹ Examination of the prior context argues that the word רַע should be understood as a contrast to the word טוֹב found in 10:32.¹⁸⁰ In Num 10:32 Moses spoke of the “good” God would do for Israel but the nation considered their experiences to date as “evil.”

Considering all of the above, readers can correctly conclude that despite the encounter at Sinai, Israel has not changed; they are still complaining as they always have. The same, however, cannot be said of God. Israel’s complaints were heard by Yahweh (בְּאָזְנַי יְהוָה, v.1). During the pre-Sinai encounters, with the exception of an occasional test or question, God ignored Israel’s demands and insults and provided their needs. In this first post-Sinai encounter, God became angry (וַיִּחַר אַפּוֹ, v.1). God punishes the people with a consuming fire on the “outskirts” of the camp (v. 1).

It is at this point that the third major character appears—Moses. Seeing the pending judgment, the people petition Moses, who then petitions God, and the threat

¹⁷⁸ Allen, “Numbers,” *EBC* 2:787.

¹⁷⁹ L. Elliott. Binns, *The Book of Numbers, with Introduction and Notes*, WC (London: Methuen, 1927): 65; George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1903): 99; Hamilton, *Handbook*: 334; Owens, “Numbers,” *BBC* 2:114; N. H. Snaith, “Numbers” in *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*, eds. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1962): 259.

¹⁸⁰ R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, NAC 3b (Nashville: Broadman, 2000): 180; Horst Seebass, *Numeri*, BKAT IV/2, 1-3 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993-2003): 21. Milgrom points out that the word טוֹב appears five times in 10:29-32. Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Text with the New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989): 82.

subsides. Other than his return to the role of mediator, Moses is rather low-key in this passage. He does not question or criticize the people.

The fact that the incident at Taberah is brief and lacks depth of details (e.g., the cause of the people's complaints) causes Alter to suggest that the account serves as a template for the remainder of the wilderness journey.¹⁸¹ Dozeman provides the steps in this new paradigm and a comparison with what occurred during the pre-Sinai encounters.

The sequence includes the five basic elements in the murmuring stories: (1) complaint by the people; (2) divine punishment; (3) the cry of the people; (4) intercession by Moses; and (5) the end of divine judgment. This structure is somewhat different from the initial murmuring stories in Exodus 15-17, where complaint was not followed by divine punishment.¹⁸²

This change in paradigm reflects a change in God's usual role as provider—He is now punishing. As in prior deviations from normal behavior, note that the changes are caused by some misbehavior on Israel's part. Once again, this is the pattern which contributes to Moses' downfall in Num 20.

Quail at Kibroth-hattaavah (Num 11:4-35)

וְהָאֱסֹפֶסֶף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבּוֹ הִתְאוּוּ תַאֲוָה וַיִּשְׁבּוּ וַיִּכְבּוּ גַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִי יֵאָכְלֵנוּ בֶּשֶׂר׃ זָכְרָנוּ
אֶת־הַדֶּגֶה אֲשֶׁר־נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חֲנָם אֶת הַקֶּשֶׁאִים וְאֶת הָאֲבֹטְחַיִם וְאֶת־הַחֲצִיר וְאֶת־הַבָּצְלִים וְאֶת־
הַשּׁוּמִים׃ וְעַתָּה נִפְשָׁנוּ יִבְשָׁה אֵין כָּל בְּלֹתֵי אֶל־הַמֶּן עֵינֵינוּ׃ (Num 11:4-6)

וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַעֵם בְּכֹה לְמִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ אִישׁ לְפִתַּח אָהֳלוֹ וַיַּחֲרֹאֶף יְהוָה מְאֹד וּבְעֵינָי מִשָּׂה רַע׃
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לְמָה הִרְעַתָּ לְעַבְדְּךָ וְלָמָּה לֹא־מִצַּתִּי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְשׁוֹם אֶת־מִשְׁאָא פְּלִהָעִם הַזֶּה
עָלַי׃ הֲאֵנֹכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת פְּלִהָעִם הַזֶּה אִם־אֲנֹכִי לְדַתִּיהוּ כִּי־תֹאמַר אֵלַי שְׂאֵהוּ בַּחֲיִקְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשְׂאָ
הָאֱמִן אֶת־הַיִּנֶּקַּע עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְרָהָם׃ מֵאִין לִי בֶּשֶׂר לְתַת לְכָל־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־יִכְבּוּ עָלַי
לֵאמֹר תִּגְדֹּה־לָנוּ בֶּשֶׂר וְנֹאכְלָה׃ לֹא־אוּכַל אֲנֹכִי לְבַדִּי לְשַׂאת אֶת־פְּלִהָעִם הַזֶּה כִּי כָבֵד מִמֶּנִּי׃ וְאִם־
כֹּכָה אֶת־עֲשֵׂה לִי הֲרֹגֵנִי נָא הֲרֹג אִם־מִצַּאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְאֶל־אַרְצָה בְּרַעַתִּי׃ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
אֲסֹפְה־לִּי שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ מִזִּקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָדַעְתָּ כִּי־הֵם זִקְנֵי הָעָם וְשִׁטְרֵי וְלִקְחָתָם אִתָּם אֶל־אֹהֶל
מוֹעֵד וְהִתִּיצְבוּ שָׁם עִמָּךְ׃ וַיַּרְדּוּתֵי וַדְּבַרְתִּי עִמָּךְ שָׁם וְאֶצְלָתִי מִן־הַרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָלְיךָ וְשָׁמַתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם
וְנִשְׂאוּ אִתָּךְ בְּמִשְׁאָא הָעָם וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא אִתָּהּ לְבַדְּךָ׃ וְאֶל־הָעָם תֹּאמַר הַתְקַדְּשׁוּ לְמַחֵר וְאָכַלְתֶּם בֶּשֶׂר כִּי
בְּכִיתֶם בְּאֲזְנֵי יְהוָה לֵאמֹר מִי יֵאָכְלֵנוּ בֶּשֶׂר כִּי־טוֹב לָנוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם וְנִתֵּן יְהוָה לָכֶם בֶּשֶׂר וְאָכַלְתֶּם׃ לֹא
יֹם אֶחָד תֹּאכְלוּן וְלֹא יוֹמִים וְלֹא חֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים וְלֹא עֶשְׂרֵה יָמִים וְלֹא עֶשְׂרִים יוֹם׃ עַד חֲדָשׁ יָמִים עַד

¹⁸¹ Alter, *Five*: 734.

¹⁸² Dozeman, "Numbers," *NIB* 2:104.

אֲשֶׁר־יֵצֵא מֵאִפְכֶם וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְזָרָא יַעַן כִּי־מֵאֲסַתֶּם אֶת־יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וַתִּכְבְּוּ לִפְנֵי לַאֲמֹר לָמָּה
 זֶה יֵצְאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרָיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה שְׁשִׁמְאוֹת אֵלַי רַגְלֵי הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ וְאַתָּה אָמַרְתָּ בְּשֶׁר
 אֲתָן לָהֶם וְאָכְלוּ חֲדָשׁ יָמִים: הֲצֵאֵן וּבָקֵר יִשְׁחַט לָהֶם וּמִצָּא לָהֶם אִם אֶת־כָּל־דְּגֵי הַיָּם יֵאָסֵף לָהֶם
 וּמִצָּא לָהֶם: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הִיךְ יְהוָה תִּקְצֹר עֲתָה תִרְאֶה הִיִּקְרָךְ דְּבָרֵי אִם־
 לֹא: (Num 11: 10-23)

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה הַמְקַנָּא אֶתָּה לִי וּמִי יִתֵּן כָּל־עַם יְהוָה נְבִיאִים כִּי־יִתֵּן יְהוָה אֶת־רוּחֹו
 עֲלֵיהֶם: (Num 11: 29)

הַבֶּשֶׂר עוֹדְנוּ בֵּין שְׁנֵיהֶם טָרָם יִפְרֹת וְאֵף יְהוָה חָרָה בָּעָם וַיֵּף יְהוָה בָּעָם מִכָּה רַבָּה
 מֵאֵד: (Num 11: 33)

The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to." ... [Vv. 7-9 omitted.] ... Moses heard the people weeping, every clan apart, each person at the entrance of his tent. The Lord was very angry, and Moses was distressed. And Moses said to the Lord, "Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,' to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!" Then the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of Israel's elders of whom you have experience as elders and officers of the people, and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them take their place there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them; they shall share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone. And say to the people: Purify yourselves for tomorrow and you shall eat meat, for you have kept whining before the Lord and saying, 'If only we had meat to eat! Indeed, we were better off in Egypt!' The Lord will give you meat and you shall eat. You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. For have rejected the Lord who is among you, by whining before Him and saying, 'Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt!'" But Moses said, "The people who are with me number six hundred thousand men; yet You say, 'I will give them enough meat to eat for a whole month.' Could enough flocks and herds be slaughtered to suffice them? Or could all the fish of the sea be gathered for them to suffice them?" And the Lord answered Moses, "Is there a limit to the Lord's power? You shall soon see whether what I have said happens to you or not!" ... [Vv. 24-28 omitted.] ... But Moses said to him, "Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them!" ... [Vv. 30-32 omitted.] ... The meat

was still between their teeth, nor yet chewed, when the anger of the Lord blazed forth against the people and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague. (Num 11:4-33)

Once again the people mount a complaint in Num 11:4-35. In this case, the instigators are the *הַאֲסִפְּסִיִּם*. The word is a *hapax legomenon* whose meaning might be a “bunch of vagabonds.” The most common translations in Num 11:4 are “riffraff” or “rebel.” Most commentators identify this group as those non-Israelites that accompanied Israel out of Egypt as described in Exod 12:38 as a “mixed multitude.” If this parallel is accurate, it indicates that the complaining in Num 11:4 begins with some peripheral group.

Their complaint is described as *הַתְּאֻוֹת הַגְּדוֹלוֹת* (“a great craving”). The context indicates that their craving has something to do with diet. There is a sense in which their complaint can be seen as reasonable. The people were expressing dissatisfaction with a one-meal menu.¹⁸³ Manna, in essence, was hard tack—meant to provide their basic needs on a temporary basis until they reached “a land flowing with milk and honey.”¹⁸⁴ The characterization of the complaint, however, cannot be restricted simply to the diet because the narrator provides several major hints that Israel had malevolent thoughts accompanying their claims. The immediate context reveals a pining for their former food of Egypt—even calling it free (v. 5)!¹⁸⁵ The capstone of their complaint is in verse 6 where they express contempt for manna: “Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!” In addition to this, their method of

¹⁸³ Hamilton, *Handbook*: 334.

¹⁸⁴ Timothy J. Gorringer, “Numbers: Chapter 11,” *ExpTim* 117.1 (2005): 12.

¹⁸⁵ Perhaps a side-benefit for being a slave.

handling the situation was divisive. Verse 4 indicates that the complaining that began with the “riffraff” now includes the Israelites (כְּנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל), i.e., instead of taking their desire as a humble request to Moses they spread division throughout the community.

Consideration of all these peripheral items can only lead to the conclusion that Israel’s אַוֶּה has a negative connotation where “...the idea seems to be of an indiscriminating passion controlled only by the senses (cf. Deut 5:21; Jer 2:24).”¹⁸⁶

These actions show a deterioration in the character of Israel. Prior to Sinai they complained of a lack of food including bread and meat (Exod 16:3). God mercifully provided both but he did so with an emphasis on the necessities of life (bread/manna) as opposed to the luxuries of life (meat). Here in Num 11, in a post-Sinai context, the people are now criticizing the God-provided necessity (manna) and demanding the luxury (meat).

Moses heard the nation weeping “every clan apart, each person at the entrance of his tent” (v. 10), probably indicating universality and in public.¹⁸⁷ Verse 10 then gives the reaction of God and Moses. God was very angry (וַיִּחַר-אַף יְהוָה מְאֹד); Moses was “distressed” (וַיִּכְעַיַּי מִשָּׂה רָע, literally “it was evil in the eyes of Moses”). Verses 11-15 now reveal a sudden surprise. Having seen prior conduct by Moses, readers would now expect Moses to either scold or question Israel or to intercede to God on behalf of the

¹⁸⁶ Budd, *Numbers*: 127. Budd’s Deuteronomy citation is with the English versification; the MT verse is 18.

