

THE CASE AGAINST MOSES REOPENED

MARTIN EMMRICH*

Numbers 20:1–13 has been rated as “perhaps the most enigmatic incident of the Pentateuch.”¹ Throughout the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures Moses has been portrayed as the model theocrat, most humble (Num 12:3) and superior as a prophetic leader (Deut 34:10), only in order to receive a startling death sentence and be denied entrance into the promised land on account of—yes, on account of what? Whatever the reader may think of the above assessment, the fact remains that the sheer number of different conjectures as to what constituted Moses’ (and Aaron’s) sin is in itself indicative of the level of ambiguity characteristic of this account.² The present study attempts to shed new light on this puzzling text by not only (briefly) discussing the nature of Moses’ transgression, but also by accentuating the typological significance of both the sin and the miracle involved in the story. It is my contention that only a synopsis of these concerns accounts for the at times bewildering language of Numbers 20.

I. MOSES’ SIN

Source analysis traditionally assigns Num 20:1–13 to P, whereas the “parallel” in Exod 17:1–7 is believed to have originated from strands of the much earlier J(E).³ P, so it has been assumed, utilized the earlier tradition and rewrote it in an effort to explain why Moses and Aaron could not lead Israel into Canaan.⁴ It is not at all my intention to engage these speculations at this point. May it suffice to mention that the differences between the said accounts clearly indicate that the author of Numbers wanted his readership to consider 20:1–13 as a separate incident and not as a “derivative” of the story in Exodus.⁵ When thus viewed in its own right, what does

* Martin Emmrich is adjunct professor of Old and New Testament at Eastern University, 1300 Eagle Road, St. Davids, PA 19087-3696, and adjunct professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, 5500 River Road, Bethesda, MD 20816-3399.

¹ Eugene Arden, “How Moses Failed God,” *JBL* 76 (1957) 50.

² Cf. William H. Propp, “The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses,” *JBL* 107 (1988) 19; cf. Stephen K. Sherwood’s comments in *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2002) 171.

³ Cf. Martin Noth, *Das vierte Buch Mose—Numeri* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 126–29; George W. Coats, *The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament: Rebellion in the Wilderness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 71–73; Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* (Waco: Word, 1984) 216.

⁴ Cf. Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 484; Budd *Numbers*, 217; Arvid S. Kapelrud, “How Tradition Failed Moses,” *JBL* 76 (1957) 242.

⁵ Timothy R. Ashley argues this point convincingly in *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 378–79.

our text reveal about Moses' fatal sin?⁶ Yahweh's response in 20:12 ("... you did not believe me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel...") gives us an initial clue. The idea of "sanctifying" Yahweh refers to the miracle that was to be performed,⁷ a miracle that was compromised by Moses' striking the rock instead of speaking to it (cf. 20:8).⁸ In OT literature, and particularly in the Pentateuch, miraculous divine interventions are always aimed at glorifying God's name, and neither Moses nor Aaron are ever said to have manipulated such displays of God's power in substituting God's directives by their own actions.⁹ We must also take into consideration that the *modus operandi* of this sign was intended to distinguish itself, in that none of the miracles of the exodus (including, of course, those of the wilderness trek and so far as they have been recorded in the Pentateuch) involved the medium of speaking.¹⁰ The miracles of the exodus were well known among the ancient Israelites, and so were their pertinent circumstances. Moses in effect destroyed the unique character of this intervention by using the "familiar" rod instrumental in so many of the miracles of his day. While the implications of this will be discussed below, we may safely conclude that Moses' action compromised God's glory that was to be displayed in the precise form of the miracle. Even if he acted in the heat of the moment, Moses forced his will upon the sign (or rather: Yahweh) and thus failed to honor God.¹¹

Psalm 106:32 as a canonical commentary affords another perspective on the incident: "(Moses) spoke rashly with his lips." The words recorded in

⁶ For a survey of the various approaches see Jacob Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism and the Sin of Moses," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God* (Fs. G. E. Mendenhall; ed. H. B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina, A. R. W. Green; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 251–65. Some scholars are pessimistic about ascertaining the nature of the sin, since—so it has been argued—the original account has been suppressed in Num 20:1–13 (cf. George B. Gray, *Numbers* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1903] 261–62; Leonard E. Binns, *The Book of Numbers* [London: Methuen, 1927] 131–32). Yet, the reconstruction of that (hypothetical) original story is at best speculative.

