

## Heroic Leadership in the Wilderness

### 1. Introduction

The book of Numbers, at first blush, depicts a tribal based extended family that has been given a cultic and military order. However, its social and religious development is a far cry from a neat and orderly world. Chapter 1 quickly clusters the Israelites into clans (לפֿשפּוֹחֶתָם) and ancestral houses (לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם) that form an elite group of chosen (Q, קְרוּאִי) leaders who assist (אֲשֶׁר יַעֲמְדוּ אִתְּכֶם) Moses and Aaron in enlisting<sup>1</sup> the burgeoning<sup>2</sup> recruits. Only the tribe of Levi is exempt from this military conscription. To them fell the task of porters for the sacral accoutrements and when stationary, to guard (מִשְׁמֶרֶת) the sacred precincts. All this is coordinated with a prearranged trumpeted series of signals to systematize the bivouacking.<sup>3</sup> Beneath the façade of this perfectly symmetrical social architecture was an institutional quagmire that only a person of heroic propensity could possibly keep together. This is one of the major thematic trajectories that runs through the book of Numbers as Jeffrey Cohen articulates it, ". . . there is not one portion which does not provide us with some insight into the nature of Moses' leadership and the manifold challenges with which a leader has to contend."<sup>4</sup>

In the following synchronic study of the Masoretic Text of the book of Numbers, I would like to present a sketch of the infrastructure of the "congregation of the Israelites" (עֵדָה בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל) and the exemplary leadership of the heroic Moses, who dealt with a leadership structure that at times was contentious and yet crucial in upholding a vision for a future generation.

### 2. The Congregation of the Israelites

The primary term that is used to describe the pre-monarchic Israel's social-political structure is עֵדָה.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rolf Knierim and George Coats argues that chapter 1 is, "a REPORT about a society-wide military CONSCRIPTION." Rolf P. Knierim and George W. Coats, *Numbers*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, Volumes IV (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 52-3.

<sup>2</sup> The large numbers have been dealt with extensively in commentaries and other scholarly literature. Some significant articles include: Eryl W. Davies, "A Mathematical Conundrum: The Problem of the Large Numbers in Numbers 1 and XXVI," *VT* 45:4 (1995), 449-469; Heinzerling, Rüdiger. "Beleams Rätsel-Die Zählung der Wehrfähigen in Numeri 1 und 26." *ZAW* 111 (1999), 404-415; Heinzerling, Rüdiger. "On the Interpretation of the Census Lists by C J Humphreys and G E Mendenhall." *VT* 50:2 (2000), 250-252; Humphreys, C. J. "The numbers of people in the Exodus from Egypt: Decoding mathematically the every large numbers in Numbers I and xxvi." *VT* 48:2 (1998), 196-213; McEntire, M. "A response to Colin J. Humphreys's 'The number of people in the Exodus from Egypt: Decoding mathematically the very large numbers in Numbers I and xxvi.'" *VT* 49 (1999), 262-264; Mendenhall, G. E. "The Census Lists of Numbers 1 and 26." *JBL* 77 (1958) 52-66; Milgrom, J. "On decoding very large numbers." *VT* 49:1 (1999), 131-132; Wenham, J. W. "Large Numbers in the Old Testament." *TB* 18 (1967) 19-53.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 10.1-10.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey M. Cohen, "Leadership in the Book of Numbers," *JBQ* 28, no. 2 (2000), 125.

Although קהל makes a few cameo appearances in the book of Numbers,<sup>5</sup> it is עדה that dominates.<sup>6</sup>

Thorkild Jacobsen set the stage for the modern discussion of עדה when he drafted the early scenario of democracy. His stance was that the day to day activities of the primitive states were handled by elders, but at pivotal crises, it was a "provisional and ad hoc"<sup>7</sup> gathering of the people, an assembly, that dealt with the problem.<sup>8</sup> In a later study, Jacobsen analyzes the *Enûma Eliš* with an eye toward a social-political analysis. He makes note of continual political inconsistencies that ultimately bring about crises. Jacobsen writes,

In this conflict stages of progressively greater concentration and permanence of power arise one out of the other: virtual anarchy and private war give way to primitive democracy with an ad hoc leader, the king, chosen in the general assembly when common danger imposes unanimity and concerted action, and this in turn resolves into permanent monarchy with its promise of administrative benefits far beyond merely temporary safety of life and property.<sup>9</sup>

The above analysis could well be applied to the biblical history of Israel, in which a post-Judges era would produce a cry for a change from primitive democracy under Samuel and others to a monarchical society. The complexities in both the developing monarchic era and the fully matured dynastic kingdom of Judah are quite different from that portrayed in the book of Numbers.<sup>10</sup> Here in Numbers the primitive democracy expressed by the עדה is maintained under the watchful eyes of Moses.