¹⁸⁷ Milgrom, *Numbers*: 85; W. Gunther. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, rev. ed. (NY: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005): 961; Cole, *Numbers*: 187; T. E. Espin and J. F. Thrupp, “Numbers,” *CookComm* 1:688; Milgrom, *Numbers*: 85. “The families joined together to weep just as they would have wept over a person who had died.” Ibn Ezra, *Pentateuch*: 3:334.

nation. Here, however, he does neither. He launches, instead, into a rather lengthy complaint to God about the burden under which he is operating. He boldly asks why God is treating him this way. He is unable to carry the burden of providing for the people. He even requests that if God insists on treating him this way that He should kill him promptly. What are readers to make of this rather uncharacteristic behavior?¹⁸⁸

The first question is what caused the anger of the two parties? Since the phrase “the Lord was angry” follows closely upon the people’s complaint, most commentators understand God’s anger as directed to the people.¹⁸⁹ Regarding Moses’ reaction, the text is somewhat ambiguous. He could be chagrined at the people’s behavior, or he could be displeased with God’s anger, or he could be displeased with both.¹⁹⁰ Regardless of the solution, it is safe to say that Moses was disgusted with the entire situation. In verses 11-15 Moses questions God and makes a death wish. Gone are the third person references

¹⁸⁸ One aspect of this text that has long puzzled scholars is why the theme of quails is coupled with a leadership issue (Moses’ complaint about the load he bears in leading the people). Beyond the pun on רוח (“wind/spirit”) the topics are seen as having little in common. Deepening the mystery is the contention by many source critics that although the text is not a literary unit the standard sources (in this case J and E; P is held not to be present) cannot account for the entire text. Some other, unknown source or sources are involved. This topic is beyond the scope of this thesis. For further discussion see Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, trans. J. D. Martin, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968): 83 and Coats, *Rebellion*: 96-100.

¹⁸⁹ One exception to this is Noordtiz who sees God’s anger directed to Moses “...because he provides inadequate leadership for the people and because he dares to bother his God with the complaints of his people (cf. v. 24).” A. Noordtiz, *Numbers*, trans. Ed van der Maas, BSC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983): 99-100; trans. of Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift (Netherlands: Kampen, [n.d.]). Considering God’s restrained reaction to Moses’ complaint in the following verses, however, it appears unlikely that Yahweh’s anger is directed toward Moses.

¹⁹⁰ For God’s anger option see Milgrom, *Numbers*: 85; for both option see Keil & Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*: 3:67.

he employed in interceding for Israel to be replaced with a long list of first person pronouns focused on his own condition. Later, in verses 21-22 he even questions where God could amass the meat required by the people, only to be reminded by God that Yahweh's hand has not grown short. In short, there is a marked deterioration in Moses' conduct. It is humanly understandable; and he did air his complaint in private, not in public; but this is the first sign that Moses is being affected by his surroundings.¹⁹¹ It is most important to note that the text makes it clear that Israel was the cause of the pressure making Moses to waiver.

God's response to Moses was similar to the way he responded to Israel's pre-Sinai complaints: Yahweh ignored the complaints, emotions, death wishes, and doubts and provided Moses with help to address a legitimate need. Readers are left to wonder, however, if the sight of authority being distributed to others in the camp opened the door to further trouble for Moses leading others like Miriam, Aaron, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram to ask the question: if authority can reside in others, why not in us? Through his outburst towards God, Moses may have inadvertently set the stage for much future grief.

To summarize, in Num 11 readers see a major departure from Moses' benchmark characterization. Instead of intercession, Moses is openly complaining about his own situation. The cause of this departure from the norm is Israel's continued complaining. This cause/effect connection is a preview of the same sequence in Num 20 just prior to God's pronouncement of Moses' exclusion.

Miriam and Aaron's Conflict with Moses (Num 12)

וַתִּדְבַר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחַת עַל־אֲדֹנָי הָאֱלֹהִים הַכְּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי־אֵשָׁה כְּשִׁית לָקַח: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָרֶק אֶךְ־בְּמִשְׁחַת דְּבַר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם־בָּנֵינוּ דְבַר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה: וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנִיו מְאֹד מִכֹּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־

¹⁹¹ Plaut, *Torah*: 963.

פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה פְּתָאֵם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־מִרְיָם צְאוּ שִׁלְשִׁתְכֶם אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיֵּצְאוּ שִׁלְשִׁתָּם: וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֵד פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּקְרָא אֶהֱרֹן וּמִרְיָם וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם: וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמַעְרֹנָא דְבָרֵי אִסְיָהֶיָה נְבִיאָכֶם יְהוָה בְּמִרְאָה אֵלָיו אֲתוֹדֵעַ בְּחִלּוּם אֲדַבְּרֶבּוּ: לֹא־כֵן עֲבָדֵי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל־בֵּיתִי נֹאמְנָן הוּא: פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה אֲדַבְּרֶבּוּ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בְּחִירָת וּתְמִנַּת יְהוָה יָבִיט וּמַדּוּעַ לֹא יִרְאֶתֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּעֲבָדֵי בְּמֹשֶׁה: וַיַּחַר אֵף יְהוָה בָּם וַיִּלֶּךְ: וְהָעֲנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהָגָה מִרְיָם מִצְרַעַת כַּשָּׁלֵג וַיִּפֹּן אֶהֱרֹן אֶל־מִרְיָם וְהָגָה מִצְרַעַת: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶהֱרֹן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בִּי אֲדֹנָי אֶל־נָא תִשֶׁת עָלֵינוּ חֲטָאת אֲשֶׁר נִוְאלְנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר חָטֵאנוּ: אֶל־נָא תְהִי כַּמַּת אֲשֶׁר בְּצִאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֵּאָכֵל חֲצֵי בְשָׂרוֹ: וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַבְיָה יָרֵק יָרֵק בְּפָנֶיהָ הֲלֹא תְכַלֵּם שְׂבַעַת יָמִים תִּסְגַּר שְׂבַעַת יָמִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחַר תֵּאָסֵף: (Num 12: 1-14)

When they were in Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: “He married a Cushite woman!” They said, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?” The Lord heard it. Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth. Suddenly the Lord called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting.” So the three of them went out. The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the Tent, and called out, “Aaron and Miriam!” The two of them came forward; and He said, “Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!” Still incensed with them, the Lord departed. As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales! When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales. And Aaron said to Moses, “Oh my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly. Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from the mother’s womb with half his flesh eaten away.” So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “O God, pray heal her!” But the Lord said to Moses, “If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted.” (Num 12:1-14)

The crisis in Num 12 varies considerably from the usual murmuring pattern. Prior to Num 12 the instigators of conflict with Moses have been the people in general, now the instigators are individual leaders.¹⁹² The just prior episode at Taberah in chapter 11 has the crisis begin with an anonymous group of riffraff and spread to the entire community, but here in Num 12 the crisis begins in the innermost circle of leadership—

¹⁹² Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1996): 69.

Moses' family.¹⁹³ There is no face-to-face confrontation with Moses in Num 12 as there is in prior episodes.¹⁹⁴ Prior complaints have centered on the difficulties of the journey to Canaan while Num 12 concerns Moses' authority.¹⁹⁵ And all of these variances have caused changes in typical vocabulary.¹⁹⁶

Having noted all these variances, however, there are a number of indicators tying the two chapters together. The same general pattern of complaint, judgment, intercession, and abatement is still present; it is merely confined to leaders as opposed to the general populace.¹⁹⁷ Most importantly, many have argued that the distribution of prophetic authority to the 70 elders in Num 11 (and especially to Eldad and Medad, Num 11:26-29) has served as the precipitator for Miriam and Aaron's actions, i.e., since leadership can be placed in others, why should it not be also with us?¹⁹⁸ This network of thematic tie-ins to surrounding material as well as the important and unusual method used to characterize Moses makes this chapter an appropriate investigation for this thesis.

¹⁹³ Allen, "Numbers," *EBC* 2:796; W. H. Bellinger, Jr., *Leviticus and Numbers*, NIBCOT 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001): 224.

¹⁹⁴ Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*, SBLDS 84 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987): 64.

¹⁹⁵ Keil & Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*: 3:75; Burns, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*: 231.

¹⁹⁶ Missing are the typical terms לֹאן and רִיב which are replaced by the term דַּבַּר בּ ("speak against," v. 1, 8).

¹⁹⁷ Bellinger, *Leviticus and Numbers*: 226.

¹⁹⁸ Milgrom, *Numbers*: 93; Allen, "Numbers," *EBC* 2:798. Note Olson: "The preceding episode (11:26-30) had opened the door to the possibility of legitimate prophets and revelation outside the official or institutional leadership of the tribes. ... Numbers 12 wrestles with the limits of such revelation." Olson, *Numbers*: 70.

Since Miriam and Aaron are the antagonists in this episode (taking the place usually held by Israel), their characterization will be examined first.

The first sources of material to characterize Miriam and Aaron are their own words. The episode begins as Miriam and Aaron “spoke against” Moses (v. 1).¹⁹⁹ The phrase *בְּדַבְּרָהּ* employs the *beth adversus* and, with its confrontational connotation, is virtually synonymous with *לִינָה* (“grumble”) used in many of the earlier interactions between Moses and Israel.²⁰⁰ They then ask the rhetorical question *וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרַק אֶדְבָרֵי יְהוָה דִּבָּר* (“Has Yahweh spoken only through Moses?”)²⁰¹ The initial, redundant “just only” focuses the complaint on the uniqueness of Moses.²⁰² The irony in their claim is highlighted by the contrast between the previous crisis where Moses expressed the wish

¹⁹⁹ It is a well-known fact that the text contains two motivations for Miriam and Aaron’s criticism of Moses: a marriage and the restricted reception of divine revelation. The verb *דַּבְּרָהּ* is in the feminine singular indicating that Miriam initiated the complaint. This leads some to theorize that Aaron was added to the story later. There is a large discussion in the literature over the connection between these two motivations—Moses’ marriage and his authority. For further details see Noth, *Numbers*: 92-93; Burns, *Has*: 68; George W. Coats, “Humility and Honor: A Moses Legend in Numbers 12,” in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, eds. David J. A. Clines, David M. Gunn, and Alan J. Hauser, JSOTSup 19 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982): 97-98. Both Noth and Burns note syntactical precedence for the use of the feminine form. This topic of dual motivations is beyond the scope of this thesis; focus here is limited to the authority issue.

²⁰⁰ Allen, “Numbers,” *EBC* 2:799; Budd, *Numbers*: 136; Rolph P. Knierim and George W. Coats, *Numbers*, FOTL 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005): 181; Levine: *Numbers*: 328.

²⁰¹ Milgrom uses the translation “only and solely.” Milgrom, *Numbers*: 94.

²⁰² Budd, *Numbers*: 136. Friedman points out that the redundant “only” which employs the word *רַק* (root *רִקַּק*) as half of the idiom sets the table for a pun in the concluding section of the episode: *נִרְקַק נִרְקַק* (“surely spit” with root *רִקַּק*) “an intensive form that doubles the verb—and doubly emphasizes the pun. And the pun confirms that Miriam’s punishment is meant to fit the crime” Friedman, *Commentary*: 466.

that all the people of Israel could function as prophets (Num 11:29) and this crisis where Miriam and Aaron were accusing Moses of hoarding his prophetic gift.²⁰³ Because such distribution is beyond Moses' authority, Miriam and Aaron's complaint is actually one against God.²⁰⁴

The next contribution to the characterization of Miriam and Aaron is God's reaction. The first indication of divine involvement is the statement "The Lord heard it," i.e. what Miriam and Aaron had said. The explicit statement that "God heard" is notification that the deity is preparing to act on behalf of someone or to act in judgment.²⁰⁵ In this case, Yahweh is coming to the defense of Moses. God appears **מִתְבַּרַּח** ("suddenly", v. 4), unexpectedly.²⁰⁶ Yahweh shows displeasure at their actions by

²⁰³ Alter, *Five*: 742. Riggins makes the following observation: "In comparison with Joshua's misplaced loyalty in 11:28, protecting Moses' uniqueness, here is a misplaced disloyalty, questioning Moses' uniqueness." Walter Riggins, *Numbers*, *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983): 102.

²⁰⁴ Friedman aptly comments that "...Miriam and Aaron bring God into what was a family dispute." Friedman, *Commentary*: 467.

²⁰⁵ For behalf see Allen, "Numbers," *EBC* 2:798; for judgment see Whitelaw and Winterbotham, "Numbers," *PC* 2:130.