⁷ Cf. Olivier Artus, *Études sur le Livre des Nombres (Récit, Histoire et Loi en Nb 13,1–20,13)* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1997) 237. Artus maintains that Moses and Aaron in "manipulating" the miracle "manquent à leur mission qui est de manifester à la communauté des Israélites la sainteté de Yahvé."

⁸ Cf. Pierre Buis, "Qadesh, un Lieu Maudit?," *VT* 24 (1974) 268–85; Hermann Holzinger, *Numeri* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1903) 85; Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997) 54.

⁹ I am puzzled at Eryl W. Davies's comment, who claims that "it is impossible to deduce whether, in striking the rock, he was obeying or disobeying God's command" (*Numbers* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 205). Is the text not clear enough on the point that Moses' striking the rock fell short of obeying the orders?

¹⁰ This is especially significant, since the miracle story of Exod 17:1–7 would have been known to the author—and very likely also to his audience. Exodus 17:1–7 contrasts with our text in that here the striking of the rock *is* commanded. Miracles in the exodus tradition virtually always involve the "rod of God" (cf. Exod 4:17; 9:23; 10:13; 17:6, etc.) or a hand stretched out/lifted up (cf. Exod 14:21, etc.). The notion of speaking is truly exceptional. I will say more on this point below.

¹¹ J. de Vaulx sees Moses' striking the rock as a sacrilege, because it typified Yahweh himself. He links this interpretation with both the witness of Rabbinic sources and Paul's claim in 1 Cor 10:4 (*Les Nombres* [Paris: Gabalda, 1972] 226–27).

Num 20:10 (“Hear, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?”) have elicited a plethora of scholarly interaction, the most inclusive of which is found in Dennis T. Olson’s commentary listing as many as five possible meanings for Moses’ rhetorical question.¹² By far the two most popular renderings posit “stealing God’s thunder” on Moses’ part¹³ and acting reluctantly (i.e. Moses deemed the “rebels” unworthy of God’s provision of water), respectively.¹⁴ Both options succeed in accounting for the language, but the former seems to cohere more naturally with Moses’ failure to bring glory to Yahweh by importing a foreign (i.e. his own) element into the miracle. Thus, fueled by Moses’ anger and frustration, the sin consists in modifying Yahweh’s miracle and taking at least some of the credit for it (“must we bring water . . .”). One may still argue that the punishment does not fit the crime. Then all I can add to the above sketch is to point out that Moses (and Aaron) was (were) not judged by common standards, but by the words of Lev 10:3: “By those who come near me I must be regarded as holy (שׁאֲקִד); and before all the people I must be glorified.” Numbers 20:12 blames the leaders precisely for failing to sanctify (הִקְדִּישׁוּ) Yahweh “before all the children of Israel.”

II. RECAPITULATIVE NUANCES

The depiction of Moses’ sin in Numbers 20 and elsewhere in the Pentateuch also has typological significance. His downfall is described in terms that make associations with the sinful patterns of the “old generation”¹⁵ that died outside of Canaan audible. Before these paradigmatic concepts can be appreciated, a few remarks about our text in its present shape and position in the book are in order.

First of all, geographical as well as chronological notices are intended to convey the notion that in Num 20:1–13, 22–29 we have come full turn, and the drama of the old generation’s history of rebellion and sin during the exodus reaches its denouement in the rejection of the leaders. The reference to Kadesh reminds the reader of the incident that put the final nail into the coffin of Moses’ contemporaries (14:1–45). The fact that 20:1 dates Moses’ fatal lapse to the “first month” (no year indicated) leaves us with the impression that our text relates events that transpired at the end of the forty-year wilderness sojourn, for, according to 33:36–39, Kadesh-Zin (cf. 20:1) marked the last camp prior to Israel’s coming to mount Hor where Aaron

¹² Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers* (Louisville: John Knox, 1996) 126–27.

¹³ *Ibid.* 127; Budd, *Numbers* 218; R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000) 327–28; Arden, “How Moses Failed God” 52.

¹⁴ Cf. Walter Riggans, *Numbers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 152; Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* 384–85.