The usage of עדה, as analyzed by Jacob Milgrom, follows the standard Ancient Near Eastern pattern as depicted by Jacobsen and others. Milgrom writes concerning the biblical perspective in the pre-monarchic era:

In sum, the עדה can only be conceived as an ad hoc emergency body called together by the tribal chieftains whenever a national trans-tribal issue arose. However, once the monarchy was firmly established, there was no further use of the עדה and it disappears. Thus the phenomenon of the sporadic assembly of the pre-monarchic city-state described by Jacobsen for ancient Mesopotamia, though separated from Israel by vast stretches of time and space, is *mutatis mutandis* duplicated by the history and function of the Biblical עדה.<sup>11</sup>

Earlier in his study, Milgrom also indicated that "the עדה can be equivalent to all the Israelites, to the

---

<sup>5</sup> See Num 14.5, 16.3 and 20.4. It is noteworthy that the קהל is found in negative contexts with all of these verses.

<sup>6</sup> See Num 1.2, 16, 18, 53; 3.7; 4.34; 8.9, 20; 10.2, 3; 13.26; 14.1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 27, 35, 36; 15.24, 25, 26, 33, 35, 36; 16.2, 5, 6, 9, 11, 16, 19, 21, 22, 24, 26; 17.5, 6, 7, 10, 11; 19.9; 20.1, 2, 8, 11, 22, 27, 29; 25.6, 7; 26.2, 9, 10; 27.2, 3, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22; 27, 2, 3, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22; 31.12, 13, 16, 26, 27, 43; 32.2, 4; 35.12, 24, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Thorkild Jacobsen, "Early Political Development in Mesopotamia," *ZA* 18 (1957), 104; Quoted in Jacob Milgrom, "Priestly Terminology and the Political and Social Structure of Pre-Monarchic Israel," *JQR*, 69 (1978), 66. See also Jacobsen's earlier article, "Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia," *JNES* 2 (1943).

<sup>8</sup> A challenging alternative view on the birth and development of democracy, with the ancient Athenians as the originators is presented in Paul Woodruff, *First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 170.

<sup>10</sup> A biblical perspective on leadership needs to work through the different social-political contexts that are present in the different texts, before one can say that they have established a biblical view/s. Needless to say this study cannot deal with these other layers and it would potentially be another area of future study.

<sup>11</sup> Milgrom, "Priestly Terminology and the Political and Social Structure of Pre-Monarchic Israel," 75.

adult males, or to their national representatives."<sup>12</sup> The "all Israelites" often included both women and children along with men of all ages. In the book of Numbers this full range is evident.

Due to the ad hoc nature of the עדה, the texts cluster around major turning points and leadership struggles. For example the use of עדה in Num 13.26; 14.1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 27, 35, 36 clusters around the scout report and the response, not of the general populous which would have been expressed by the phrase בני ישראל alone<sup>13</sup> or some combination with עם, but the עדה. The עדה here, differentiates this crisis event from those in chapter 11 (11.1-3, העם; 11.4-35, האספסף<sup>14</sup> and בני ישראל), where the organized opposition against Moses and divine guidance is illegitimate and spontaneous or charismatic without the sanction of the "primitive democratic" system. Chapter 13.25-14.45 on the other hand, begins with the legitimate gathering of the legal body for such occasions, that is the עדה, along with Moses and Aaron. There would have been greater symmetry in this pericope if the scouts had returned to Moses first, however the discontinuity may be intended to accentuate the intensity of the rebellion (14.9, מרד) of the legitimate legal assembly.

It would seem that a valid study of leadership in the book of Numbers, necessitates an awareness of the role of the עדה before applying a characterized and synthetic picture of leadership as represented in the life of Moses.

Furthermore, the catalogue of technical terms dealing with social stratification needs to at least be mentioned. The book of Numbers as well as other pre-monarchic biblical texts refer to the following: "tribe (שבט) ⇒ clan (משפחה) ⇒ household (בית) ⇒ individual (גבר)." <sup>15</sup> Both the words for "tribe" and "clan" have parallel terms: שבט for מטה and אלף for משפחה, with the phrase "בית אבות" also meaning "clan." Valid leaders within specified spheres of influence are indicated by each of these social stratification terms. A full differentiation cannot be accomplished in this paper. Instead the tribal leader or "chieftain" will be investigated next.

### 3. Tribal Leaders

---

<sup>12</sup> Milgrom, "Priestly Terminology and the Political and Social Structure of Pre-Monarchic Israel," 70.

<sup>13</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 4A (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 130, differentiates the two terms and defines the בני ישראל as "a more widely used ethnographic designation in which *bēn* 'son' functions to express group affiliation."

<sup>14</sup> The אספסף is probably an example of a charismatic and illegitimate leadership. Contrary to the Septuagintal reading which identifies this group with those in Exod 12.38, the ו and the use a unique term here. As Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 102, indicates it is a reduplicated form of אסף which generally translates into "to gather in." Levine implies the possibility that אסף may indicate the gathering of "fighting forces" and therefore the text is dealing with a military-*junta* like coup d'état.

<sup>15</sup> Milgrom, "Priestly Terminology and the Political and Social Structure of Pre-Monarchic Israel," 79.

Leadership in the book of Numbers is not vested in just crisis based assemblies, nor monopolized by Moses or even a Moses-Aaron-Miriam triumvirate. It is a rich and variegated hierarchy that is both institutional and charismatic, legitimate and at times illegitimate. The tribal leadership infrastructure was both institutional and legitimate. The words that depict this general level of leadership in the book of Numbers include: עדה, מטה, אלה / בית אבות, עם which are used along side נשיא and ראש. These words are combined, recombined and nuanced throughout the book. Some of the pericopes can be clustered, while others remain orphaned.