²⁰⁶ Nachmanides states that Miriam and Aaron were not in a state expecting divine revelation and then the revelation they were questioning burst upon them. In other words, they were so busy complaining about the lack of revelation they were shocked and unprepared to suddenly experience it. Ramban (Nachmanides), *Torah*: 6:234. The irony continues: "God's speech, spoken directly to Miriam and Aaron, subverts his very point. He comes, not in a dream or vision or riddle, but as the author of direct discourse. And Miriam and Aaron have no need to rely on Moses to make sense of what God has said." Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993): 115. Miriam and Aaron received what they yearned for; the only problem was that the content of the message is not what they expected! Riggins, *Numbers*: 103.

severely questioning them and leaving them in anger (vv. 8-9).²⁰⁷ Thus, their own actions and God's reactions characterize Miriam and Aaron negatively.

The character benchmark of Moses is reinforced in Num 12 by two level 1 sources of reliable information: an explicit comment from the narrator, and God's comments regarding Moses. The statement "Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth" (v. 3) is the only explicit comment of characterization given by the narrator in the entire wilderness narrative. This places its contents at the highest level of reliability (using Alter's reliability scale). The main question is what does *קָנַי* mean? Its base meaning is "bowed."²⁰⁸ More specific suggestions are numerous with the vast majority of scholars seeing the term as a positive characteristic.²⁰⁹ Older translations, under the influence of the LXX with its translation of "...πραῦς which means 'gentle, mild, meek, ...'" have utilized the word "meek"—"...the notion of the patient bearing of inflicted wrongs."²¹⁰ Most scholars now reject this translation as

²⁰⁷ Burns, developing thoughts by Coats, notes a judicial theme within the episode. The accusation is made in verse 2, the defense is given in verses 6-8 while the defendant sits silently, and the final indictment is given in verse 8 ("How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!"). Burns, *Has*: 63-64. In the same vein, on verse 9, Hertz adds the following regarding Yahweh's departure: "As a judge departs after trying and convicting evil-doers." Hertz, *Pentateuch*: 619.

²⁰⁸ HALOT 2:855.

²⁰⁹ Whitelaw is an exception to this trend with his insistence that the term is "conventional hyperbole" because Moses "...was marred by sinful impatience and passion on more than one occasion." Whitelaw and Winterbotham, "Numbers," *PC* 2:131. Granted, Moses has his faults, but the context and content in Num 12 appear to argue against this position.

²¹⁰ John William Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Numbers*, Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies Series 46 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988): 184.

indicating too much passivity. Other options fall into the general category of a trait which was initiated through his prior trials—“miserable,” or “depressed/afflicted.”²¹¹ A large group of options fall under the category of personal relationship to God—(1) “discipline, integrity, trust, and dedication” to God, (2) “obedience within the context of personal responsibility,” (3) “seeks, hears, and rejoices in God,” (4) devout or trusting.²¹² Another option is “selflessness.”²¹³ A large number of scholars opt for the idea of “humble/humility.”²¹⁴ The immediate context where God comes to the defense of Moses

²¹¹ For miserable see Allen, “Numbers,” *EBC* 2:799; for depressed/afflicted see Clarke, *Holy*: 1:628.

²¹² For (1) see Bellinger, *Leviticus and Numbers*: 225; for (2) see Coats, “Humility”: 100-101; for (3) see Dozeman, “Numbers,” *NIB* 2:109-110; for (4) see Milgrom, *Numbers*: 94; Riggans, *Numbers*: 103; Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 4 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981): 111 (the latter adding the trait “humility”).

²¹³ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. Isaac Levy, 2nd, rev ed., 5 vols. (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1999): 4:190.

²¹⁴ Friedman, *Commentary*: 467; Gray, *Numbers*: 123; Paul P. Levertoff, trans., ed., *Midrash Sifre on Numbers*, Translations of Early Documents Series III: Rabbinic Texts (London: SPCK, 1926): 81-82; Levine, *Numbers*: 329; James L. Mays, *The Book of Leviticus, the Book of Numbers*, The Layman’s Bible Commentary 4 (Richmond: John Knox, 1963): 90; A. H. McNeile, *The Book of Numbers in the Revised Version*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911): 66; Frederick L. Moriarity, “Numbers,” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, 2 vols. bound as one (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968): 90-91; Olson, *Numbers*: 71; Rashi, *Torah*: 4:137; Snaith, “Numbers”: 259.

could suggest the idea of “not self-assertive.”²¹⁵ The slightly broader context can argue for the idea of “not power hungry.”²¹⁶ It is difficult to precisely define the word.

Whatever the precise meaning, it is meant to be a high compliment to Moses.

The second main source of information for the characterization of Moses is God’s statements. Yahweh calls Moses “My servant” (vv. 7, 8)—a term usually reserved for special individuals like Abraham (Gen 26:24), Isaac (Gen 24:14), and David (2 Sam 7:5).²¹⁷ God states that Moses is “trusted throughout My household” (v. 7).²¹⁸ While God speaks with other intermediaries through veiled methods like visions and dreams, God speaks to Moses “mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the

²¹⁵ Budd, *Numbers*: 136; Burns, *Has*: 63 (within the legal motif mentioned above); W. J. Dumbrell, “אֲנִי,” *NIDOTTE* 3:456; Espin and Thrupp, “Numbers” *CookComm* 1:693; John Peter Lange, “Numbers, or the Fourth Book of Moses,” *Lange* 3:69; Ramban (Nachmanides), *Torah*: 6:232; P.P. Saydon, “Numbers,” in *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, eds. Reginald C. Fuller, Leonard Johnston and Conleth Kearns, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1969): 247.

²¹⁶ Conrad E. L’Heureux, “Numbers,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990): 85; ibn Ezra, *Pentateuch*: 3:344. The question of Moses’ authority originates in Exod 2; it is the heart of the issue in this chapter. For the future, Fox notes the following: “This description helps to prepare us for the confrontation with Korah in Chap. 16, where the rebels accuse Moshe of lording it over them.” Fox, *Five*: 719.

²¹⁷ Julius H. Greenstone, *Numbers, with Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1939): 123; Budd, *Numbers*: 136-137.

²¹⁸ “The apparent image of this verse, though based on a different grammatical form, draws on the same root word and meaning (*’mn*) from Ex. 17:12. Moses shows himself a responsible steward in God’s house, and his responsibility undergirds the picture of Moses as a person with integrity.” Coats, “Humility”: 100.

likeness of the Lord” (v. 8).²¹⁹ As Dozeman says, “The point of the divine oracle is that such direct communication with God is beyond that of prophets and places Moses in a special category. His charismatic authority transcends traditional categories.”²²⁰

In Num 12 Moses has, in a sense, “returned to himself.” Unlike Num 11, he is not questioning God regarding his personal misfortunes despite the personal attack from members of his own family. In Num 12 we see Moses receiving the highest accolades from the narrator and from God. As Allen notes, the usually long-suffering God is here suddenly motivated to quickly “... redress the wrong done to his friend.”²²¹ The two, level 1 statements of Num 12 underscore the fact that Moses has a solid character core;

²¹⁹ The “mouth to mouth” and “likeness” references bring to mind Exod 33:11 where “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face ...” and Exod 33:18 where Moses requests of God “Oh, let me behold Your Presence!” He was not granted the latter but he came closer to seeing God than anyone.

²²⁰ Dozeman, “Numbers,” *NIB* 2:110.

²²¹ Allen, “Numbers,” *EBC* 2:800. Another, subtle aspect to the sudden appearance of the comments of the narrator and of God is the significance of the parties making the complaints—the high priest of Israel and a woman who has been labelled a “prophetess” (Exod 15:20). We have two highly-positioned individuals pitted against another highly-positioned individual (Moses). Granted, there are hierarchical differences between the various parties, but considering the significant departure from Moses’ usual behavior in the prior episode, there is the potential for readers to be divided in declaring who was right and who was wrong. Immediate response from the highest levels of reliability (narrator and God) are needed to make crystal clear who is the correct party. A similar situation is described in 1 Kgs 13:18 where two prophets had two, conflicting messages. How could readers determine which prophet was indeed from God when both had the same office? In this case, the narrator steps into the story line with the explicit statement “He was lying to him” in order to give a clear signal to readers as to which prophet had the real word from God. (For further detail, see Sternberg, *Poetics*: 380.) Moses is unique in his position before God—higher than any priest or prophet. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973): 203-204.

any deviations from that core are exceptions not the rule. This principle will guide the assessment of blame in Num 20.

The Refusal of the Israelites to Enter the Promised Land from
Kadesh (Num 13:1-14:45)

The story line of Israel's trek in the Wilderness reaches its peak in Num 13-14. In addition to its theme—the halt of the movement toward Canaan—the extent of the narrative—two entire chapters—is an indication of the importance of its content. Even its style has been adjusted to add emphasis to its content.²²² Not only is there an expansion of text, there is also a thematic expansion of players involved in the episode's rebellion.

Three rebellions preceded the spy story, one that affected the fringe of the camp (11:1-3), a second involving the people's complaint about the manna (11:4-35), and a third involving for the first time leaders of the people, Miriam and Aaron (12:1-16). The progression from the fringe to all the people to the leaders build progressively toward the culminating rebellion in Numbers 13-14. In the spy story, both the leaders in the form of the spies (13:2) and all the people (14:1-2) are involved and implicated.²²³

Since this episode is much larger than any similar episode reviewed to this point, an outline is listed below. Once again, the focus in this thesis is on issues of characterization, specifically, the actions and words of the people of Israel, Moses, and God.

²²² “The actors speak passionately and at length about the issues at stake. Repetition, vivid imagery and deliberate irony accent the main thrust of the story.” Wenham, *Numbers*: 116. Olson adds the following: “The spy story is one of the most elaborate narratives in the whole of Numbers. Its several scenes and dialogues are carefully constructed. Suspense, irony, and dramatic dialogue give the reader a sense of the heightened importance of this narrative moment.” Olson, *Numbers*: 75.

²²³ Olson, *Numbers*: 81.

1. Num 13:1-24 Dispatching and Movement of the Scouts
2. Num 13:25-29 The Scouts' Report
3. Num 13:30 Caleb's Response
4. Num 13:31-33 The Scouts' Counter Report
5. Num 14:1-4 Reaction of the People
6. Num 14:5-9 Joshua's and Caleb's Plea
7. Num 14:10 The Threat of Stoning
8. Num 14:11-12 The Lord's Address to Moses
9. Num 14:13-19 Moses' Intercession for the People
10. Num 14:20-35 The Lord's Response to Moses
11. Num 14:36-45 Immediate Judgments

Dispatching and Movement of the Scouts (Num 13:1-24)

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: שְׁלַח לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיְהִיו אֶתְיָרִץ כְּנֹעַן אֲשֶׁר-אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אֶחָד אִישׁ אֶחָד לְמִטָּה אַבְתָּיו תִּשְׁלְחוּ כֹל נָשִׂיא בְּהֵם: (Num 13:1-2)

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Send men to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelite people; send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them.” (Num 13:1-2)

Regarding characterization, the main issue in this section is whether Moses was correct in sending the spies. Num 13:1 states that the initiative to send spies came from Yahweh while a parallel passage in Deut 1:22 states that the initiative was with the people.²²⁴ Considering the disaster that ensued, some have criticized Moses for heeding

²²⁴ Num 13:1: “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying ‘Send men to scout the land of Canaan’” Deut 1:22: “Then all of you came to me and said, ‘Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land for us’”

the people's request.²²⁵ Nachmanides, on the other hand, finds no fault in Moses' actions. He builds his argument on three principles. First, what was the point of error in the spies' report? It was not the content; if they had reported no opposition they would have been lying. They reported the truth; it was their disbelief that the opposition could be overcome that was the problem. Second, Moses, immediately prior to his death, gave similar instructions, with even more ominous warnings about the inhabitants, to the next generation and no crisis of rebellion followed. Third, what Moses was doing was standard procedure for a military force to do when scouting a land for invasion.²²⁶ In light of all this, Moses should not be accused of sin in this matter. Either God authored the command and Moses was obedient, or Moses supplemented the command and his action was without fault within God's permissive will.

Another matter that needs mention in vv. 1-24 is the type of leaders involved in the scouting mission. They were לְלִישָׁא בְּהֵם ("each a prince/chieftain among them," v. 2) and כָּלֵם אֲנָשִׁים רְאִשֵׁי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל ("all of them heads of the Israelites," v. 3)²²⁷. This indicates

²²⁵ "Since Israel came and said, 'Let us send men ahead of us,' ... and Moses consulted the *Shechinah* [and God] said 'I told them that [the Land] is good, as it says, 'I shall bring you up from the affliction of Egypt, etc.' I swear by their lives that I give them room to err through the words of the spies so that they shall not take possession of it.'" Rashi, *Torah*: 4:148. Note also Ackerman: "...Moses' instructions to the spies go far beyond mediating the divine word (13:17-20). ... Do not these terms invite us to look askance at Moses' lack of faith? ... [Verses] 17-20 reveal that Moses still doubts the goodness of the land and YHWH's ability to deliver it into Israel's hands. ... It was, however, the agenda of questions set by Moses and not by YHWH that prompted the spies to seek out *whether* rather than *how* the land could best be conquered." James S. Ackerman, "Numbers," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987): 83.