¹⁵ This terminology, of course, has first been coined by Olson in his 1985 landmark study (*The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New—The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* [Chico: Scholars Press, 1985]). His thesis was that the structure and message of the book of Numbers revolves around the two census lists in chs. 1 and 26, the old generation rejected by Yahweh and the new generation that was to possess the promised land.

died in the “fortieth year” (33:38) of the trek.¹⁶ Since the events narrated in the spy story (14:1–45) happened early in the forty-year delay, Kadesh is the location of the “beginning of the end” of the old generation (i.e. here the death sentence was pronounced), as well as the bitter conclusion to the disaster: even the leaders cannot enter Canaan and receive a verdict (cf. 20:24) so reminiscent of the one passed in 14:26–45.¹⁷

We now turn our attention to the book of Numbers’ (and other texts’) evaluative statements concerning Moses’ (and Aaron’s) sin. Commentators have often noted the apparent ambiguity in the relevant texts,¹⁸ without considering the possibility that such ambiguity may be due to the fact that the author saw the typological nuances inherent in the heroes’ fall. In other words, Moses’ sin is portrayed as in some sense recapitulating all that was wrong about the old generation.¹⁹

To begin with, Yahweh’s first censure in our text claims that Moses and Aaron “did not believe/trust” (לֹא־הֵאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי, 20:12), and this charge—at first sight rather puzzling—requires some explanation. Are we to conclude that Israel’s heroes failed to believe that Yahweh could perform what he said he would do?²⁰ In light of the countless miracles they had already witnessed it is quite difficult to imagine that they doubted Yahweh’s ability to produce water from the rock. Of course, one could appeal to the wider range of meaning sustained by this verb, namely, “to act faithfully,” which appears to move

¹⁶ Cf. Cole, *Numbers* 323.

¹⁷ It is certainly remarkable that Numbers 20 records (or anticipates) the death not only of Moses and Aaron, but also of their sister Miriam (20:1). With one sweep the chapter terminates the tenure of Israel’s three leaders, and thus creates the impression that an era has come to an end.

¹⁸ Cf. Riggan, *Numbers* 151; Arvid S. Kapelrud, “How Tradition Failed Moses,” *JBL* 76 (1957) 242. Kapelrud argues that the vague language bespeaks the author’s/editor’s tendency to exonerate Moses and Aaron from the charge of having committed very specific crimes. But if so, then the author’s choice of words seems rather poor precisely in that the account fails to “exonerate” Israel’s leaders. The level of ambiguity inherent in the narrative gives rise to all kinds of speculations, so that, even if “specific crimes” are difficult to pinpoint, the text does anything but come to the rescue or help of the accused.

¹⁹ John H. Sailhamer has developed a quasi-typological reading of the incident in Numbers 20 (*The Pentateuch as Narrative* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] 72–78). He argues that “. . . the faithlessness of Moses does not appear to have consisted in his striking the rock or in his harsh words but rather lies just out of reach somewhere in the numerous ‘gaps’ of the story . . . it appears to be part of the story’s design” (ibid. 75). Sailhamer further contends that the narrative raises the actions of Moses and Aaron “to a higher level of theological reflection—the issue of faith versus obedience to the Law. Their actions epitomize the negative side of the message of faith. Moses and Aaron, who held high positions under the Law, did not enjoy God’s gift of the land. They died in the wilderness because they did not believe” (pp. 76–77). Accordingly, so Sailhamer, the author of the Pentateuch distinguished “between a life of faith before the Law . . . and a lack of faith under the Law” (p. 77). Moses is thus pitted against Abraham “who believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness” (Gen 15:6) as the representative of the motto “faith before the Law.” I find it rather difficult to avoid the question of whether this antithetic approach (based upon an implicit tension between faith and law: “Abraham did not have the law, but believed; Moses had the law, but did not believe”) is not more of a Christian eisegesis than reconstructive of the ancient author’s intention. At any rate, one cannot reduce the Pentateuch’s message to a “showdown” between Moses and Abraham, with Abraham getting the better of Moses.

²⁰ Noth says as much in identifying Moses’ question in v. 11 as “eine Äußerung der Verlegenheit und des Zweifels” (cf. “. . . sie hatten sich nicht fest auf seine Zusage verlassen,” *Numeri* 129).