The two terms נשיא and ראש may be used in contrast to the designation זקן. In the book of Numbers זקן is used to indicate "a national body comprised of seventy elders acting as a council."<sup>16</sup> While נשיא and ראש tend to be used interchangeably with a "slight difference between the two terms, not in substance but in syntax: ראש is generally used when referring to the leader's office within a clan, whereas נשיא will refer to his office vis-à-vis his tribe."<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, ראש according to J. R. Bartlett's study was used in early pericopes "in a tribal context of men exercising leadership in military and judicial matters."<sup>18</sup> Speiser studied the early usage of נשיא and concluded that "a *nāšī'* was someone elected to that position by the appropriate council,"<sup>19</sup> thereby emphasizing the office's representative role.

The first block of leaders designated as נשיא and ראש, that we can cluster, are those that are repeated by name in 1.4-15, 2.3-31, 7.12-83 and 10.14-27. Their names are for the most part unique to these pericopes<sup>20</sup> and show signs of great antiquity,<sup>21</sup> due to the lack of the Tetragrammaton as a theophanic element in their names. Their specific tasks include: 1) assisting Moses and Aaron (אשר יעמדו אתכם, 1.5aβ) in the census taking (שאו את-ראש, 1.2a) and in fact they were in charge of the conscription (הם העמידים על-הפקדים, 7.2b); 2) stationing themselves among their respective camps (רגל מחנה, 2.3aβ) which would be the basis for the decampment and bivouac (2.34); 3) offering a series of gifts and dedicatory offerings (להנכת, 7.11b); 4) commanding the tribes as they were to move out (ועל-צבאו),

<sup>16</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, "Judge and Officer in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East," *IOS* 7 (1977), 65. Conrad, "זקן, *z āqēn*; זקן, *zōqēn*; זקנא, *zīqnāh*; זקנא, *z'qunīm*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Volume IV, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 123. writes, "The elder is . . . a member of a special committee representing a specific, clearly defined social community; he must be thought of primarily as the holder of an office, not the representative of a particular age group."

<sup>17</sup> Milgrom, "Priestly Terminology and the Political and Social Structure of Pre-Monarchic Israel," 80.

<sup>18</sup> J. R. Bartlett, "The use of the word ראש as a title in the Old Testament," *VT* 19, no. 1 (1969), 1.

<sup>19</sup> E. A. Speiser, "Background and Function of the Biblical *Nāšī'*," *CBQ* 25, no. 1 (1963), 114.

<sup>20</sup> Only Nahshon and Amminadab are repeated in the biblical traditions. See George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1903), 6.

<sup>21</sup> See Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 53-4 and Trygve N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 69.

10.14b).

The first task hints at a hierarchical infrastructure in which these tribal leaders are subservient to Moses and Aaron as they fulfill the divine command to take a census. This may be argued from the use of the preposition **את** along with the verb **עמד**.<sup>22</sup> However, the fact that 7.2b describes these same tribal leaders as being in charge<sup>23</sup> of the census process mitigates their subservience. Instead a fully delegated process is indicated. This is crucial since the census taking plays a significant role in chapters 1-4 and 26 and therefore providing an important stitching in the fabric of the book of Numbers. Following the studies of E. A. Speiser on the use of census in Mari and its application to ancient Israel,<sup>24</sup> Benjamin E. Scolnic identified the purpose of this census as military. Furthermore, "records are the goal, so carefully-gathered lists are essential. The lists are created by place names and personal names in Mari, and by tribal (or clan) names and personal names in Israel."<sup>25</sup> Scolnic, combines Speiser's studies with the insights of Jean Robert Kupper and adds a purificatory role to the census.<sup>26</sup> He writes, "there is something about a census, at least as described by Ex 30:12, which requires an expiatory ritual or monetary payment for assurance that there will be no plague."<sup>27</sup> The redemption principle in Num 3.40-51 may be viewed as functioning in a similar manner. If this line of reasoning can be sustained, the tribal leaders may have had an apotropaic function.

The tribal leaders' military function is further witnessed in the second and fourth tasks enumerated above. The orderliness in the encampment and militaristic advancement is depicted as within the parameters of their responsibilities. It is possible to link these passages to 10.1-13, which precedes the last pericope in this cluster. Here, the two silver trumpets call the tribal leadership together in 10.4 (ונועדו אליך הנשיאים ראשי אלפי ישראל) and then spell out the order of decampment according to the blast.<sup>28</sup>

The appearance of the tribal leaders in the narrative context that chapter 7 establishes is paradigmatic. As Eryl W. Davies indicates, "there can be little doubt that the object of its inclusion was

---

<sup>22</sup> See Genesis 45.1 which refers to Joseph's attendants.

<sup>23</sup> Here the preposition **על** is crucial. Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 4A (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 254, writes, ". . . characterizing the twelve chieftain as "the ones in charge of the musters," literally, "who stand over (*hā'ōmedīm 'al*) the musters," recalls Num 1:5, *'a šer ya 'amdū 'itkem*, literally, "who shall stand with you."