²²⁶ Ramban (Nachmanides), *Torah*: 6:244-247.

²²⁷ Milgrom calls them "dignitaries." Milgrom, *Numbers*: 101. Levine employs the term "important personages." Levine, *Numbers*: 351.

that the ones who would return with a fear-filled report were on the opposite end of society from the instigators of the first post-Sinai crisis—the “riffraff” (Num 11).

The Scouts' Report (Num 13:25-29)

וַיָּשׁוּבוּ מִתּוֹר הָאָרֶץ מִקֵּץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם: וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־כָּל־עֵדֶת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־מִדְּבַר פְּאָרָן קְדֻשָּׁה וַיָּשִׁיבוּ אוֹתָם דְּבַר וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵדָה וַיַּרְאוּם אֶת־פְּרִי הָאָרֶץ: וַיִּסְפְּרוּ־לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְּאֵנוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַחְתָּנוּ וְגַם זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבַשׁ הִוא וְזֶה־פְרִיָּהּ: אָפֶס כִּי־עַז הָעַם הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ וְהָעָרִים בְּצֻרוֹת גְּדֹלַת מְאֹד וְגַם־יְלָדֵי הָעֵנָק רָאִינוּ שָׁם: עַמְלֹק יוֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב וְהַחִתִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי וְהָאֱמֹרִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּהָר וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי יֹשֵׁב עַל־הַיַּם וְעַל יַד הַיַּרְדֵּן: (Num 13: 25-29)

At the end of forty days they returned from scouting the land. They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them and to the whole community, as they showed them the fruit of the land. This is what they told him: “We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there. Amalekites dwell in the Negeb region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan.” (Num 13:25-29)

The first part of the report (v. 27) details the agricultural virtues of the land. It was a “land that flowed with milk and honey”—just like Yahweh had promised. They even brought a rather sizable sample. They then contrast (“however,” כִּי) this description of the land with a description of the inhabitants of the land (vv. 28-29). Nachmanides states that the various native groups are listed in such a way geographically “...to intimate that there is no direction from which to enter the Land, for on all sides [the inhabitants] are all mighty.”²²⁸ The scouts simply state their findings but the fact that the description of the land’s dangers is about twice the size of the description of the land’s

²²⁸ Ramban (Nachmanides), *Torah*: 6:263-264. See also Levine, *Numbers*: 357.

virtues and the fact that whenever the scouts mention the land it is absent of any reference to God, as in “which the Lord swore to give to us,” forebodes ill for the future.²²⁹

Caleb’s Response (Num 13:30)

וַיְהִי כִּלְבָּב אֶת־הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר עֲלֵה נַעֲלָה וַיִּרְשְׁנוּ אֹתָהּ כִּי־יָכוֹל נוֹכַל לָהּ: (Num 13:30)

Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.” (Num 13:30)

The text does not give an explicit description of the people’s reaction to the scouts’ report but something must have been amiss because Caleb steps forward to “hush” (וַיִּהָס) the crowd.²³⁰ He exhorts the people to press on with the taking of the land “for we shall surely overcome it.”

The Scouts’ Counter Report (Num 13:31-33)

וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־עָלוּ עִמּוֹ אָמְרוּ לֹא נוֹכַל לַעֲלוֹת אֶל־הָעָם כִּי־חָזַק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ: וַיּוֹצִיאוּ דְבַת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֹתָהּ אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֹתָהּ אָרֶץ אֲכָלֶת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הוּא וְכָל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־רָאִינוּ בְּתוֹכָהּ אֲנָשִׁי מְדוּת: וְשָׁם רָאִינוּ אֶת־הַנְּפִילִים בְּנֵי עֲנָק מִן־הַנְּפִילִים וְנָהִי כְּעֵינֵינוּ כַּחֲגָבִים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ כְּעֵינֵיהֶם: (Num 13:31-33)

But the men who had gone up with him said, “We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we.” Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, “The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size; we saw the Nephilim there—the Anakites are part of the Nephilim—and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.” (Num 13:31-33)

²²⁹ Rashi suggests that the scouts were so calculating in their report that they made sure they said something positive about the land at the front of their report to gain acceptance of the bad news at the end of the report. In other words, if they had said all bad things about the land they risked raising the people’s skepticism over the objectivity of the entire report. Rashi, Torah: 4:155. For the absence of the mention of God, see Wenham, *Numbers*: 119.

²³⁰ “The author does not say in so many words what impression the report of the spies makes on the people, but after what was said about their mentality in chapter 11 it is clear to his readers how fatal this impression must have been.” Noordtzij, *Numbers*: 120.

Caleb's positive report forces the issuers of the majority report to respond and make explicit what they only implied in their first report—the land cannot be taken, the people are “stronger than we” (v. 31). At this point, in order to win the Israelites to their opinion, they return to describing the land—but this time with extreme hyperbole. Now the land “eats its inhabitants,” its inhabitants are giants, the Nephilim are also residents, and “we looked like grasshoppers” (v.32-33).²³¹ Olson remarks: “The balance is tipped when all the spies except Caleb revise their description of Canaan, mythologizing both the land and the inhabitants into primordial monsters.”²³² The ten scouts then “spread” (וַיִּזְעִיאוּ) their “calumnies” (דִּבְתֵי הָאָרֶץ) among the people. The *hiphil* form of the verb יצא has the basic meaning “to bring out.” The noun דבה has a malevolent connotation. When used elsewhere in the Bible the term is linked with “hatred” (Prov 10:18), and “reproach” (Prov 15:10). It often has the sense of covertness, as in “whisper” (Psa 31:14; Jer 20:10) or “jibes”/“gossip” (Ezek 36:3).²³³ Combined, the two words leave the impression that

²³¹ The meaning of this phrase “eats its inhabitants,” is debated. The most common understanding is that the land is constantly experiencing warfare (Milgrom, *Numbers*: 107; Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*: 186; Lange, “Numbers,” *Lange* 3:73; Morris Sigel Seale, “Numbers xiii.32,” *ExpTim* 68 (1956-57): 28. Other theories include the idea that the land does not supply enough food for the inhabitants to survive. Gray, *Numbers*: 151; Harvey H. Guthrie, Jr., “The Book of Numbers,” in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971): 89; Moriarity, “Numbers”: 91; Riggins, *Numbers*: 109. The land has bad air. Ibn Ezra, *Pentateuch*: 3:354. The land has an unhealthy climate. Jamieson, Faussett, and Brown, *Commentary*: 1:548. The land produces food that is so large that normal people cannot handle it, only giant people. Ramban (Nachmanides), *Torah*: 6:270. Or God was arranging for the indigenous population to be constantly burying their dead in order that it might distract them from noticing the Israelite scouts in their midst. Rashi, *Torah*: 4:157. The Nephilim were the mysterious race of beings mentioned in Gen 6:4.

²³² Olson, *Numbers*: 79.

²³³ Fabry, H.-J. “דִּבְתֵי *dibbāh*; זָבוּבִים *z'bhûh*.” *TDOT* 3:72-79.

the ten scouts went about the camp spreading their bad report almost in a family-to-family, behind the scenes manner.²³⁴

Reaction of the People (Num 14:1-4)

וַתִּשָּׂא כָּל־הָעֵדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֶת־קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכוּ הָעָם בְּלַיְלָה הַהוּא: וַיִּלְנוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם כָּל־הָעֵדָה לְדַמְתָּנוּ בְּאָרְץ מִצְרַיִם אוֹ בַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְדַמְתָּנוּ: וְלָמָּה יְהוָה מְבִיא אֹתָנוּ
אֶל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְנַפֵּל בְּחַרְבַּב נַשְׁיָנוּ וְנִטְפְּנוּ? הֲיִינוּ לְבוֹד הָלֹא טוֹב לָנוּ שׁוּב מִצְרָיִמָּה: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־
אָחִיו נָתַח רָאשׁ וְנָשׁוּבָה מִצְרָיִמָּה: (Num 14: 1-4)

The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. All the Israelites railed against Moses and Aaron, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt,” the whole community shouted at them, “or if only we might die in this wilderness! Why is the Lord taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!” And they said to one another, “Let us head back for Egypt.” (Num 14:1-4)

The people’s response to the negative report of the ten spies was broad in scope and rebellious in passion. To emphasize the universality of the reaction, the text employs three terms for the people: כָּל הָעֵדָה (“all of the community,” v. 1), הָעָם (“the people,” v. 1), and כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“all the Israelites,” v. 2). Their reactions were multiple: they “broke into loud cries” and “wept all night”—reminding readers of the weeping at Kibroth-hattaavah (11:10). They then “grumbled/railed against” (וַיִּלְנוּ עַל) Moses and Aaron—utilizing the same verb (לוּן) as in prior rebellions (Exod 15:24; 16:2, 7, 8; 17:3).

Up until this point, the reactions of the people duplicated many of their reactions in earlier disputes. But from this point on, their reactions plunge to new depths. They wish they would die in the wilderness—in essence, they are refusing to go forward into

²³⁴ Nachmanides is of the opinion that during their the pre-Caleb presentation, the ten scouts tempered the negative aspects of their report for fear of Moses, but after Caleb completed his counter-report and they were away from Moses they resorted to spreading a more explicit version of their report among the people. Ramban (Nachmanides), *Torah*: 6:264, 266. See also Milgrom, *Numbers*: 106.

Canaan.²³⁵ They accuse Yahweh of deliberating leading them to their death in battle.

They express their worst fears for the abuse of their wives and children. And, to cap their response, they formulated a plan to return to Egypt (נִתְּנָה רֹאשׁ וְנִשׁוּבָה מִצְרָיִמָּה).²³⁶ In short, their reaction expressed a total rejection of Yahweh's plan of deliverance.

Joshua's and Caleb's Plea (Num 14:5-9)

וַיִּפֹּל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם לִפְנֵי כָל-קְהַל עֲדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיְהִי שָׁע בְּיָנִיחַ וְכָלֵב בֶּן-יִפְתָּח מִן-הַתָּרִים אֶת-הָאָרֶץ קָרְעוּ בְּגָדֵיהֶם: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-כָּל-עֲדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֲתָנָה טוֹבָה הָאָרֶץ מְאֹד מְאֹד: אִם-חָפֵץ בְּנֵי יִהְיֶה וְהִבִּיא אֲתָנוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת וְנִתְּנָה לָנוּ אָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-הִיא זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ: אַךְ בֵּיהֵנָּה אֲלִיתְּמוּדוֹ וְאַתֶּם אֲלִיתִירְאוּ אֶת-עַם הָאָרֶץ כִּי לֹחֲמֵנוּ הֵם סָר צֶלֶם מַעֲלִיָּהֶם וַיְהִי וְהָיָה אֲתָנוּ אֲלִיתִירְאָם: (Num 14: 5-9)

Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembled congregation of the Israelites. And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, of those who had scouted the land, rent their clothes and exhorted the whole Israelite community: “The land that we traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord is pleased with us, He will bring us into that land, a land that flows with milk and honey, and give it to us; only you must not rebel against the Lord. Have no fear then of the people of the country, for they are our prey; their protection has departed from them, but the Lord is with us. Have no fear of them!” (Num 14:5-9)

At this point Moses and Aaron fell to the ground before the people. Joshua now joins Caleb in another attempt to turn the people from their proposed course. They remind the people that the scouts found that the agriculture of the land matched that

²³⁵ Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*: 187; Levine, *Numbers*: 362.

²³⁶ The phrase is somewhat ambiguous and debated. Rashi and Targum Onkelos (נמני רישא ונתוב למצרים) express the concept of appointing a leader to return the nation to Egypt (Rashi, *Torah*: 4:159). Noth says “...the translation of it, therefore, would be: ‘Let us set up a head’, i.e. act defiantly and of our own free will (not, as would certainly also be possible from the wording: ‘Let us choose a captain’, i.e. someone other than Moses).” Noth, *Numbers*: 107-108. Levine prefers “let us head back” instead of the appointment of a leader. Levine, *Numbers*: 363. Whatever the case, the directive ה on מצרים indicates the ultimate goal of the new endeavor—a return to Egypt.

promised by Yahweh (v. 7-8). This same God has promised the nation this land and will deliver it to them if they trust him. They must not “rebel” (תמרדו) against Yahweh (v. 9).