us closer to an intelligible rendering of our text's language. Ashley offers this approach in an effort to account for v. 12: ". . . [Moses and Aaron] have refused by their actions to rely on God to quench his people's thirst without their aid in spite of all that he has done."²¹ To be sure, Ashley's reading of the text is certainly correct, in that Moses' words and actions fail to display the humility that characterizes a servant of Yahweh who performs a sign in his name. And—as we noted above—by taking at least some credit for the miracle in this episode Moses could not have had implicit trust in Yahweh alone as the provider. But even though the language of 20:12 can be explained in these terms, the reader may retain a certain notion of uneasiness that cannot be dispelled by producing a more or less sophisticated theological argument. The words of our text continue to haunt us as they seem somewhat out of place. However, once we realize that the author imported terms and concepts well known from pentateuchal (and other) traditions into his narrative, the words of 20:12 no longer have this air of elusiveness. Moses' sin is depicted as "unbelief" to echo his contemporaries' sin at Kadesh or, more generally, the old generation's shortcomings in the wilderness.²² "They do not believe me" is not only Yahweh's rebuke in 14:11 (לֹא-יֵאֱמִינוּ בִי), cf. 20:12), but the same refrain reverberates throughout the Pentateuch and the OT (Deut 1:32; 9:23; Ps 78:8, 22, 32, 37), so much so that the author of Hebrews, well trained in the OT, can think of no better way to epitomize Israel's disaster (cf. Heb 3:19).

Another instance of this form of "recapitulative historiography" is found in the characterization of Moses' sin in 20:24 ("you rebelled against my word," מִרִּיבֶתֶם אֶת־פִּי, cf. 27:14). We are here reminded of perhaps the most popular negative attribution in the OT, namely, the desert trek generation's reputation as a "stiff-necked and rebellious generation" (cf. Num 14:9; Deut 1:26, 43; 9:7, 24; 31:27; Ps 78:8, 17, 40; 95:8; Ezek 20:8, 13, 21, etc.).²³ Scholars have pointed out the irony that Moses' harangue against the people ("you rebels," 20:10) would so promptly backfire and be returned upon his own head in Yahweh's response.²⁴ The charge of 20:24 is even repeated verbatim in 27:14, so that it is hard to escape the impression that the author had a vested interest in calling the sin "rebellion." For in doing so he deliberately conjured up reminiscences of the people's defections during the desert journeys.

Two additional texts from the Pentateuch commenting on Moses' sin evince the same tendency of portraying the incident with recapitulative nuances. Deuteronomy 4:21 mentions an oath sworn by Yahweh barring Moses from entering the promised land ("Furthermore Yahweh was angry with me . . . , and swore that I would not cross over Jordan . . ."), a detail that should perplex the attentive reader to some degree. Nowhere in Numbers 20

²¹ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* 385–86.

²² Cf. Olson on this point (i.e. unbelief), *Numbers* 128.

²³ It should be noted, though, that the book of Ezekiel also makes abundant use of this root (מָרָד, "to rebel") in describing the prophet's contemporaries.

²⁴ Cf. Cole, *Numbers* 327; Artus, *Études sur le livre des Nombres* 234–35.

or elsewhere do we find any hint at a declaration regarding this case that bears the formal marks of oath-like utterances. What comes to mind, however, is an oath that Yahweh swore at the beginning of the wilderness journeys—in Kadesh: “. . . truly, as I live . . . they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected me see it . . .” (Num 14:21–23; cf. 14:28–29, where the oath-formula “as I live” is employed a second time). The dreadful curse of Kadesh-Barnea was a moment well remembered in Israel’s history,²⁵ and the puzzling remark in Deut 4:21 connects Moses’ failure at Kadesh with the people’s refusal to obey Yahweh’s command. Whether or not the author of Deut 4:21 imported the curse of Numbers 14 into his text, or whether there really was a curse to the above effect and it only happened to be recorded “retroactively” in the summary account of Deuteronomy need not be discussed at this point.²⁶ The fact is that Deut 4:21 creates this “*déjà-vu* effect” and allows the reader to identify the typological nuances of Moses’ sin.

Another, equally intriguing statement comes to us from Deut 1:37. The first chapter of Deuteronomy recounts (among other matters) Israel’s infamous rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea (1:19ff.). It is conspicuous that Moses’ sin surfaces in the passage that rehearses the penalty for the people’s refusal to conquer: “Yahweh was also angry with me for your sakes, saying, ‘Even you shall not enter’” (1:37). Source critics proposed that this autobiographical comment was intended to encourage the Deuteronomist’s exilic audience to imitate Moses’ resolve and quietly accept their present deplorable situation.²⁷ But such diachronic approaches to 1:37 tend to obliterate the trend that is obvious throughout the Pentateuch, namely, to accentuate Moses’ sin and the incurred punishment as part and parcel of the rebellious generation’s rejection. In the case of Deut 1:37 the author effected this notion by simply dischronologizing Moses’ downfall and incorporating it into the first revolt at Kadesh. Thus, Moses’ sin in the true sense of the word intersects or coincides with that of the old generation.²⁸ Even the words “on your account,” ir-

²⁵ Notice the language of Ps 95:11.