<sup>24</sup> Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, "Census and Ritual expiation in Mari and Israel," in *Oriental and Biblical Studies*. ed. Jacob J. Finkelstein and Moseh Greenberg (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania, 1967), 171-186.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, *Theme and Context in Biblical Lists*, Studies in the History of Judaism, No. 119 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 59.

<sup>26</sup> Scolnic, *Theme and Context in Biblical Lists*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Scolnic, *Theme and Context in Biblical Lists*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> See my paper "An Introduction and Experiment in Pluriform Textual Studies: Numbers 10.1-10ff." for a comparison of the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuchal texts. The paper can be downloaded from <http://hebrewscripturesandmore.com/APTS-Subpages/BOT640/Documents/Numbers-10-AnExperiment.pdf>

to emphasize the unstinting generosity of the tribal leaders of old. . ."<sup>29</sup> a role model for future generations. The leadership role of these chieftains is obviously beyond the *Zählgehilfen* rubric that Kellermann subsumes them under.<sup>30</sup>

Numbers 1.16 is an important verse for understanding this tribal leadership. It reads:

אלה (קרואי, Q) קריאי העדה	These were called ones of the congregation
נשיאי מטות אבותם	the leaders of their ancestral tribes,
ראשי אלפי ישראל הם	the heads of the divisions of Israel.

Both the Qere reading (קרואי, Qal passive participle) and the Kethib reading (קריאי, masculine plural adjective) may be understood as passive.<sup>31</sup> So readings such as "those called" or "elected" of the community may be contrasted with a leadership role that would be under the direct appointment of Moses and/or Aaron. If this is the case, then the 250 Israelite leaders that rose up against Moses and Aaron in Num 16.1-4 and Dathan and Abiram (26.9) were of the same elected status, i.e., legitimate leaders. Needless to say then, the 12 in chapters 1, 2, 7 and 10 were only a small portion of the larger leadership infrastructure in the tribes. Furthermore, the legitimacy of the leader does not guarantee proper submission to divine guidance.

The most dramatic example of legitimate institutional leadership failure can be seen in the scout narrative of chapters 13-14.<sup>32</sup> Here, in the typical Mosaic pattern of obedience, Moses follows YHWH's command to send men out to scout the land which was to be given to the בני ישראל (13.2, 3). Each was to be a tribal leader (13.2b כל נשיא אבותיו . . . למטה; 13.3b כלם אנשים ראשי בני ישראל), so they were legitimate institutional leaders. In fact, parodying the named chieftains of chapters 1, 2, 7, and 10, they are individually named. With the exception of Joshua, which the narrator indicates as an altered name, the chieftains do not have the theophanic Tetragrammaton in their names. Also, the list begins with Reuben like Num 1 and 26, in contrast to Num 2, 7, 10 and 34 which begins with Judah.<sup>33</sup> As tribal leaders they could call for the עדה to assemble to meet in the primitive democratic mode. However, the result was failure due to their covenant unfaithfulness in the form of rebellion.<sup>34</sup> The Masoretic Text

<sup>29</sup> Eryl W. Davies, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Numbers* (London & Grand Rapids: Marshall Pickering & Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 70.

<sup>30</sup> Diether Kellermann, *Die Priesterschrift von Numeri 1.1 bis 10.10* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970), 6-7.

<sup>31</sup> Kellermann, *Die Priesterschrift von Numeri 1.1 bis 10.10*, 6. "Die Form קריאי kann sowohl aktiven wie passiven Sinn haben. . ."

<sup>32</sup> Scout narratives have a comparable narrative pattern that is helpful in analyzing the texts. See A. Malamat, "The Danite Migration and the Pan-Israelite Exodus-Conquest: A Biblical Narrative Pattern," *Biblica* 51 (1970), 1-16 and Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 390-91.

<sup>33</sup> Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 352.

<sup>34</sup> Norbert Lohfink, "Original Sins in the Priestly Historical Narratives," in *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 110-12, indicates that the sins of the political leaders of Israel in the P-source was to lead the entire community of Israel into slandering of the land.

expresses the words of rebellion as: "We are not able to go up against the people, for it is (they are) stronger than us." (13.31) It is interesting to note that Jewish scholars from the medieval period had found the unpointed text as indicating an even greater level of rebellion. The comparative preposition and its suffix had been pointed to read: מִמֶּנּוּ which is a 1st person plural, i.e., "than us." However, in an unpointed text the same consonants could be read as "than he." Rashi writes, "They said this, - if this were at all possible, i.e., if one may be permitted to say so of God - with reference to the Omnipresent מִמֶּנּוּ, stronger than "He"; they thus uttered blasphemy."<sup>35</sup>

Numbers 14.4 continues the depth of the paradox, by having the members of the עֵדָה suggest the choosing of another ראש and heading back to Egypt. Once again, a legitimate action by the ad hoc assembly, however the special, atypical status of Moses<sup>36</sup> was not recognized, nor was "majority rule" the answer to the "rejection" of YHWH (14.11aβ, עֵדָה אֵנָה יִנְאֲצְנִי הָעָם הַזֶּה) and their "not believing" in YHWH (14.11bα, וְעֵדָה אֵנָה לֹא־יֵאֱמִינּוּ בִּי). It is interesting to note that the forgiveness that Moses attempts to gain is not for the עֵדָה or the unfaithful chieftains, but for the עָם. Even after forgiveness is extended to the עָם, the עֵדָה is under judgment as can be seen in 14.27, 35 and 36, while the unfaithful tribal leaders "who caused<sup>37</sup> the עֵדָה to complain against him," died unceremoniously by a plague.

