

WHY CAN'T MOSES ENTER THE PROMISED LAND?

Summarized from Dr. Jacob Milgrom Excursus 50 in The JPS Torah Commentary on Numbers Chapter 20: 1-13 By Nechama Tamler

The punishment is clear but what is the crime? Ten theories from medieval Jewish commentaries are categorized by Dr. Jacob Milgrom:

Category 1: The action of Moses in striking the rock:

- A. Moses hit the rock instead of speaking to it.
- B. Moses chose the particular rock instead of the one the people wanted.
- C. Moses struck the rock twice instead of once.

Category 2: The character of Moses:

- D. Moses's temper got the best of him.
- E. Moses fled to the sanctuary which indicated his cowardice.
- F. Moses was callous in the way he ignored people dying of thirst while he mourned his sister.

Category 3: The words of Moses:

- G. Moses's questioning of God indicates his possible doubt.
- H. Moses did doubt God—for certain.
- I. Moses called the Israelites "rebels" indicating that he was fed up with them.
- J. Moses saying: "*notsi*" (we shall draw forth) meaning that he and Aaron are the agents responsible for bringing water out of the rock.
- K. A modern explanation: (an eleventh theory) claims that the sin of Moses has been lost or deliberately obscured, so as not to detract from the glory of Israel's founder.

What is wrong with each of these? (samples of Milgrom's analysis)

K: It would have required a "severe mutilation of the text to accomplish this purpose," and the biblical authors don't hesitate to portray fallible heroes (think of David, Judah, Noah, etc.)

D: When God says: "*You did not trust me*" God wasn't referring to anger. After all, Aaron was not guilty of anger, why was he also punished? And Moses gets angry in other places (31:14) without provocation and nothing happens. He also vents his anger at God (11:11-15 and 21, 22) and is not punished.

E: Moses was prone to desperation and paralysis for which he never incurred punishment (Exodus 14:15, 15:25, 17:4 and Numbers 14:5 and 16:4)

B, C and F: This cannot be derived from the text here or any place else Milgrom: " --we can immediately discount these for lack of corroborative evidence."

A: Why would Moses have been commanded to take the rod if he hadn't been meant to use it? In all other incidents with the rod, smiting is mentioned specifically or implied and there is no negative consequence. And, isn't it just as big a miracle to have water gush forth from a rock with the action of striking as with the action of speaking? This is compared with Exodus 17: 5-7 in which the same language is used. Milgrom uses the Rambam and holds him up to be the most effective in refuting the category one arguments, which have at least three different complex objections. Milgrom concludes by stating: "In any event, even if we are not disposed to accept the suggested, drastic textual change or either of Rambam's renderings--if we follow the accepted interpretation that Moses and Aaron were ordered to speak to the rock--we cannot gainsay the evidence that the rock was also to be struck with the rod. Thus, their sin lies not in their action but in the only remaining alternative--in Moses's words." (emphasis mine) [The historical evidence is that *speaking*, as opposed to *striking*, is a standard way in which sorcerers exercised magical powers; so striking is the preferred mode of relating by a person who doesn't want to claim magical powers, and who rather wants to show that God is the source of the water.]

G and H: Moses has doubted God's powers before (Exodus 4:10-14, 5: 22-23 and especially Numbers 11:11-15, 21-22). Verse 10b in our story has Moses addressing Israel not God and "it is most likely NOT a question but rather an exclamation of Moses's brittle impatience."

I: The children of Israel are called "rebels" all the time. In Deuteronomy they are referred to as rebels in 1:26 and 43, 9:7, and 23-24 and 31:27. Ezekiel uses the term rebels in 20:8 and the psalmist repeatedly uses it. Even God Himself called Israel rebels in Numbers 17:25. Why would Moses be punished for using the term here?

J: This is the reason Moses is punished according to Milgrom, following the Bekor Shor, (Joseph ben Isaac of Orleans France 12th century). Moses and Aaron said "**notsi**" (shall we bring forth). The Bekor Shor states: **The sin resulted from saying notsi and they should have said yotsi (He shall bring forth meaning God.)** Milgrom goes on to note 3 other exegetes (Rabbi Hananel ben Hushiel of Kairouwan in the 10th century, the Rambam and Ibn Ezra, who agree.) **Moses's statement "shall we bring forth water?" clearly implies it was his miracle and not God's.**

Milgrom: **"In other words, the nature of the sin--far from being obscure and unjustified--is now projected with startling clarity; it was not an ordinary transgression. In defying God, Moses did not merely countermand His order; indeed, his behavior could be interpreted as a denial of God's essence...instead they showed no trust (Numbers 20: 10a), they acted treacherously (Deut. 32:51), rebelling against God (Numbers 20:24, 27:14)...setting themselves up in His place, arrogating to themselves the divine power to draw forth the water miraculously from the rock."**

"Considering that Moses's generation had hardly been weaned from the bondage of Egypt, his error was neither slight nor pardonable. Israel had to be released from more than chains; it still had to be purged of its pagan background. In being redeemed from Pharaoh, it had yet to be bound to its God."

"One final observation. If correct, we have uncovered the true pathos in the personal tragedy of Moses. Israel's teacher is condemned for revealing the very failing that he tried to rectify in those charged to his care. He successfully brought his people to a promised land of the spirit, a destination that he himself failed to reach."