²⁶ In the final analysis, though, I see no reason why Yahweh’s oath should not have been original.

²⁷ Cf. Norbert Lohfink, “Wie stellt sich das Problem Individuum-Gemeinschaft in Deuteronomium 1,6–3,29?,” *Scholastik* 35 (1960) 403–7. Others have built on Lohfink’s interpretation, cf. Thomas W. Mann’s brief survey in “Theological Reflections on the Denial of Moses,” *JBL* 98 (1979) 94. Mann himself follows F. M. Cross’s suggestion of a pre-exilic edition of the deuteronomic history ending in Deut 23:25a (the positive evaluation of Josiah’s reign) and an exilic edition (Dtr²) beginning with 23:25b. Moses’ fate who suffers “because of the people” is thus compared to Josiah’s critical position at the seam of the two editions of the deuteronomic history. He, too, shares in the judgment of his sinful contemporaries despite his own devotion to Yahweh. Moses and Josiah and their ineluctable doom on account of the people thus captures the deuteronomic redactor’s coming to terms with the problem of the relationship between individual and corporate guilt (pp. 493–94). Obviously, this argument hinges on the question of whether there ever was a “Deuteronomist” in the sense Mann understands this term (and I—for one—do not think there was).

²⁸ One should take note of the fact that Deut 3:26 employs the same language as 1:37 (“. . . angry with me on your account . . .”), but retains the chronological framework of the narrative in Numbers 20–21. Accordingly, Moses’ sentence is pronounced in the context of the conclusion of the wilderness trek to Canaan (i.e. the defeat of Sihon & Og, cf. Num 21:21–35).

respective of whether or not they represent an effort to shift blame on the part of an exilic author/editor,²⁹ move Moses closer to the sphere of the people and express this fateful association with the old generation.

III. THE “ROD OF GOD”

So far we have concentrated our efforts on demonstrating typological undercurrents of our text and other relevant sources in the OT. We shall now proceed in the opposite direction in showing how Num 20:1–13 breaks with certain patterns relating to the traditions of the wilderness trek (rather than to “repeat” or recapitulate them). It is at this juncture that the rod mentioned in Num 20:8–11 comes into focus.

Olson’s analysis of Num 20:1–13 underscores both the high degree of concurrence between our text and the basic contours of cycles previously established in Numbers as well as surprising deviations from these cycles.³⁰ Accordingly, “every time we hear the first hint of whining from the people in Numbers, we automatically assume that the people’s complaint is illegitimate, that the attack on Moses and Aaron is unjustified, and that God’s anger and righteous judgment on the people will follow like clockwork.”³¹ Indeed all the elements that constitute “complaint stories” in Numbers seem to be in place. The account opens with the people’s whining, their complaint, their rebelling against the leaders (cf. 20:2–5; 11:1; 14:2–4; 16:1–3). Moses and Aaron fall on their faces before Yahweh (20:6; 11:2; 14:5; 16:4), and eventually the glory cloud is seen hovering over the sanctuary (20:6; 14:10; 16:19). Yet, God’s response breaks decisively with the pattern. While the reader is prepared to hear of yet another judgment, God simply instructs Moses how he is to produce water for the community (20:8). In light of the people’s all too familiar words of complaint and the corresponding plagues in prior episodes, it will hardly do to suggest that this time their case is entirely legitimate.³² Rather, God here sovereignly decides to put an end to the ever-recurring cycles of sin and punishment and to initiate a “new beginning.” In this sense Numbers 20 becomes the turning point of the book. Not only does it record/anticipate the end of the old generation (i.e. the death of its leaders), but God here also affords clearance for the generation that would inherit Canaan by breaking the vicious cycle that proved fatal for their predecessors. The fact that we have thus entered a new stage in God’s dealings with Israel is borne out by a number of textual features whose combined witness make this conclusion plausible.

We note first of all that 21:1–3, the account following God’s verdict on Moses and Aaron and the latter’s death notice (20:22–29), is contrasted with Israel’s defeat at Kadesh-Barnea (14:39–45). While the people’s refusal to act on God’s promise ultimately resulted in their defeat and being driven back

²⁹ Cf. Andrew D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 147.