The Threat of Stoning (Num 14:10)

וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל־הָעֵדָה לְרָגוּם אֹתָם בְּאֲבָנִים וַיִּכְבֹּד יְהוָה נֹרְאָה בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד אֶל־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
(Num 14: 10)

As the whole community threatened to pelt them with stones, the Presence of the Lord appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites. (Num 14:10)

The prostrations of Moses and Aaron and the pleas of Joshua and Caleb failed to dissuade the people from their intention. Indeed, the people began preparations to stone them.²³⁷ At this point, Yahweh, who had been quietly on the sidelines, makes an appearance.

The Lord’s Address to Moses (Num 14:11-12)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עַד־מַשָּׁה עַד־אָנֹכִי יִנְאַצְנִי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְעַד־אָנֹכִי לֹא־יֶאֱמִינּוּ בִּי כָּל־הָאֹתוֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי
בְּקִרְבּוֹ: אֲנֹכִי בְּדִבְרֵךְ וְאוֹרְשָׁנּוּ וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אִתְּךָ לְגוֹי־גָדוֹל וְעַצוֹם מִמֶּנּוּ: (Num 14: 11-12)

And the Lord said to Moses, “How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you a nation far more numerous than they!” (Num 14:11-12)

Yahweh asks Moses “How long will this people spurn (ינאצני) Me ...?”²³⁸ This “spurning” takes place despite all the repeated signs Yahweh demonstrated to the people

²³⁷ Wenham suggests that because Joshua and Caleb accused the people of rebellion and that the people rejected this charge, they considered the pair to be false witnesses and resorted to the punishment for false witnesses—stoning. Wenham, *Numbers*: 122.

²³⁸ Of the verb נאץ Sakenfeld writes: “Although the *qal* of this verb has a varied usage, the 12 other occurrences of this term in the *piel* refer without exception to the despising or spurning of God or of something sacred to him. The contexts suggest that the action is regarded as tantamount to rejection of the whole covenant relationship, an action which Yahweh must treat in judgment.” Katharine D. Sakenfeld, “The Problem of Divine Forgiveness in Numbers 14,” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 321.

(v. 11). The only thing left to do is destroy everyone in the nation except Moses and start over with him (v. 12).

Moses' Intercession for the People (Num 14:13-19)

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה וְשָׁמְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי־הִעֲלִיתָ בְּכַחַךְ אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה מִמִּצְרַיִם וְאָמְרוּ אֶל־יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְעוּ שְׁמֵנוּ כִּי־אַתָּה יְהוָה בְּקִרְבֵּי הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר־עִיֵּן בְּעֵינֵי נְרָאָה אַתָּה יְהוָה וְעַנְנְךָ עָמַד עַל־הֶם וּבַעֲמֹד עַנְן אַתָּה הַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם וּבַעֲמֹד אֵשׁ לַיְלָה: וְהִמַּתָּ אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה כְּאִשׁ אֶחָד וְאָמְרוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמְעוּ אֶת־שְׁמֹךָ לֹא־מֵר: מִבְּלַתִּי כִלְתִּי יְהוָה לְהַבִּיא אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּע לָהֶם וַיִּשְׁחָטֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר: וְעַתָּה יִגְדַלְנָא כַח אֲדָנִי כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ לֹא־מֵר: יְהוָה אָרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חַסָּד נִשְׂא עוֹן וְנָשַׁע וְנָקָה לֹא יִנְקָה פֶקֶד עוֹן אָבוֹת עַל־בְּנָיִם עַל־שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל־רְבָעִים: סֶלֶח־נָא לַעֲוֹן הָעָם הַזֶּה כַּגִּדְל חֶסֶדְךָ וְכַאֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאַתָּה לְעָם הַזֶּה מִמִּצְרַיִם וְעַד־הַנְּהָ: (Num 14: 13-19)

But Moses said to the Lord, “When the Egyptians, from whose midst You brought up this people in Your might, hear the news, they will tell it to the inhabitants of that land. Now they have heard that You, O Lord, are in the midst of this people; that you, O Lord, appear in plain sight when Your cloud rests over them and when You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. If then You slay this people to a man, the nations who have heard Your fame will say, ‘It must be because the Lord was powerless to bring that people into the land He had promised them on oath that He slaughtered them in the wilderness.’ Therefore, I pray, let my Lord’s forbearance be great, as You have declared, saying, ‘The Lord! slow to anger and abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression; yet not remitting all punishments, but visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and fourth generations.’ Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt.” (Num 14:13-19)

Moses now faces a major test of his character. Will he reenact his intercession for the nation as he did at Mt. Sinai or would he remember his frustration at Kibroth-hattaavah, swear off the torturous nation, and accept God’s offer to replace the entire nation? Moses, in accord with his core character of intercessor, chooses the first option and utilizes two of the arguments from his intercession at Sinai—God’s reputation among the nations, and God’s חַסָּד—to beg for the forgiveness of the people.

The Lord’s Response to Moses (Num 14:20-35)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה סֶלַח־תִּי כְּדַבַּרְךָ: וְאוּלָּם חִי־אַנִּי וַיִּמְלֵא כְבוֹד־יְהוָה אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ: כִּי כָל־הָאֲנָשִׁים הָרְאִים אֶת־כַּבְּדִי וְאֶת־אֲתֵתִי אֲשֶׁר־עָשִׂיתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וּבַמִּדְבָּר וַיִּנְסוּ אֹתִי זֶה עָשָׂר פְּעָמִים וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי: אִם־יָרְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְתָּם וְכָל־מִנְאָצִי לֹא יְרֹאוּהָ: וְעַבְדֵי כָּל־בַּיטָא יִתְּנָה רוּחַ אַחֲרָת עִמּוֹ וַיִּמְלֵא אַחֲרָי וְהַבִּיאֲתִיו אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־בָּרַךְ שְׁמִי וְזָרְעוּ יוֹרְשָׁנָה: וְהָעַמְלָקִי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי יוֹשְׁבֵי

בְּעֵמֶק מִחֹר פָּנוּ וְסָעוּ לָכֶם הַמַּדְבָּר דֶּרֶךְ יַם־סוּף: וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: עַד־מַתִּי לַעֲדָה הֲרָעָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר הִמָּה מִלִּינִים עָלַי אֲתִתְּלֹגוֹת בְּגִי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הִמָּה מִלִּינִים עָלַי שְׂמַעְתִּי: אָמַר אֱלֹהִים חִי־אֲנִי נְאֻם־יְהוָה אִם־לֹא כִּפְאוֹר דְּבַרְתֶּם בְּאָזְנֵי כֵן אֶעֱשֶׂה לָכֶם: בַּמַּדְבָּר הַזֶּה יִפְלוּ פְגָרֵיכֶם וְכָל־פְּקֻדֵיכֶם לְכָל־מִסְפָּרְכֶם מִכֵּן עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעֲלָה אֲשֶׁר הִלִּינְתֶם עָלַי: אִם־אַתֶּם תִּבְאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֲתִיְדִי לְשַׁכֵּן אִתְּכֶם כִּי אִם־כֹּלֵב בְּנֵי־פִנְחָה וַיְהִי־שָׁעַ בְּיָנוּן: וְטַפְכֶם אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתֶּם לְבוֹ יְהִיָּה וְהִבִּיאֹתִי אִתְּם וַיִּדְעוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר מְאַסְתֶּם כִּי: וּפְגָרֵיכֶם אִתְּם יִפְלוּ בַּמַּדְבָּר הַזֶּה: וּבְנֵיכֶם יְהִיוּ רַעִים בַּמַּדְבָּר אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וְנִשְׂאוּ אֶת־זִנְוֹתֵיכֶם עַד־תֶּחֱסַר פְּגָרֵיכֶם בַּמַּדְבָּר: בְּמִסְפַּר הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר־תִּרְתֶּם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם לְשָׁנָה יוֹם לְשָׁנָה תִּשְׂאוּ אֶת־עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וַיִּדְעֶתֶם אֶת־תְּנוּאַתִּי: אֲנִי יְהוָה דְּבַרְתִּי אִם־לֹא זֹאת אֶעֱשֶׂה לְכָל־הָעֵדָה הֲרָעָה הַזֹּאת הַנּוֹעֲדִים עָלַי בַּמַּדְבָּר הַזֶּה תִּתְמוּ וְשֶׁם יִמָּתוּ: (Num 14:20-35)

And the Lord said, “I pardon, as you have asked. Nevertheless, as I live and as the Lord’s Presence fills the whole world, none of the men who have seen My Presence and the signs that I have performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, and who have tried Me these many times and have disobeyed Me, shall see the land that I promised on oath to their fathers; none of those who spurn Me shall see it. But my servant Caleb, because he was imbued with a different spirit and remained loyal to Me—him will I bring into the land that he entered, and his offspring shall hold it as a possession. Now the Amalekites and the Canaanites occupy the valleys. Start out, then, tomorrow and march into the wilderness by way of the Sea of Reeds. The Lord spoke further to Moses and Aaron, “How much longer shall that wicked community keep muttering against Me? Very well, I have heeded the incessant muttering of the Israelites against Me. Say to them: ‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘I will do to you just as you have urged Me. In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop. Of all of you were recorded in your various lists from the age of twenty years up, you who have muttered against Me, not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you—save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. Your children who, you said, would be carried off—these will I allow to enter; they shall know the land that you have rejected. But your carcasses shall drop in this wilderness, while your children roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness, until the last of your carcasses is down in the wilderness. You shall bear your punishment for forty years, corresponding to the number of days—forty days—that you scouted the land: a year for each day. Thus you shall know what it means to thwart Me. I the Lord have spoken. Thus will I do to all that wicked band that has banded together against Me: in this very wilderness they shall die to the last man.’” ” (Exod 14:20-35)

Yahweh grants Moses’ request, but He still insists on punishment. The generation that has seen all His signs and yet still spurned Him will not be allowed to see the land; instead their carcasses will drop in the wilderness (vv. 22-23, 29-30, 32). They will wander in the wilderness for 40 years—one year for each day of the scout’s mission (v.

- 34). The children they worried about dying in the wilderness, they will inherit the land instead—only they will have to wait 40 years until all the older generation dies off. (vv. 31, 32). The only individuals exempted from this punishment were Joshua and Caleb (vv. 24, 32).

Immediate Judgments (Num 14:36-45)

וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־שָׁלַח מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וַיָּשׁוּבוּ וַיְלִינוּ עָלָיו אֶת־כָּל־הָעֵדָה לְהוֹצִיא דָבָר עַל־הָאָרֶץ :
 וַיִּמְתּוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים מוֹצְאֵי דְבַת־הָאָרֶץ רָעָה בַּמִּגַּפָּה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה : וַיְהוֹשֶׁעַ בֶּן־נֹון וְכָל־בְּנֵי־קִנְחָנָה חָיו מִן־
 הָאֲנָשִׁים הָהֵם הַהֲלֹכִים לְתוֹר אֶת־הָאָרֶץ : וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶת־דְּבָרֵים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 וַיִּתְאַבְּלוּ הָעָם מְאֹד : וַיִּשְׁכְּמוּ בַבֶּקֶר וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶל־רֹאשֵׁי־הָהָר לֵאמֹר הֲנִנוּ וְעָלִינוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אָמַר
 יְהוָה כִּי חָטָאנוּ : וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לָּמָּה זֶה אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת־פִּי יְהוָה וְהוּא לֹא תִצְלַח : אֲלֵתְעַלּוּ כִּי אֵין
 יְהוָה בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְלֹא תִנְגַּפוּ לִפְנֵי אֵיבֵיכֶם : כִּי הִעֲמַלְקִי וְהִכְנַעְנִי שָׁם לִפְנֵיכֶם וְנִפְלַתֶם בַּחֶרֶב כִּי־עַל־כֵּן
 שָׁבַתֶם מֵאֲחֵרֵי יְהוָה וְלֹא־יְהִיָּה יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם : (Num 14:36-43)

As for the men whom Moses sent to scout the land, those who came back and caused the whole community to mutter against him by spreading calumnies about the land—those who spread such calumnies about the land died of plague, by the will of the Lord. Of those men who had gone to scout the land, only Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh survived. When Moses repeated these words to all the Israelites, the people were overcome by grief. Early next morning they set out toward the crest of the hill country, saying, “We are prepared to go up to the place that the Lord has spoken of, for we were wrong.” But Moses said, “Why do you transgress the Lord’s command? That will not succeed. Do not go up, lest you be routed by your enemies, for the Lord is not in your midst. For the Amalekites and the Canaanites will be there to face you, and you will fall by the sword, inasmuch as you have turned from following the Lord and the Lord will not be with you.” ... [Vv. 44-45 omitted.] ... (Num 14:36-45)

Two groups suffered immediate judgment. Group one consisted of the ten scouts heralding the negative report. They died of a plague (v. 37). The second group consisted of individuals who decided not to follow Yahweh’s instructions to turn back toward the wilderness, but instead decided to attempt an invasion of Canaan. They were crushed by its defenders (v. 45).

