

# Numbers 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ] Numbers chapter 20 Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and fell on their faces.

And the glory of the Lord appeared to them. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Take the staff and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water.

So you shall bring water out of the rock for them, and give drink to the congregation and their cattle. And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he commanded him. Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, Hear now, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?

And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice. And water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.

These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and through them he showed himself holy. Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom.

[ 1 : 55 ] Thus says your brother Israel, You know all the hardship that we have met, how our fathers went down to Egypt, and we lived in Egypt a long time. And the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our fathers.

And when we cried to the Lord, he heard our voice and sent an angel, and brought us out of Egypt. And here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your territory. Please let us pass through your land.

We will not pass through field or vineyard, or drink water from a well. We will go along the king's highway. We will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left, until we have passed through your territory.

But Edom said to him, You shall not pass through, lest I come out with the sword against you. And the people of Israel said to him, We will go up by the highway, and if we drink of your water, iron my livestock, then I will pay for it.

Let me only pass through on foot, nothing more. But he said, You shall not pass through. And Edom came out against them with a large army and with a strong force.

[ 2 : 57 ] Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory. So Israel turned away from him. And they journeyed from Kadesh, and the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor.

And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor, on the border of the land of Edom, Let Aaron be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land that I have given to the people of Israel, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah.

Take Aaron and Eliezer his son, and bring them up to Mount Hor. And strip Aaron of his garments, and put them on Eliezer his son. And Aaron shall be gathered to his people, and shall die there.

Moses did as the Lord commanded. And they went up Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments, and put them on Eliezer his son. And Aaron died there, on the top of the mountain.

Then Moses and Eliezer came down from the mountain. And when all the congregation saw that Aaron had perished, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron thirty days. Reading Numbers chapter 20, we may not initially appreciate that about 38 years has passed since the preceding narrative sections of the book.

[ 4 : 06 ] Almost an entire generation has perished in the wilderness in the intervening period. The first event that we read of after all this time passes then, is the death of Miriam.

Miriam was present from the very beginning of the Exodus narrative, when Moses was drawn from the water. She was singing after the crossing of the Red Sea, and she has been a leading figure in Israel to this point.

And now she dies. Numbers chapter 20 comes after the law of the red heifer in chapter 19, which is one of the more perplexing chapters in the book. It contains a law for cleansing, involving the ashes of a red heifer placed in water.

And this water is supposed to be used to cleanse those who have had contact with a dead body. The heifer has to be clean, but it is slaughtered outside of the camp. There's cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet yarn involved, which may be connected with the law of the leprous person in Leviticus chapter 14, where those same elements are found.

It seems to me that these recall elements also of the Passover. The cedar wood connects with the doorpost and the lintel. The scarlet yarn with the blood. The hyssop with the hyssop dipped into the blood.

[ 5 : 18 ] Leprous and corpse-defiled persons are being brought back into the realm of life after being kept outside of the camp. And there's a sort of replaying of the Exodus theme here, which I think accounts for those particular elements.

In being burnt up outside of the camp and reduced to its ashes, the red heifer is brought down to the dust. And the ashes or the dust of this red heifer are the means by which the corpse-defiled persons can be let back in.

What does the red heifer itself represent? It might be connected with life, the redness connected with blood, and the earth, the redness of the earth.

It may be connected with the procreative power of the female of the species. It's a heifer. It's not a bull. And it might represent Israel as well, which I think is one of the most important associations. Hosea chapter 4 verse 16 and 10 verse 11 both make such an association. Those who administer this right are defiled by it, which seems to be very strange for a purification right.

[ 6 : 23 ] All of chapter 19 seems very odd. It seems to be an unusual law that's very arbitrary and strange. But it seems to me that as with the rest of numbers, law and narrative belong together, and they comment upon each other.

And the more that you think about the relationship between the two, the more that the narrative makes sense, and the more that the law makes sense. So what is this law doing here? It seems to me that the law is the ritual expression of the death of the Exodus generation in the wilderness. We've had all these intervening years, 38 years between the rebellion of Korah and the death of Miriam. And in that period of time, almost all of the old generation has died out.