³⁰ Olson, *Numbers* 125–26.

³¹ *Ibid.* 125.

³² *Pace* Olson, *Numbers* 126.

“as far as Hormah” (עַד-הַחֶרְמָה, 14:45), the new generation pursues a different course of action in asking God for victory, a request which is readily granted (21:1–3). Most interestingly, this first military engagement after the death-sentence of Moses also concludes with the word חֶרְמָה (21:3). The aetiological remark relating to the successful campaign (as opposed to the earlier futile attempt) coupled with the preceding account of Moses’ fall at Kadesh conveys the notion that by God’s intervention the new generation is finally moving beyond the stigmatic time frame of punishment inflicted on the old generation. From here on military conflicts will see Israel emerging victorious as they move ever closer to the land of their hope (cf. 21:21–35). To be sure, this new generation is far from being sinless (cf. 21:4–9; 25:1–15),³³ but with Numbers 20 the narrative takes an undisputed turn for the better and brings the community to the brink of Jordan, from where the slopes of Canaan and the city of Jericho are already in sight (Num 36:13).³⁴ The break in the cycle of sin and punishment mentioned above is thus further elaborated in the nation’s successful campaign after Moses’ and Aaron’s sin.

Another key feature of our text calls for further investigation now, namely the matter regarding “the rod.” Much effort has been exerted in trying to ferret out the question as to whether we are here dealing with Moses’ or with Aaron’s rod.³⁵ The reference to the rod as being “before Yahweh” (20:9) may indicate that it was Aaron’s rod (cf. 17:10), although some have identified it as Moses’ rod based on the pronominal phrase “his rod” (20:11).³⁶ An ultimate answer to this oddity has eluded commentators so far (after all, the MT is somewhat ambiguous),³⁷ and perhaps we are in fact missing the point in trying to pinpoint ownership. It is essential to recognize the rod’s significance as symbolic of God’s authority and power revealed in the exodus of Israel, less so as belonging to this or that person.³⁸ And, of course, the reader of the Pentateuch is all too familiar with “the rod,” the instrument used to perform almost all of the signs recorded in the exodus tradition until this point.³⁹ Apparently, the “rod of God” (cf. Exod 4:20) is an extension

³³ See comments on 21:4–9 below.

³⁴ Olson suggests that the promises of the Balaam cycle (Numbers 22–24) are the turning point between the death of the old and the birth of the new generation (*The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New* 162). But, as I intend to show, this shift is already contemplated in Numbers 20–21.

³⁵ Cf. Davies, *Numbers* 203–4; Cole, *Numbers* 326; Propp, “The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses” 22; Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* 382; John Milgrom, *Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 165; Noth, *Numeri* 145; George J. Wenham, *Numbers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981) 149.

³⁶ Cf. Milgrom, *Numbers* 165; de Vaulx, *Les Nombres* 222.

³⁷ It should be noted, however, that the LXX “eliminates” the ambiguity by calling the instrument in v. 11 “the rod” (τῆ ῥάβδῳ; i.e. no personal pronoun). Cf. Propp, “The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses” 22.

³⁸ The “rod” is first introduced in Exod 4:2, later (4:20) referred to as the “rod of God.” Moses is told in 4:17 that he is to perform the signs in Egypt using the rod, but already in 7:9–10 this notion is compromised in that it is Aaron’s rod that is involved in producing a snake (cf. also 7:15: is this Moses’ or Aaron’s staff?). It is quite clear that the author of the book did not care to differentiate between the rods of the two leaders. Whichever rod was used and regardless as to the human medium performing a particular sign, the rod, by God’s sanction, *was* or *became* the “rod of God” indicative of God’s kingship.