Summary Characterizations

During the greatest crisis in Israel’s march to Canaan, Moses and Israel must be graded at opposite ends. On the one hand Moses receives the highest marks. He literally

saved Israel from destruction at the hands of an angry God. On the other hand Israel receives the lowest marks. The people in general or their leaders are described as “railing against” God or Moses (לוח, v. 2, 27, 29)²³⁹, refusing to enter Canaan (v. 2) or rejecting (מאס, v. 31) the land, accusing Yahweh of malevolence (v. 3), planning to undo the exodus (שוב ממצרימה, v. 4), being rebels (מרד, v. 9), spurning God (נאץ, vv. 11, 23), having no faith in god (לא אמן, v. 11), committing spiritual prostitution (זנה, 33), ignoring God’s works on their behalf (v. 11), testing God (נסה, v. 22), thwarting God (נוא, v. 34), banding together against God (יער על, v. 35), spreading lies among the community (דבה, vv. 36-37), transgressing God’s commands (עבר, v. 41), and turning from following God (שוב מ, v. 43).

Korah’s Rebellion (Num 16:1-17:15)

ויקח קרח בן־יצהר בן־קהת בן־לוי ודתן ואבירם בני אליאב ואון בן־פלת בני ראובן: ויקמו לפני משה ואנשים מבני־שׂרָאֵל חֲמֹשִׁים וּמֵאֲתָיִם נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה קְרָאִי מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי־שָׁם: ויקהלו על־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַבְלְכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה כָּלָם קְדָשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יְהוָה וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קַהֲלֵי יְהוָה: וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל עַל־פָּנָיו: (Num 16: 1-4)

זאת עשו קחורלכם מחתות קרח וכל־עדתו: ודתנו בהן אש ושימו עליהן קטרת לפני יהוה מחור והיה האיש אשר־יבחר יהוה הוא הקדוש רב־לכם בני לוי: (Num 16: 7)

לבן אתה וכל־עדתך הנעדים על־יהוה ואהרן מה־הוא כי תלינו עליו: וישלח משה לקרא לדתן ולאבירם בני אליאב ויאמרו לא נעלה: המעט כי העליתנו מארץ זבת חלב ודבש להמיתנו במדבר כִּי־תִשְׁתַּרֵּר עָלֵינוּ גַם־הַשְּׂתֵרֵר: אף לא אליאב וזבת חלב ודבש הביאתנו ונתת לנו נחלת שדה וכרם העיני האנשים ההם תנקר לא נעלה: ויחר למשה מאד ויאמר אליהוה אל־תפן אל־מנחתם לא תמור אחד מהם נשאתי ולא הרעתי את־אחד מהם: (Num 16: 11-15)

וידבר יהוה אל־משה ואליאהרן לאמר: הבדלו מתוך העדה הזאת ואכלה אתם כרנע: ויפלו על־פניהם ויאמרו אל אלהי הרוחת לכל־בֶּשֶׂר האיש אחר יחטא ועל כִּלְיֵהֶעֱדָה תִקְצָף: (Num 16: 20-22)

וילנו כל־עדת בני־שׂרָאֵל מִמִּתְרַת עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אַתֶּם הַמִּתְעַם יְהוָה: ויהי בהקהל העדה על־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיִּפְנוּ אֶל־אַהֲלֵה מוֹעֵד וַהֲגִה כִּפְהוּ הָעֵנָן וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד יְהוָה: וַיִּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־פָּנָיו אֶהֱל מוֹעֵד: וידבר יהוה אל־משה לאמר: הרמו מתוך העדה הזאת ואכלה אתם כרנע ויפלו על־פניהם: ויאמר משה אליאהרן קח את־המחתה ותן־עליה אש מעל המזבח ושים קטרת והולך מהרה אליהעדה וכפר עליהם כִּי־יֵצֵא הַקָּצָף מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה הַחַל הַנִּגְנָף: (Num 17: 6-11)

²³⁹ All the verses in this sentence are from Num 14.

Now Korah, son of Izhar, son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben—to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?” When Moses heard this, he fell on his face. ... [V. 5 omitted.] ... Do this: You, Korah and all your band, take fire pans, and tomorrow put fire in them and lay incense on them before the Lord. Then the man whom the Lord chooses, he shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!” ... [Vv. 8-10 omitted.] ... Truly, it is against the Lord that you and all your company have banded together. For who is Aaron that you should rail against him?” Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab; but they said, “We will not come! Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us? Even if you had brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, and given us possession of fields and vineyards, should you gouge out those men’s eyes? We will not come!” Moses was much aggrieved and he said to the Lord, “Pay no regard to their oblation. I have not taken the ass of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them.” ... [Vv. 16-19 omitted.] ... and the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: “Stand back from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant!” But they fell on their faces and said, “O God, Source of the breath of all flesh! When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?” ... [Vv. 23-35 omitted.] ... Next day the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron, saying, “You two have brought death upon the Lord’s people!” But as the community gathered against them, Moses and Aaron turned toward the Tent of Meeting; the cloud had covered it and the Presence of the Lord appeared. When Moses and Aaron reached the Tent of Meeting, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Remove yourselves from this community, that I may annihilate them in an instant.” They fell on their faces. Then Moses said to Aaron, “Take the fire pan, and put on it fire from the altar. Add incense and take it quickly to the community and make expiation for them. For wrath has gone forth from the Lord: the plague has begun.” (Num 16:1-35; 17:1-11)

Numbers 16 is the narrative of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and 250 of their followers. It expands the list of objects of Israel’s complaining: whereas Num 11-12 deals with prophetic leadership, and Num 13-14 deals with the land, Num 16-17

now deals with the organization of the priesthood.²⁴⁰ It also expands the list of complainants: whereas Num 11 highlight complaints from the general congregation, and Num 12 from within the family, and Num 13-14 from the scouts, Num 16 now tells of clerical complaints.²⁴¹ The attack on the character of Moses that was first breached in Num 12, is expanded here in Num 16, and will reach its peak in Num 20.²⁴²

The usual understanding of the goals of the Num 16 rebellion is that Korah was leading opposition to clerical authority (i.e. Aaron) while Dathan and Abiram were leading opposition to secular/political authority (i.e. Moses).²⁴³ These two actions are combined into a single, simultaneous event.²⁴⁴ The account jumps back and forth

²⁴⁰ Budd, *Numbers*: 188; Dozeman, “Numbers,” *NIB* 2:134.

²⁴¹ Hamilton, *Handbook*: 343.

²⁴² Allen, “Numbers,” *EBC* 2:833.

²⁴³ Katharine D. Sakenfeld, *Journeying with God: A Commentary on the Book of Numbers*, ITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 97; Ackerman, “Numbers”: 82. Noordtjij differs on this point in that he believes both groups are interested in the priesthood and this common goal led to the two groups working against each other. Noordtjij, *Numbers*: 141-142. Num 16 lacks support for any dissension between the groups.

²⁴⁴ Simultaneity is demonstrated by the passage’s use of resumptive repetition. (As an example, note Moses’ instructions to Korah regarding the fire pans in vv. 6-7, followed by the exchange between Moses and Dathan/Abiram in vv. 12-15, followed by the repeated fire pan instructions in vv. 16-17. Moses was juggling two threats at the same time.) Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993): 312; Dozeman, “Numbers,” *NIB* 2:137. Friedman speaks of the structure of the passage as indicating a plan of Moses to weaken the two parties by separating them—divide and conquer. Friedman, *Commentary*: 481-482. It seems far more likely that the separation is merely a grammatical structure—it is the way Hebrew narrative presents simultaneous events.

between Korah and Dathan/Abiram.²⁴⁵ The narrative contains a rather impressive collection of sarcastic puns indicating the aggressive nature of the dialogues between the various participants. These features of rapidly oscillating simultaneity and aggressive dialogues recreate the extreme pressure under which Moses was operating.

The main sources of characterization of the opposing groups are their actions and words, the words of Moses, and the actions of God. In verses 2-4 the opposition group enunciates their charges against Moses and Aaron by “rising up before” (וַיִּקְמוּ לִי, v. 2) and “assembling against” (וַיִּקְהָלוּ עָלַי, v. 3) Moses. The participants accuse Moses: “you have gone too far” (וַיִּבְלַעְתֶּם, v. 3). The theological justification for this statement is that “all the community is holy” (כָּל־יְהוּדָה עֲדָה כֻּלָּם קֳדָשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יְהוָה), literally “all the community, all of them, are holy and Yahweh is in their midst,” v. 3). In other words, because all the people are holy, there should be no hierarchy in sacral matters.²⁴⁶ Finally, they ask (v. 3) why Moses and Aaron “raise yourselves [תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ] above the Lord’s congregation?”²⁴⁷ In

²⁴⁵ A basic scheme of the oscillation is as follows: Korah’s rebellion, 16:5-11; Dathan/Abiram’s rebellion, 16:12-15; Korah’s testing, 16:16-22; Dathan/Abiram’s testing, 16:25-34.

²⁴⁶ Note the emphasis on “all”. Alter is probably correct in stating: “Korah and his followers throw back in Moses’s face the idea he has transmitted to them that all Israel should be ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Exodus 19:6).” Alter, *Five*: 763. There may also be an echo of Moses’ statement in Num 11:29 where he wished the whole congregation were prophets. Sakenfeld, *Journeying*: 98.

²⁴⁷ The *hithpaal* form conveys arrogance, presumption, and often oppression. Levine, *Numbers*: 412; Dozeman, “Numbers,” *NIB* 2:136. It may also be a sarcastic pun on the נִשָּׂא of the 250.

short, this is a full-blown accusation by a large number of top-level leaders of Israel that Moses and Aaron have unjustifiably accumulated powers into their hands.²⁴⁸

In verses 12-14 Dathan and Abiram contribute their grievances. When Moses sends for them in v. 12 to appear before him, they respond in total contempt for his position: “We will not come!” (לֹא נֵעֲלֶה). They then accuse Moses of wrongfully bringing them out of (הַעֲלִיתָנוּ) Egypt, the “land flowing with milk and honey”, thereby taking the description of the Promised Land and applying it to Egypt (v. 13), and deliberately leading them into the wilderness to die (v. 13). And they add “you would also lord it over us?” (תִּשְׁתַּרְרַר עָלֵינוּ גְמֵדָה־שְׁתַּרְרַר). The word שָׁרַר in this context implies tyranny; it conveys the sense that there is nothing good in Moses’ motivations for all his actions to this point. He is selfish; he is power-hungry; and he is incompetent.²⁴⁹ It is the same word used in Exod 2:14 by the fighting Israelite questioning Moses’ authority.²⁵⁰ They end their speech in verse 14 where they accuse Moses of being a deceiver (“you gouge out those men’s eyes” indicating “hoodwink”).

²⁴⁸ In order to signify the important positions of the 250 men, verse 2 employs three different statements: “chieftains of the community” (נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה), “chosen in the assembly” (קְרָאֵי מוֹעֵד), and “men of repute” (אֲנָשֵׁי־שֵׁם), literally “men of a name”. “The text thus draws considerable attention to the fact that this was not a rebellion of rude, impudent ruffians but of creditable leaders, esteemed men of rank.” Allen, “Numbers,” *EBC* 2:834.

²⁴⁹ “The complaint of Dathan and Abiram also exceeds the other murmuring stories, because it is not limited to a failure of leadership by Moses. Their complaint includes the accusation that Moses has abused his power.” Dozeman, “Numbers,” *NIB* 2:137.

²⁵⁰ “Here, near the end of Moshe’s life, an old canard returns. He had been accused at the outset of his career (in his first attempt to save the Israelites in Ex. 2:14) of ‘playing-the-prince’ by intervening in a quarrel.” Fox, *Five*: 738.