The leadership infrastructure of the book of Numbers therefore implies a vast pyramid of responsibilities and spheres of authority whereby tasks are truly delegated. On the other hand, these chieftains/tribal leaders may err or even participate in sedition against Moses and/or Aaron, along with a rejection of divine fidelity. It should be noted that both the עֵדָה and tribal leaders who were legitimate within the social-political infrastructure of the pre-monarchic community were immediately judged over against the forgiveness offered to the עָם.

### 3. Elders & the 70 Elders of Moses

The elder system is another component within the hierarchical infrastructure of the pre-monarchical community of Israel depicted in the book of Numbers. Although the noun זָקֵן may derive from the word "beard"<sup>38</sup> and "a third of the occurrences has the meaning" old. . . . Most often by far the noun *zāqēn* is

<sup>35</sup> M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann, ed. *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary translated into English and Annotated: Numbers* (Jerusalem: The Silbermann Family, 1973), 65.

<sup>36</sup> See Numbers 12.6-8 and the discussion below.

<sup>37</sup> Reading the Qere which is a causative (Hiphil), וִילִינּוּ

<sup>38</sup> Conrad, "זָקֵן, *zāqēn*; זָקֵן, *zōqēn*; זִקְנָה, *ziqnāh*; זָקִימִים, *z'qunim*," 122.

used in the specialized sense of "elder."<sup>39</sup> Hanoach Reviv has compared the terms ראש/ראשים and זקן/זקנים and established an important clarification of terms, especially in Numbers and Chronicles.

... "heads" were the leaders (the "elders") at the sub-tribal and settlement levels, or parallel to the "chiefs" at the tribal level. However, the "elders are invariably second in rank to the "head" in the sense of "chief", when these terms are both mentioned in a particular context. Consideration of the titles assigned to the "chiefs", in the sense of tribal heads, such as "heads of fathers", "heads of fathers' houses", "heads of the people of Israel", implies that the individual tribal chiefs came from the ranks of the elders.<sup>40</sup>

Earlier in his study, Reviv adds another important insight, that in the זקן/ראש relationship, the term ראש is used in the Bible when referring to an individual member of the institution of the "elders", in place of "elder" (זקן), which is not used in this sense in the singular form.<sup>41</sup> This may very well mean that the social-political authority of the sub-tribal leadership is vested in the collective "elders" rather than the individual "elder." It is only the individual elder who has been singled out as a tribal leader/chieftain that has authority individually.

A case of collective sub-tribal eldership activity is seen in the interesting Zelophehad's daughters hearings (27.1-11; 36.1-12). The difficult judicial ruling concerning the property rights of the daughters of Zelophehad is deliberated before Moses, Eleazar the new priest, the tribal leadership (הנשיאם) and the whole עדה (27.2). The ruling comes via divine fiat in favor of the daughters. However, in Num 36.1 a sub-tribal elder (ראשי האבות למשפחה), in this case ראש is used with "clan" along with the term אבות to identify the elders. They then bring a counter-claim before Moses and the tribal leadership. Here, as is expected the eldership approaches as a collective and receives a hearing that mitigates the initial ruling.

The Pentateuch as a whole has several important sections that deal with eldership and its development: Exod 18.12-27; 24.1-11; Num 11.16-17, 24-30 and Deut 1.9-17. However, it is difficult to produce a consistent synthesis from these texts. Reviv bemoans that "the written sources are not homogeneous. There are difference of approach, argumentation, and background which reflect different conditions and indicate different dates of composition."<sup>42</sup> Reviv in fact, concludes that the Exod 18.13-27 "reflects the time of David, prior to the rebellion of Absalom,"<sup>43</sup> Num 11.16-25 is "related to the

<sup>39</sup> Conrad, "זקן, zāqēn; זקן, zōqēn; זקנה, ziqnāh; זקנים, zūqunîm," 123.

<sup>40</sup> Hanoach Reviv, *The Elders in Ancient Israel: A Study of a Biblical Institution* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1989), 21.

<sup>41</sup> Reviv, *The Elders in Ancient Israel: A Study of a Biblical Institution*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Hanoach Reviv, "The Traditions Concerning the Inception of the Legal System in Israel: Significance and Dating," *ZAW* 94 (1982), 566. J. Buchholz, *Die Altesten Israels im Deuteronomium*, Göttingen Theologische Arbeiten, no. 36 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), argues that the phrase "elders of Israel" has its theological foundations in the Deuteronomic historians or Ezekiel.