And in this chapter, Miriam dies, Aaron dies, and Moses is told that he will die before he enters into the land. And so I think we can start to see the connection.

The death of the red heifer, the death of Israel outside of the camp in the wilderness, its ashes will be the means by which, added to the living water, Israel will enter into the promised land.

[ 7 : 30 ] The deaths of Miriam, Aaron, and Moses then, are not just the ends of their lives. They're the beginning of something new. They affect a transition.

In the same way as the ashes of the red heifer allow with the water the person to be cleansed and to enter back into the camp, so Israel, cleansed by the death of these leaders, will be able to make the transition from the realm outside of the camp, being in the wilderness, into the promised land. Immediately after Miriam's death, there was a water crisis. There were previously water crises in Exodus chapter 15 and 17 at Mara, and then at Massa and Meribah.

This place will be named Meribah 2, connecting it with that earlier location, even though it is a different place. Miriam, in her story, is connected with the provision of water.

From Exodus chapter 2 onwards, she's the one who's present as Moses is delivered out of the water, and she is the one who provides her mother as a wet nurse for Moses, someone from whom he can have drink.

[ 8 : 37 ] Water for Israel is provided after they are delivered from the Red Sea, and there are a number of plays upon Miriam's name at that point too. The way that the water is cut off immediately after Miriam's death, again, creates an association that many people have commented upon.

As the people complain about this crisis, the Lord appears to Moses and Aaron and instructs them to take the staff and to speak to the rock, and it will yield its water.

However, Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly, and Moses says to them, Here now, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock? He then strikes the rock twice, and plentiful water comes out for all of them and their cattle.

The Lord, however, judged Moses for not believing in him and not upholding him as holy in the eyes of the people, and the consequence could not be more severe.

He is told that he would not lead them into the land as a result. Why such a serious punishment? What did Moses do wrong? Why was it so wrong? Why was he instructed, for instance, to bring the rod if he wasn't supposed to use it?

[ 9 : 45 ] And I think there is some help to be found in later passages that reflect upon these events. In Deuteronomy chapter 3, verse 26, where Moses pleads with the Lord to be allowed into the land, we are told, But the Lord was angry with me because of you, and would not listen to me.

In Psalm 106, verse 32 to 33, They angered him at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses on their account, for they made his spirit bitter, and he spoke rashly with his lips.

In Numbers 27, verses 12 to 14, The Lord said to Moses, Go up into this mountain of Abarim and see the land that I have given to the people of Israel. When you have seen it, you also shall be gathered to your people as your brother Aaron was, because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarrelled, failing to uphold me as holy at the waters before their eyes.

These are the waters of Meribah, of Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin. In Deuteronomy chapter 32, verses 50 to 51, And die on the mountain which you go up, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died on Mount Hor, and was gathered to his people, because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah, Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel.

Reading these different verses, I think we can pick up a number of elements of Moses' sin. Moses' action was provoked by anger at the people and was a sin of speech. He broke faith with the Lord, not believing in him.

[ 11 : 22 ] He rebelled against the Lord's word, not following his instruction. He didn't treat the Lord as holy, and the Lord was also angry with him on account of the people.

So breaking this down, I think we can get a clearer picture. First of all, Moses lost his temper, and he spoke inappropriately. This was provoked by anger with the people. Shall we bring water for you?

It suggests that it was them, not the Lord, that was doing this. And it makes it about him and Aaron versus the people. It's not about the Lord. The Lord is removed from this picture.

Second, he failed to trust the Lord. The doubt in his statement, perhaps, shall we? In Numbers chapter 11, verses 21 to 23, we see a similar note of doubt in Moses' voice.

But Moses said, The people among whom I am number 600,000 on foot, and you have said, I will give them meat that they may eat a whole month. Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them and be enough for them?