The characterization of Israel does not stop with its leaders. After the rebellious leadership is killed, the people (v. 17:6) “railed against” (וַיִּלְנוּ)²⁵¹ Moses and Aaron accusing them (אַתֶּם, “you two”) of killing the “Lord’s people”.²⁵² This is probably a reference to the recently executed leaders of the revolt.²⁵³ Their activity then progressed into a “gathering against” (בְּהַקְהֵל הָעֵדָה עַל).²⁵⁴

The second source of characterization is Moses’ speeches. In his response to Korah in verse 7 he utilizes two puns. First, the Lord will chose who is “holy” as opposed to Korah’s “all are holy” in v. 3. Second, very sarcastically, he turns Korah’s phrase around and states רַב־לָכֶם (as much as to say, “it is not me who has gone too far; it is you”). In the speech of vv. 8-11 he scolds Korah for not being satisfied with the position to which God called him. He concludes by saying that Korah is not ultimately banding against or conspiring against (יעַד עַל) Aaron but against God. He also employs the root לִין describing their “murmuring/railing against” Aaron.

God’s opinion of the rebels is demonstrated in his response in v. 21: “Stand back from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant!” The word “annihilate” is a translation from the root אכל “to eat”—the same word the scouts used of the Canaan’s

²⁵¹ The root לִין has a long history in the rebellions of Israel which leads Ashley to observe: “Neither awe nor terror brought about a change in the Israelites’ behavior.” Ashley, *Numbers*: 326.

²⁵² Milgrom states that the use of אַתֶּם is emphatic. Milgrom, *Numbers*: 140.

²⁵³ Nili S. Fox, “Numbers” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 318.

²⁵⁴ “Wherever the word קהלה is followed by the word על (against), it denotes strife.” Ibn Ezra, *Pentateuch*: 3:384.

relationship to its inhabitants. He also, with the same vocabulary, threatens the continued rebellion in 17:10.

The characterization of Moses comes from two sources: his speeches and acts, and God's reaction to him. After hearing Dathan and Abiram's attack on him in vv. 12-14, Moses was livid.²⁵⁵ He then asks that the Lord have "no regard to their oblation" (v. 15). The identification of this offering is debated. Suggestions include: (1) a request for a general disregard of all their sacrifices, (2) a request to disregard the next day's offering (the coming test), (3) it could be part of a treaty curse, or (4) it could be a general idiom extending beyond sacrifices to indicate a request for no divine hearing or granting of requests to the offenders.²⁵⁶ Regardless, these are not words of blessing or intercession.²⁵⁷ How is this wish to be categorized? Some have criticized Moses for being impatient and angry implying that he should never have spoken such a request.²⁵⁸ Evidence in the narrative counters this position. First, whereas Moses was quick to come to a public defense of Aaron in v. 11, he does not make a public defense of himself here.

²⁵⁵ The NJPS translation "Moses was much aggrieved" appears to greatly soften the Hebrew: וַיִּחַר לְמֹשֶׁה מְאֹד.

²⁵⁶ For (1) see Binns, *Numbers*: 112. For (2) see Rashi, *Torah*: 4:200; Eugene H. Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (n.p.: Victor Books, 1985): 234. For (3) note the following: "A common theme in treaty curses and in the execrations included in royal inscriptions is the plea to a god, or to gods, not to accept the offerings of any who violate the terms of the treaty or show disrespect to the king." Levine, *Numbers*: 414. For (4) see Budd, *Numbers*: 187; Bush, *Numbers*: 238; Gray, *Numbers*: 202; L'Heureux, "Numbers": 86.

²⁵⁷ "The prayer for their punishment sharply contrasts with Moses' other prayers for the nation's forgiveness." Fox, *Five*: 317.

²⁵⁸ Noordtzijs, *Numbers*: 146-147.

Second, he will twice make intercession for the people (vv. 22, 17:11). Third, when his authority was questioned, Moses did not run like he did in Egypt (Exod 2). Fourth, when he experienced extreme frustration, Moses here prayed to God and stated his innocence (“I have not taken the ass of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them”) instead of casting blame on Yahweh as he did in Num 11. In other words, considering the extreme pressure and vitriol hurled his way, Moses’ reaction was not only admirable but an improvement over prior episodes of interaction.²⁵⁹

Aaron’s Budding Rod (Num 17:16-28)

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְקַח מֵאִתָּם מִטָּה מִטָּה לְבֵית אָב מֵאֵת כָּל־נְשֵׂיאֵיהֶם לְבֵית אֲבוֹתָם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מִטּוֹת אִישׁ אֶת־שְׁמוֹ תִּכְתֹּב עַל־מִטָּהּ: וְאֵת שֵׁם אֶהְרֹן תִּכְתֹּב עַל־מִטָּה לְוִי כִּי מִטָּה אֶחָד לְרֹאשׁ בֵּית אֲבוֹתָם: וְהִנַּחְתֶּם בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹעַד לָכֶם שָׁמָּה: וְהִיָּה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אֲבַחֲרֶבּוּ מִטָּהּ יִפְרַח וְהִשְׁכַּחְתִּי מֵעַלִּי אֶת־תְּלִמּוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵם מְלִינִם עֲלֵיכֶם: (Num 17:16-20)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הֲשִׁב אֶת־מִטָּה אֶהְרֹן לִפְנֵי הָעֵדוּת לְמִשְׁמַרְתָּ לְאוֹת לְבְנֵי־מִרְי וְתִכַּל תְּלוֹנְתָם מֵעַלִּי וְלֹא יָמָתוּ: (Num 17:25)

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and take from them—from the chieftains of their ancestral house—one staff for each chieftain of an ancestral house: twelve staffs in all. Inscribe each man’s name on his staff, there being one staff for each head of an ancestral house; also inscribe Aaron’s name on the staff of Levi. Deposit them in the Tent of Meeting before the Pact,

²⁵⁹ A brief summary of the puns in this section are as follows: Korah accused Moses of “too much” power (v. 3) and Moses countered to Korah with “too much” aspiration (v. 7). Moses asked Korah if his present job as Levite was “too little” (v. 9) and Korah countered to Moses with is it “too little” that you brought us out of Egypt (v. 13). Dathan and Abiram refused to “go up” to Moses (v. 12) and accused Moses of “leading up” Israel out of the good land of Egypt (13), but their final destination was to “go down” to Sheol (v.33). Korah “took” (v. 1) with no direct object indicated and caused great turmoil in the camp while Aaron “took” (v. 17:12) with no direct object but contextually the fire pan that was made from the material belonging to Korah’s followers, and interceded for the nation. The participants in the rebellion could be “called ones of the assembly” (v. 2) but they would not allow themselves to be “called” by Moses (v. 12). While the followers of Korah considered themselves “ones who are elevated among the community” (נְשֵׂאֵי עֵדָה), they considered Moses as one who “elevated himself to grab power and things” (תִּתְנַשֵּׂא), to which Moses protested that he has not “elevated” (נְשֵׂאָתִי) as much as one donkey from these people.

where I meet with you. The staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout, and I will rid Myself of the incessant mutterings of the Israelites against you. ... [Vv. 21-24 omitted.] ... The Lord said to Moses, “Put Aaron’s staff back before the Pact, to be kept as a lesson to rebels, so that their mutterings against Me may cease, lest they die. [Vv. 26-28 omitted.]” (Num 17:16-28)

By this time God was moved to counter the incessant rebellion with a special sign—Aaron’s budding rod. In essence, God replaced the human-authored test of chapter 16 with a divinely-authored test of chapter 17. Both dealt with the issue of approaching the holy place but whereas the first test utilized people, the latter utilized rods/tribes (מטה). This substitution allowed God to signal his acceptance by a budding rod as opposed to a deadly fire.²⁶⁰

All the characterizations in this chapter are concerning Israel and they all originate with God. In verse 20 he gives the reason for this new test: “I will rid Myself of the incessant mutterings of the Israelites against you” (תלנות בני ישראל אשר הם מלינים עליכם) literally “the grumblings of the Israelites which they are grumbling against you”). This thought is also repeated in verse 25: “so that their mutterings [תליונתם] against Me may cease.” Finally, God categorizes them as “rebels” (v. 25).²⁶¹

The Sin of Moses at Kadesh (Num 20:1-13)

ויבאו בני־ישראל פל־הַעֲדָה מִדְּבַר־צֶן בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ וַתִּמָּת שָׁם מֵרִיב וַתִּקְבֹּר שָׁם: וְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לַעֲדָה וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מִשְׁחָה וְעַל־אֲהָרֹן: וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם עִם־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר וְלוֹ גִּוְעָנוּ בְּגֹוע אַחִינוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: וְלָמָּה הִבַּאתֶם אֶת־קֶהֱל יְהוָה אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְמוֹת שָׁם אֲנַחְנוּ וּבְעֵירָנוּ: וְלָמָּה הִעֲלִיתֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהַבִּיא אֲתָנוּ אֶל־הַמִּקְוֹם הַרְעֵה הַזֶּה לֹא מְקוֹם זֶרַע וַתֵּאָנֶה וְנִגְפָן וְרִמּוֹן וּמִיִּם אֵין לְשִׁתּוֹת: וַיִּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן מִפְּנֵי הַקֶּהֱל אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם וַיִּרְא כְבוֹד־יְהוָה אֲלֵיהֶם: וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: קח אֶת־הַמַּטֵּה וְהִקְהַל אֶת־הַעֲדָה אִתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן אַחִיד וַדְּבַרְתֶּם

²⁶⁰ J. A. Thompson, “Numbers” in *The New Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., ed. D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970): 186; Gordon J. Wenham, “Aaron’s Rod (Numbers 17:16-28),” *ZAW* 93 (1981): 280.

²⁶¹ The phrase לִבְנֵי מְרִי, “the sons of rebellion,” which occurs nowhere else in the MT is probably “...a rhetorical substitute for the national terms in the idioms ‘sons of Israel (בני ישראל)” Gray, *Numbers*: 217.

אֶל־הַסֹּלֶעַ לְעִינֵיהֶם וַנִּתֵּן מִימֵיו וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מַיִם מִן־הַסֹּלֶעַ וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת־הָעֶדָה וְאֶת־בְּעִירָם: וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמַּטֵּה מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ: וַיִּקְהֵלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת־הַקְּהָל אֶל־פְּנֵי הַסֹּלֶעַ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהֶם שְׂמַעֲרֹנָא הַמֵּרִים הַמְּן־הַסֹּלֶעַ הַזֶּה גּוֹצֵיא לָכֶם מַיִם: וַיִּרְם מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּדְ אֶת־הַסֹּלֶעַ בְּמַטְהוֹ פַּעֲמָיִם וַיֵּצְאוּ מַיִם רַבִּים וַתִּשְׁתַּהֲעֶדָה וּבְעִירָם: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַל־אַהֲרֹן יַעֲזוּב לֹא־הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת־הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נָתַתִּי לָהֶם: הֲמָה מִי מְרִיבָה אֲשֶׁר־רָבוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־יְהוָה וַיִּקְדַּשׁ בָּם: (Num 20: 1-13)

The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses, saying, “If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the Lord! Why have you brought the Lord’s congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us up to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!” Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of the Lord appeared to them, and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “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.” Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He had commanded him. Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?” And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.” Those are the Waters of Meribah—meaning that the Israelites quarreled with the Lord—through which he affirmed His sanctity. (Num 20:1-13)

Prior to Num 20, rebellion had touched every level of Israelite society—people (Num 11), tribal leaders (Num 16), and priests (Num 16). Num 20 now expands this list to include the top two leaders of the nation—Moses and Aaron. The scene is Kadesh; the time is probably year 40 of the wilderness trek.²⁶² By this time a large majority of the old

²⁶² The date stamp in Num 20:1 gives the month but not the year. Most scholars calculate the year as 40 based on examination of the itinerary in Num 33:36-38. For details, see Milgrom, *Numbers*: 164.

generation had died leaving a new generation under Moses' leadership. Although a new group of people, this generation of Israelites would prove as troublesome as the old one.