³⁹ Cf. Levine, *Numbers 1–20* 489.

of the “high hand” and the “stretched out arm” (הַיָּד, cf. Exod 6:6; 7:5; Deut 4:34, etc.) by which Yahweh led Israel out of Egypt. It is not accidental that the rod was also to be held high with a stretched out arm when employed to show miraculous signs by either Moses or Aaron (הַיָּד, cf. Exod 7:20; 8:16; 9:22–23; 10:13; 14:21).⁴⁰ The rod is thus the standard symbol of God’s power unleashed and manifested in redeeming Israel from bondage. The imperative “take the rod” echoes throughout the exodus traditions like a refrain, and this prominent, well-known phrase also initiates the sequence of events that lead to the miraculous provision of water in Numbers 20. The reader expects the rod to be used in the same way it was employed on previous occasions,⁴¹ and the text evinces a certain emphasis on the rod. For although the rod is not to be used in producing the water, 20:8–11 mentions the insignia three times! Not only do we hear God’s command to “take the rod,” but the author also includes Moses’ corresponding action in typical Hebrew narrative style (20:9). The third reference relates Moses’ implementing the rod (20:11). So again, the reader expects the rod to be involved in what will transpire, yet the story takes a surprising turn. Yahweh’s instructions then could be rendered in the following way: “Take the rod (. . . the one you have used countless times before . . .)—but do not use it!” The sign featured a decisive break with respect to the involvement of the “rod of God.” It was no longer to be employed in miraculous performances, since its symbolic significance was temporally limited to the period of the exodus and the wilderness journeys. Now this era was nearing its end, and God was about to open a new chapter in the history of Israel’s redemption (i.e. the conquest of Transjordan and Canaan—Israel’s new home—was imminent). The first mention of the rod is found in Exod 4:2, at the dawn of Yahweh’s great intervention on behalf of his people,⁴² while Numbers 20 brings it into focus for the very last time.⁴³ But it is not to be used anymore. The “rod of God” is put to rest, and it is unfortunate for Moses and Aaron that this idea coincides with the death sentence of the leaders of the old generation.⁴⁴ This reading of our text is not at all whimsical, because—as we argued above—the chapter marks a salient turning point in the book of Numbers and features aspects of both continuity as well as discontinuity when read against the backdrop of well-established narrative patterns in the book of Numbers.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Occasionally, the rod was also used to strike an object as in Exod 7:20; 8:16; 17:5–6. But even in these instances the texts mention the motion of lifting (cf. 7:20) and stretching out (cf. 8:16).

⁴¹ After all, the (very similar) sign described in Exodus 17 would be in the back of the reader’s mind familiar with the salient events recorded in the Pentateuch.

⁴² The rod enters Egypt just as God does to redeem Israel (cf. Exod 4:20).

⁴³ In total the rod is referred to no less than 22 times in Exodus through Numbers.

⁴⁴ In this sense, therefore, Moses unintentionally obscured the significance of the event by striking the rock (see above).

⁴⁵ Moses’ bronze serpent (cf. 21:4–9) arguably becomes the new symbol of this “new thing” that God was doing with his people. The reader will remember that a snake was the initial sign of the exodus when Moses’ rod was miraculously transformed (cf. Exod 4:2–5). Here, at this critical juncture in the narrative, we encounter another snake as the symbol of God’s willingness to forgive the people’s murmuring and to lead them on to the promised land. Jesus referred to the bronze snake as in some sense foreshadowing (or simply illustrating) the inauguration of the eschatological stage

IV. CONCLUSION

Moses' sin consisted in failing to glorify God by performing the miracle precisely according to Yahweh's instructions. In doing so he not only conferred some credit onto himself, but also seriously compromised Yahweh's intention to signify a new beginning with his people about to inherit the promised land. This conclusion is supported both by the textual features found in Numbers 20 itself and by our passage's pivotal position as well as its function as the book's turning point. Intimately related to this notion is the fact that Moses' and Aaron's sin has been portrayed in terms recapitulative of the old generation's rebellious reputation. In this sense Numbers 20 not only alludes to sinful patterns of the past, but actually brings the history of the old generation (including its leaders) full circle. Yahweh is "finished" with the old generation that would not see Canaan. Viewed in this light, it does not come as a surprise that he also "lowers" (or rather, puts down) the symbol of this era, namely, the rod once held high and stretched out during the days of Moses.

When all is said and done, it is still evident that Moses and Aaron as the leaders of their contemporaries were judged by different standards than the rest of the people (cf. Lev 10:3). Although God's mercy is boundless, the passage continues to exhort leaders in the church to set a good example rather than to "embody" the sins of God's people or to conduct their own campaigns with little or no concern for God's glory.

of God's dealings with his people (cf. John 3:14–15). His remark in John 3 may imply that he saw the significance of the snake in the way I have suggested above. Be that as it may, the people of Israel certainly adopted and understood the snake as a new covenantal symbol and eventually even began to worship it (cf. 2 Kgs 18:4, נחשתן).