[ 12 : 24 ] Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them and be enough for them? And the Lord said to Moses, Is the Lord's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.

In Numbers chapter 20, Moses expressed his doubt in the Lord's word before all the people. And he hit the rock twice, which is perhaps an expression of his doubt.

Speaking just does not seem to be enough for such a great miracle. Hitting is more likely to work. Hitting is what worked the last time. And twice, just for good measure, because once probably wasn't sufficient.

This is an expression of his failure to believe and to follow what God had told him. God had told him that he would bring water out of the rock. Why didn't he trust him?

Third, he rebelled against the Lord's word. Specifically, he's told to speak to the rock, not to hit it. Why was the rod necessary, if this is the case?

[ 13 : 21 ] Well, the attentive reader is rewarded here, because they'll realise that the rod is not Moses' rod, it's the rod of Aaron. It's taken from before the Lord, which is where Aaron's rod, the rod that had blossomed, was placed.

Moses' rod was connected with striking the Egyptians. But the rod of Aaron had become associated with his priestly office and intercession. The rod was powerful because it was before the Lord. It represented Aaron's access to the presence of the Lord. And the symbolic significance of the rod is far more important than any power that seems to be invested in the rod itself.

Very easy to think of the rod of Moses or Aaron as magical rods, that in themselves they have some great power. But the real power is that of the Lord. And speaking will be every bit as effective as striking.

They do not need some magical rod to achieve this purpose. Bringing along the rod that represents Aaron's access to the Lord is going to show where the real power lies.

[ 14 : 24 ] Not in the rod itself, but in what the rod stands for. Aaron's access to and presence with the Lord and Moses' access to and his ability to intercede with the Lord.

And the difference between the events of Exodus 17 and the events of Numbers 20 are also worth noting. The rock was passive in the event of Exodus 17.

The rock was struck and water came out of it. But here the rock is spoken of as giving its water freely. Striking is how slaves are treated, but you speak to free persons.

And the two actions mean very different things. We're supposed to read these passages alongside each other and not just notice the similarities, but notice the progressions and the differences.

Fourth, he failed to treat the Lord as holy. This is seen in his failure to obey, also in his failure to trust. But perhaps there's something more going on.

[ 15 : 22 ] The Lord, in the book of Deuteronomy particularly, is associated with the rock. In Deuteronomy chapter 20 in the Song of Moses, we see this on numerous occasions, that the Lord is associated with the rock.

He's personified as the rock. The Lord stands before Moses on the rock in Exodus chapter 17 when Moses is instructed to strike it. The people were almost ready to stone Moses in that chapter, but the Lord was struck so that the people would be given something to drink.

But here, however, the rock just needs to be petitioned. The rock is a physical object, but also stands for God's provision for his people. The Lord had once submitted to being struck by people who reasoned as slaves with the logic of force, people who had to be struck in order to do something, or people who had to strike in order to get a message across.

And here, that logic of force is supposed to be replaced by a pattern of free address and intercession. The Lord now wishes Moses and Aaron to demonstrate that the rock, as a servant and a representation of the Lord, will freely give of its water to them, if only they ask.

Fifth, and finally, the Lord is angry with Moses and Aaron on account of the people. Now, why is that? To this point, Moses has largely stood apart from all of the Israelites, marked out by his faithfulness.

[ 16 : 50 ] On account of this, he has been able to intercede for and intermeditate for them when they have sinned. By virtue of Aaron's close association with Moses, Aaron has also been preserved.

However, here Moses himself sins in a marked way and manifests the same rot of rebellion that has been working through the whole people in the book of Numbers.

He is now associated with the people in that trait for which they are being excluded from the land.

And he, as their leader and model, has much less latitude granted to him for forgiveness.

He has to model faithfulness to an unfaithful people and when he fails to do that, the consequences are quite severe. What else might be going on here?