Within a very brief time the Israelites launched a new round of complaints against Moses; the issue this time was a lack of water. The text contains an extensive list of vocabularic and thematic ties to previous rebellions. (1) The community “joined against” (וַיִּקְהָלוּ אֵלַי, v. 2) Moses. This same expression is utilized in Num 16:3, 19; and 17:7 (Eng. 16:42) during Korah's rebellion. It is also used in the golden calf incident (Exod 32:1). (2) The people then “quarreled with” (וַיִּרְבּוּ, v. 3) Moses. The root ריב is used in Exod 17:2, 7 during the water crisis at Rephidim. (3) The congregation now expresses a wish: “If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the Lord [לְפָנַי לְיְהוָה]!” (v. 3). The identification of “brethren” is debated. The most common understanding is that it refers to those who died in Korah's rebellion.²⁶³ If this is correct, this is yet another tie to Num 16 (v. 35). (4) The Israelites now question Moses: “Why have you brought the Lord's congregation into this wilderness for us ... to die?” (v. 4). This refrain is heard in Exod 14:11 (the crisis at the Reed Sea), Num 14:2 (the rebellion at Kadesh), and Num 16:13 (Korah's rebellion). (5) The nation mentions the suffering of its animals (v. 4), an echo of Exod 17:3 (Rephidim). (6) A second question follows: “Why did you make us leave Egypt?” (v. 5). The pining for all things Egyptian is a theme seen in Exod 14:11 (Reed Sea), Exod 16:3 (Manna), Num 11:5 (Kibroth-hattaavah), Num 14:2 (scout's report), and Num 16:13 (Korah). And (7) the people then

²⁶³ Gray, *Numbers*: 260-261; Milgrom, *Numbers*: 164; Ashley, *Numbers*: 381; Budd, *Numbers*: 218. Keil gives an alternate explanation: “...the reference is to those who had died one by one during the thirty-seven year.” Keil & Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*: 3:130. Plaut argues for the male fighting force in Num 14. Plaut, *Torah*: 1026.

give a rather extensive description of the barrenness of their present location: “a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates” and, of course, “no water” (v. 4).²⁶⁴ The three plants are “Precisely the items brought back from the Promised Land by the scouts (13:23).”²⁶⁵ The lack of water is the same issue in Exod 17 (Rephidim). In total, the various statements have tie-ins to all prior rebellion incidents except the bitter water at Marah (Exod 15) and Miriam and Aaron’s complaining against Moses (Num 12). The incidents with the greatest number of references are Korah’s rebellion (Num 16, with 4 references), the scout’s report (Num 13-14, with 2 references) and Rephidim (Exod 17, with 2 references). All of these actions are being done by “all the assembly” (כָּל־הָעֵדָוָה), 20:1). Nachmanides makes the following observation of this term:

And the most sound explanation in my eyes is that it is the practice of Scripture to mention this ‘wholeness’ of the nation in places where there were public complaints raised against God, as in: and *the entire assembly* of the Children of Israel arrived at the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai (Exodus 16:1), *The entire assembly* of the Children of Israel journeyed from the Wilderness of Sin, They encamped in Rephidim and there was no water for the people to drink (ibid. 17:1). Scripture informs us, by using the expression ‘*the entire assembly*’ and the like, that they were all involved in the complaint described subsequently. And similarly, in the verse, *The entire assembly* raised up and issued its voice (above, 14:1), Scripture stresses that everyone participated, as well as in the verse, *The entire assembly* of the Children of Israel complained on the morrow (ibid. 17:6).²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ When comparing Exod 17 with Num 20, Coats notes that in Num 20 “...the infertility of the land plays a much more prominent role. Vs. 5a refers to the wilderness only as הרע הזה, while vs. 5b defines the character of the place in terms of infertility.” Coats, *Rebellion*: 76.

²⁶⁵ Milgrom, *Numbers*: 164.

²⁶⁶ Ramban (Nachmanides), *Torah*: 6:412-413. Emphasis added.

It is suggested here that the narrator has amassed a formidable list of keywords from prior conflicts in order to recreate or mimic the weight of 40 years' worth of trouble bearing down on Moses' memory. This mass of references by the entire assembly thus hints at the pressure under which Moses was operating—despite all the intervening years.

Another source of pressure may have been an incident in 20:1—the death of Miriam. Miriam has been missing from the narratives since her criticism of Moses in chapter 12. Her death at this time raises a question: why did she die now? Lloyd Bailey simply says “Miriam, the sister of Moses, is part of the wilderness generation that must die before Israel can enter the ‘promised land’”²⁶⁷ But why? What has she done? Whitelaw states that it was because of her rebellion in Num 12.²⁶⁸ Brown holds that she supported the view of the ten scouts and was thus condemned for that association.²⁶⁹ One or both of these theories may be true but there are no texts to support either one. But this lacuna does raise an issue. Numbers 14 has only two explicit exemptions from the sentence of death in the wilderness—Joshua and Caleb. It is assumed that Moses and Aaron, and perhaps Miriam, are also exempt, but that is nowhere explicitly stated. But is the assumption true? Is it possible that with the death of Miriam, Moses may be questioning whether he is implicitly included in the death-in-the-wilderness exception? Or might it be possible that Moses was concerned that an occurrence of another rebellion

²⁶⁷ Lloyd R. Bailey, *Leviticus-Numbers*, SHBC 3 (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005): 498.

²⁶⁸ Whitelaw and Winterbotham, “Numbers,” *PC* 2:252.

²⁶⁹ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers: Journey to the Promised Land*, *The Bible Speaks Today: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002): 174-175.

in Kadesh, like the prior one in Num 13-14, would institute yet another generational delay that he could not physically survive? Could Moses be asking the question: “do I have enough time left in my life to last another 40 year delay due to this ungrateful people? Am I going to make it?” Whatever the possible questions, the death of Miriam at this point compounds the pressure being applied by the new complaints from the nation at large. It is under the combined weight of the whole nation re-enacting the myriad behaviors of the previous generation and the personal loss of a near-age relative that Moses goes to Yahweh.

Moses and Aaron go to the Tent of Meeting to receive instructions. Moses is told to “take the rod,” “assemble the people,” and “speak to the rock” (v. 6). In v. 9 he “takes the rod from before the Lord.” Then appears the phrase “as He had commanded” (v. 9). Of this phrase Milgrom notes: “This statement would have been expected before or after the account of the fulfillment of the command but not in the middle. Its ‘misplacement’ is deliberate; up to this point Moses executes God’s commands; thereafter he deviates from it.”²⁷⁰ After the people are gathered the deviations begin. (1) He speaks to the people (v.10). (2) He calls them “rebels” (v. 10). (3) He asks the question “shall we get water for you out of this rock?” (v. 10). And (4) he strikes the rock twice. In seeking an answer to the specific sin of Moses, scholars have greatly debated each of these four actions.²⁷¹ The activity here plays a legitimate part in determining Moses’ sin, but it is suggested here that the main purpose is not to give the specific identification of Moses’

²⁷⁰ Milgrom, *Numbers*: 165.

²⁷¹ For details see Johnson Lim Teng Kok, *The Sin of Moses and the Staff of God: A Narrative Approach*, SSN 35 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1997).

sin but to show Moses' anger. All of the above 4 activities have precedents in prior rebellions but Moses seems to be "out-of-phase" in every action. Moses has addressed the nation in prior crises but usually to remind them that their rebellion was against Yahweh and not him. Here, however, he is not scolding or questioning them but calling them rebels. God called the Israelites rebels in Num 16 and that would seem to indicate that Moses was merely emulating God's decree. But when Yahweh called them rebels, the issue was leadership; here, in contrast, the issue is water. Moses struck the rock to get water in Rephidim (Exod 17). Since God instructed him to fetch a rod in Num 20, would it not be reasonable to expect that Moses would strike the rod here? Perhaps, but the command here is "speak." Moses struck the rock once in Exod 17, but here he strikes it twice. And, as the capstone, Moses' question is ambiguous: is he asking "do we want to," "shall we," and "can we"? And should he even be using the pronoun "we"? In all these things Moses is thinking, speaking, or acting discordantly, to one degree or another, with prior behaviors. All these variances in behaviors are meant to mimic the state in which Moses is in—in short, he is angry. Indeed, his anger is so great at this point that it is affecting all his actions and statements. Whereas in prior instances the narrator explicitly *told* readers of Moses' condition, here the narrator *shows* readers Moses' condition.

The specific identity of Moses' sin has precipitated an extensive debate with equally extensive literature. An examination of all the arguments and counter-arguments would take this thesis far beyond its bounds. Instead, a summary statement on the issue will be made. The key to identifying the sin is to carefully watch God's reactions to the nation. In the pre-Sinai encounters, all the nation's demands were for necessities of

life—water and food. Despite the arrogance and insults of the people, God always provided the necessities. After Sinai, however, the demands became luxury-oriented or rebellions against leadership structures. In those instances God responded with anger, and in some cases threatened annihilation of the people. Readers, therefore, need to ask whether the situation in Num 20 is a necessity of life or a luxury. This is the point where God and Moses were in discord. God saw it as a legitimate need and wanted to fulfill it despite Israel's petulance; Moses saw it as a continuation of the post-Sinai illegitimate rebellions and did not want to supply the need. This was the essence of Moses' sin.

Humanly speaking, Moses' reaction was understandable. As Olson notes:

The version in Exodus 17 presents the request for water by a refugee slave people in the desert as a legitimate need. But at this point in the narrative of Numbers, readers are conditioned to assume that any complaint here by the people is a sign of sinful rebellion—not only against Moses and Aaron but also against God. We are primed to believe the people are deserving of divine judgment whenever they complain. ... Every time we hear the first hint of whining from the people in Numbers, that the attack on Moses and Aaron is unjustified, and that God's anger and righteous judgment on the people will follow like clockwork. This narrative background is crucial in understanding the dynamics of the enigmatic story in Numbers 20 about water from the rock.²⁷²

In the post-Sinai period, Num 20 was the first time a legitimate need was expressed.

Unfortunately, Israel's long history of constant and consistent whining and complaining over non-necessities predisposed Moses to miss the switch in focus. This was not a case where some constantly present, core flaw in Moses' character led directly and solely to his exclusion. His behavior here was a one-time deviation from the norm as is

²⁷² Olson, *Numbers*: 125. See also Won W. Lee, "The Exclusion of Moses from the Promised Land: A Conceptual Approach," in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003): 228-229.

demonstrated by the very next crisis—the bronze serpent of Num 21. There Moses returns to his characteristic role of intercessor for the people. Instead, this was a case where something or someone acted as a trigger, and that someone was Israel. Moses was ultimately responsible for his own sin, but the narrator has made it clear through characterization and mimesis that Israel played *the* major role in Moses' downfall.²⁷³

²⁷³ As an added indication of Israel's effect, note also that not only did Israel cause Moses to act out-of-character as intercessor, it also caused God to act out-of-character as provider. This puts Moses in good company.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Returning to the question with which this thesis began: is there a way to understand the wilderness narratives as assessing blame to both Moses and Israel? The answer is yes. Throughout the wilderness period the narrator, through the reporting of Moses' words and actions, of God's reactions to Moses, and of an explicit character statement, has depicted Moses as willing to intercede on behalf of people. This is seen in his deliverance of several individuals under physical attack (Exod 2), his prayer for the healing of Miriam (Exod 12), his quick defense of Aaron (Exod 16), his requests to God for provisions of Israel's needs (Exod 14; 15; 16; 17), and most importantly, his intercessions for Israel when God threatened the very existence of the entire nation (Exod 32; Num 16; 17). Parallel to this characterization of Moses, the narrator, through the reporting of Israel's words and actions, and of God's actions and declarations, has depicted Israel as constant in its questioning of Moses' authority, and in its accusations that Moses was motivated for self, incompetent, greedy, or power-hungry. The nation's behavior deteriorated and intensified over time from demands regarding the necessities of life (pre-Sinai encounters), to demands for luxuries (Num 11), to rejection of God's plan for the exodus (Num 13-14), to outright insolence and personal attack (Num 16-17).

Parallel to this was a deterioration in Moses' behavior from mild scolds of Israel (Exod 15; 16; 17), to a private, bitter complaint to God (Exod 11), to a public display of anger to the people (Num 20). The important thing to note is that whenever Moses lapsed in his behavior, Israel's behavior was always the immediate cause.

Moses finally broke in Num 20 under the weight of the entire nation once-more complaining, bringing back the memories of the long history of Israel's misbehavior, and all of this within the context of facing his own mortality as symbolized by the recent death of his sister Miriam. At this point, worn out from all the abuse, Moses' desire to do nothing for the nation diverged from God's will to meet the need of the people. God eventually bypassed Moses and provided the needed water, but Moses was declared guilty of failing to sanctify God. Taken as a total picture, the guilt for Moses' exclusion from the Promised Land is assessed asymmetrically—Moses is explicitly blamed for his punishment, but Israel, as the sole contributor to Moses' misbehavior, is implicitly blamed.

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