<sup>43</sup> Reviv, "The Traditions Concerning the Inception of the Legal System in Israel: Significance and Dating," 575. R. Knierim, "Exodus 18 und die Neuordnung der mosaischen Gerichtsbarkeit," *ZAW* 73 (1961), 161-62 identified the Jehoshaphat period for Exod 18.

establishment of high court in Jerusalem in the days of Jehoshaphat,"<sup>44</sup> while Deut 1.9-17 "suits the period of the reigns of Hezekiah or Josiah."<sup>45</sup> When attempts are made to present a unified picture of eldership in the Pentateuch, it is the fact that they do not seem to play an "independent role"<sup>46</sup> that is significant. In fact the elders "are silent representatives of the people, who are summoned or instructed by Moses, or appear alongside him, without ever developing any independent initiative."<sup>47</sup>

The interpretative quagmire may be simplified by first realizing that the numbers of elders were large, having naturally developed in the social infrastructure of the clan, a sub-tribal leadership. Even the idea of an "institution of a council of seventy attached to a ruler is well attested in the ancient Near East."<sup>48</sup> Passages such as Exod 4.29 and 12.21 indicated that the biblical tradition acknowledged the eldership strata of Israelite leadership before the above four pericopes. Secondly, the four pericopes may depict changes or special utilizations of the clan eldership.

Exod 18.22, for example, proposes that the elders who qualified could function as judges (ושפטו אתהעם בכל-עת). The specific qualifications of these elders was that they would be able men or better "men of competence"<sup>49</sup> (אנשי-חיל), who feared God (יראי אלהים), were trustworthy men (אנשי אמת) and hated gain<sup>50</sup> (שנאי בצע). The men are then made to be rulers (שר) with varying degrees of responsibility.<sup>51</sup> Pietro Bovati, focusing on the function and role of judges and their interrelationship with such terms as *z<sup>c</sup>qēnīm*, *śārīm*, and *melek*, etc., writes, "the role of the judge was not exercised indiscriminately by everybody, but rather by those recognized as having some authority (of government): in accordance with spheres of competence and in accordance with the historical evolution of (civil or military) political authority, jurisdiction belonged to different people."<sup>52</sup> Bovati also indicates that since there was a fundamental problem with a singularity of leadership, this problem was "solved by the creation of a *corps of judges* (Exod 18.22-26; Deut 1.16-17), which was not, however, a 'separate organ' endowed with autonomy within its sphere of competence, but rather an organic group of people to whom a measure of power was delegated for minor cases. The 'judges' were or became

---

<sup>44</sup> Reviv, "The Traditions Concerning the Inception of the Legal System in Israel: Significance and Dating," 575.

<sup>45</sup> Reviv, "The Traditions Concerning the Inception of the Legal System in Israel: Significance and Dating," 575.

<sup>46</sup> Conrad, "זקן *zāqēn*; זקן *zōqen*; זקנה *ziqnāh*; זקנים *z<sup>c</sup>quṅīm*," 129.

<sup>47</sup> Conrad, "זקן *zāqēn*; זקן *zōqen*; זקנה *ziqnāh*; זקנים *z<sup>c</sup>quṅīm*," 129.

<sup>48</sup> Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 87.

<sup>49</sup> William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 632. Propp writes, "ʾĪš ḥayī can connote a warrior, a rich man or a citizen of deserved respect and social influence. While the last dominates here, the judges also require physical stamina and material prosperity."

<sup>50</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 632. "That is, immune to bribery because of their wealth."

<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Magonet, "The Korah Rebellion," *JSOT* 24 (1982), 8. Magonet give a summary of H. S. Nahmani's discussion concerning Moses' reinstatement the "elders" over the military and then their judiciary authority.

<sup>52</sup> Pietro Bovati, *Re-Establishing Justice: Legal Terms, Concepts and Procedures in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 105, trans. Michael J. Smith (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 177.

'chiefs' in Israel; they were recognized as having received an authority that was also jurisdictional, in accordance with a well-defined hierarchical ladder."<sup>53</sup>

Exod 24.1-11 depicts a different function that is more social-religious in nature (24.1b "worship at a distances" (והשתחוויתם מרחק)). The chosen group are called "seventy from among the elders of Israel" (שבעים מזקני ישראל), which seems to lack specificity. The sacral meal (24.11), the vision of "the God of Israel" (24.10), along with the covenant rituals performed by Moses are more central to this pericope.<sup>54</sup> There is no indication that the seventy here are those who reappear in the narrative sequence of Numbers 11.16-30.<sup>55</sup> All in all this text seems to refer to another very different group of elders selected especially for this event that was strongly religious in function.

Num 11.16-30, the main "elders of Israel" passage in the book of Numbers, presents another different group of leaders with a specific role and function that differs from the preceding texts. I argue this in spite of the fact that there are many links between the two passages. Stephen L. Cook has given an extended list:

They share the motif of the burden of the people on Moses, which he cannot bear "alone" (Num 11:14, 17; Exod 18:18), the idea of a selection of leaders from among the people for the relief of Moses (Num 11:16; Exod 18:21, 25), the identical clause וינשאו אתך ("they will share your load"; Num 11:17; Exod 18:22), and a report that Moses carried out the recommended decentralization of his office (Num 11:24-25; Exod 18:27). . . .