Well, Moses has just been bereaved. He's lost his older sister Miriam and it doesn't seem that they've had proper time to mourn her because the water crisis has immediately struck. There's no mention of the time of mourning that we have at the end of the chapter for Aaron.

[ 17 : 49 ] And the people are quarrelling with him again. At this point it becomes personal for him. He's lost one of the closest people to him, the older sister who had helped to deliver him as an infant, the leader of the women who had assisted him in leading that part of the congregation alongside him.

The loss of his sister perhaps leads him to feel isolated and to neglect the presence of the Lord that is with him, feeling more keenly the opposition of the people. It's now become Moses versus the people and the Lord isn't really in the picture.

And Miriam may be in this story in subtle ways. David Foreman observes that you can vowelise the letters of Miriam's name in three different ways. Marim for bitter which is used in the story of Mara at the end of Exodus chapter 15.

Marim for the participle of lifting up which is connected to Moses' action of lifting up the rod to strike the rock. And then finally Morim rebels which is the way that he addresses the people of Israel. And so perhaps Miriam is playing in the background here. Her death is connected with the provision of living water that will provide for a new start for the people of Israel.

[ 19 : 02 ] She's connected with the red heifer of the previous chapter and the death of that red heifer, the provision of its ashes and the living water are the means by which people can re-enter the camp of the Lord's presence once they've been excluded because of contact with death.

All these people connected with the death of the previous generation they can enter in as a result of the death of people like Miriam and the provision of the living water here is supposed to be read against the background of that.

Her association with the provision of water and her death just as the water runs out suggests that there are some deeper associations here and this is something that Jewish commentators have long recognised and commented upon.

Israel requests write a passage through Edom to go up through the king's highway not to take anything from the land but just to have a shorter journey to the destination of the promised land and Edom spoken of in the singular reminds us that Edom and Israel are the brothers Esau and Jacob. They reference the angel that brought them out of Egypt in verse 16 in Exodus chapter 23 verse 20 the angel is described as going ahead of them. Israel is not a warmongering people in relation to its neighbours.

[ 20 : 18 ] They ask for peaceful travel through the land of Edom but Edom resists and presents a show of strength and they go another way. They have to go the long way round. They're prevented from going through Edomite territory and this seems to be one of the ways in which Moses is prevented from entering into the land.

This is followed by the death of Aaron going up Mount Hor and being replaced by his son Eliezer. The death of Aaron is the death of the high priest and the death of the high priest is also an event of transition.

The death of Miriam as we have seen is an event of transition and the death of the high priest also affects a transition. In Numbers chapter 35 verse 32 we have the description of the cities of refuge and then told what will happen to the manslayer who is in such a city of refuge and you shall accept no ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the high priest.

Israel is going to be released from its wandering in the wilderness released from its exile from the land with the death of people like Miriam with the death of Aaron and then finally with the death of Moses.

There are sacrificial themes here. The death of particular human beings cleanse the land and enable the people to enter in. The death of these three leading characters then, red against the backdrop of the law of the red heifer helps us to understand this transition.

[ 21 : 47 ] The transition from the generation two years after the exodus to the generation on the borders of the land about to enter in and now being cleansed so that they can enter into the land.

The death of Aaron cleanses the land then. It wipes clean the slate. And this can help us to understand why Eliezer is important here. Eliezer is mentioned in the previous chapter in Numbers chapter 19 verses 2 to 4.

This is the statute of the law that the Lord has commanded. Tell the people of Israel to bring you a red heifer without defect in which there is no blemish and on which a yoke has never come and you shall give it to Eliezer the priest and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered before him and Eliezer the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle some of its blood toward the front of the tent of meeting seven times.

With Eliezer the baton is handed on to the next generation. He is part of administering this rite of the red heifer. He is one who sees that old generation die.

He is rendered impure because of his association with the red heifer and its ashes but he will be the one as he administers it to lead the people into the land and he and they will be cleansed.

[ 23 : 07 ] A question to consider how might the manner of Moses' sin be instructive and cautionary for us in our behaviour?