Exod 18:13-27 and Num 11:14-30 must be connected. . . . Knierim's objection that Numbers 11 deals with prophetic, not judicial, issues does not carry weight. . . . Numbers 11 involves the reinforcement of the leadership role of lineage heads in Israel. It is specifically the people's "elders and officers" that are singled out to be Mosaic leaders (Num 11:16). And the leadership role of Israel's elders had a significant judicial component, which would be presupposed by the ancient hearers of Numbers. Thus, the tradition of Moses' relief through the appointment of Mosaic elders/judges should be accepted as a common thread linking Numbers 11 and Exodus 18, although the judicial aspect of the tradition was only stressed explicitly in the later text.<sup>56</sup>

Cook's observation concerning the motif of the burden sharing should probably be viewed as a strong point of contact between the two texts,<sup>57</sup> however the tasks which the "elders of Israel" will perform seem to be quite different. The clear indication that in Exod 18 a judicial role is being played, while there is a complete absence of this in Num 11 is telling. Furthermore, in contrast to the rather specific qualifications of Exod 18.22, Num 11.16 only indicates that the helpers of Moses be known by Moses

---

<sup>53</sup> Bovati, *Re-Establishing Justice: Legal Terms, Concepts and Procedures in the Hebrew Bible*, 179-80.

<sup>54</sup> Shigehiro Nagano, "The Elders of Israel in Exodus 24.9-11," *AJBI* 19 (1993), 23-29. Nagano gives an extended discussion of three major themes in the passage, i.e., the covenant making meal, the vision of God in the theophany, and the festive worship of God.

<sup>55</sup> Nagano, "The Elders of Israel in Exodus 24.9-11," 18. Nagano attempts to connect Exod 24.9-11, Ezek 8.11 and Num 11.16ff in light of the 'seventy' elders. Although he, speculates about the term "seventy" being used as a symbolic representation of a "political ruling body," in the Old Testament, ultimately nothing can be definitively identified between the three texts.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen L. Cook, "The Tradition of Mosaic Judges: Past Approaches and New Direction," in *On the Way to Nineveh: Studies in Honor of George M. Landes*, ed. Stephen L. Cook and S. C. Winters (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 291.

<sup>57</sup> Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, 110-11, argues that v. 17b is an editorial addition that secondarily attaches the present text to Exod 18. Once v. 17b is removed and along with v. 11-15 from the flow of 11.16ff. the connection that Cook argues for disappears. However, this level of textual manipulation is highly questionable.

to be "elders of the people and their שטריי. The latter qualification is an interpretative crux that is difficult to interpret. Baruch Levine gives the following standard background to the word:

In Hebrew usage, šōtērīm are so called primarily because they issue written documents or actually write them. This definition emerges for the Akkadian cognate, šatāru 'to write,' as well as from Aramaic šeṭār 'written document'. A title similar to Hebrew šōtēr does not, however, occur either in Akkadian or Aramaic, as far as we know. These same officials figure in the narratives of Exodus and in the laws of Deuteronomy. In 2 Chr 26.11, šōtēr is synonymous with sōpēr 'scribe'.<sup>58</sup>

Moshe Weinfeld capitalizes on this scribal aspect and offers the following as a contextualized function of such a group:

The functions of the šōtēr attached to the judge may be clearly enumerated. The judge was certainly in need of a *secretary* for recording, a *constable* for executive-punitive measures, and a *messenger* or *attendant* for rendering service to the court. In ancient Egypt these functions are clearly illustrated on the wall-drawings: in a scene of the judgment hall, shown on the walls of the tomb of Rekhmire, vizier of Thutmose III, we see rows of scribes on one side and an accused being led by constables to the judgment on the other. Another scene depicts the accused brought before the court on the right side, and three men flogging the accused on the left. These functions are documented in texts from the New Egyptian Kingdom, and especially in those from Deir el Medineh. . . .<sup>59</sup>

Although etymologically the "writing" or "scribal" aspect of the term is dominant, its biblical usage moves beyond a "record keeper." Koehler, Baumgartner and Stamm notes that "according to its usage and literary context it has the sense of civil servant, office holder, and in the plural officials, administrators."<sup>60</sup> It is especially the Exod 5.6, 10, 15, 15, 19 passages with the "foreman over the labour gangs"<sup>61</sup> that may be helpful here. Contextually Moses needed assistance with the people who were complaining and it is just these foremen that could help in the day to day leadership issues. This would clearly differentiate the Exod 18 and Num 11 texts.

Another crucial difference between the two pericopes is the manner in which the elders are initiated. In Num 11.16 they are brought to the "tent of meeting" and then stationed there together with Moses. Then, verse 17:

וירדתי ודברתי עמך שם	Then I will descend and talk with you there
ואצלתי מן-הרוח אשר עליך	and I will take some of the spirit which is on you
ושמתי עליהם	and I will put it on them;
ונשאו אתך במשא העם	and they will bear the burden of the people with you
ולא-תשא אתה לבדך	so that you will not bear it alone

Verse 25 is the parallel text that indicates that all was accomplished:

וירד יהוה בענן וידבר אליו	Then YHWH descended in a cloud and talked with him
ויאצל מן-הרוח אשר עליו	and he took some of the spirit which was on him

<sup>58</sup> Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 323-24.

<sup>59</sup> Weinfeld, "Judge and Officer in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East," 84.

<sup>60</sup> Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Volumes 1-4 combined in one electronic edition (Leiden & New York: E. J. Brill, 1999).

<sup>61</sup> Koehler, Baumgartner, Richardson, and Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*.

ויתן על-שבעים איש הזקנים  
ויהי כנוח עליהם הרוח  
ויתנבאו ולא יספו

and he put it on the seventy men, the elders  
and when the spirit rested on them,  
they prophesied but did not continue

The texts above bristle with problems. What is the nature of the רוח that is referred to here? Is it the empowering רוח יהוה/אלהים seen quite often in the Deuteronomistic Historians work or a term used in a non-technical sense focusing more on Moses than any divine origin?<sup>62</sup> What is the nature of the verb אצל and what effect does it have on the רוח that is on Moses? Are the verbs נתן and שים/שום used as verbs of appointment?<sup>63</sup> These and many other questions are fodder for future studies on this well traversed pericope.

An observation that I would like to make here, however is to focus on the symmetry of the two above verses and what this could tell us about the pericope and the function of these 70 elders. First, it is clear that 17αα, αβ and αγ are in general harmony with 25αα, αβ, αγ. It is with 17βα-β and 25βα-β that an interesting interpretative paralleling may be taking place. Does ויהי כנוח עליהם הרוח parallel וייתנבאו במחנה? This is how the Masoretic accentuation would have us interpret the consonantal text. The רוח resting on them is parallel to the burden of sustaining the people. This would mean that the רוח is not the רוח יהוה/אלהים, but rather the gifting or the responsibility to lead the people. That the elders would then prophecy (ויתנבאו) aligns with the fact that Moses received a calling in the pattern of the classical prophets in Exod 3-4 along with his specific commission to deliver the people. It is the fact that the prophesying is understood as a one-time experience, over against the elders' new responsibility of shouldering the people along with Moses that seems strange. The puzzle continues with the Eldad and Medad incident of 11.26-29. Here prophesying in the encampment (ויתנבאו במחנה), 11.26; 11.27) is obviously seen as a problem by Joshua. It is one that Joshua wants stopped (כלאם), 11.28), which would make them like the other elders in 11.25, since they were part of the originally registered (והמה בכתבים) group. Within the narrative, Moses interprets Joshua's demand as possibly being jealous on Moses' behalf (המקנא תאה לי). Then Moses focuses, not on the eldership that will assist him in shouldering the burden of the people, but offers the possibility that the whole עם

---

<sup>62</sup> See my article "The Spirit of God in the Old Testament," *Koudan* (1992). It has been reformatted and published online at <http://hebrewscripturesandmore.com/CV/Pdf-Articles/SpiritofGodintheOT.pdf>. At the present time I am of the opinion that the רוח should not be identified with the רוח יהוה/אלהים, but rather a more general descriptive use of the term to identify Moses gifting in general. Ze'ev Weisman, "The Personal Spirit as Imparting Authority," *ZAW* 93, no. 2 (1981), 231, states, "The spirit that is conveyed to them from the spirit that is on Moses is meant to have them partake of Moses' authority while also subjecting them to it in a sacred ceremony in which the main performer is God himself."

<sup>63</sup> When נתן and שים/שום are used as verbs of appointment they are usually followed by an accusative with rank. See Bruce K. Walkte and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 175. They cite 1 Sam 8.1; Isa 3.7; Deut 1.15 as examples. I would add Jer 1.5c.

of YHWH be appointed prophets (וּמִי יִתֵּן כָּל־עַם יְהוָה נְבִיאִים).<sup>64</sup> The final כִּי clause could be read as a temporal clause, i.e., "when YHWH would give his spirit on them."<sup>65</sup> Or possibly an asseverative, which originally followed an oath,<sup>66</sup> i.e., "YHWH will indeed give his spirit on them."

Although a quick supposition may be that the כָּל־עַם יְהוָה is synonymous with בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, Levine indicates that the usage of this phrase may be once again slanted toward governance and leadership issues. He finds that in Judg 5.11 and 2 Sam 1.12 the phrase is military. Then he writes, "elsewhere the context pertains to governance, referring to the anointing of a king over all of the people (2 Sam 6:21; 2 Kgs 9:6). The theme of governance also informs Num 17:6, 1 Sam 2:24, and even Zeph 2:10."<sup>67</sup>

Another issue that stands out is the possibility that this passage is referring to a larger non-institutional form of governance in which propheticism performs a social-political service of checks that balance the institutional forms of leadership. The text of Num 12.6b $\alpha$  may be translated, "If there should be a prophet of yours, of Yahweh. (אִם־יְהִיָּה נְבִיאֲכֶם יְהוָה)"<sup>68</sup> This implies that prophets were understood to exist in the narrative depiction of the wilderness. If the poem, 12.6-8 was not original to its present context, then the 2nd person plural may refer to the בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, some leader who utilized a prophetic group not unlike Moses' unique group of seventy elders in 11.16-30 or following the context, specifically Aaron and Miriam.<sup>69</sup> Either way, this text aligns with 11.29 and offers a picture of a large scale prophetic movement.

#### 4. Rebellious Leaders: Korah, Dathan & Abiram, and the 250

The rebellion of Korah depicted in chapters 16-17 plays an archetypal role when it comes to rebellious leaders. The two chapters however are not easy to analyze. The text has become a magnet,

---

<sup>64</sup> See note 62 above. Here the grammatical construction, unlike 11.16 and 11.25, follows the standard for the verb of appointment and the necessary accusative, i.e., "prophets." Furthermore the first clause in 11.29 is an optative clause that utilizes an exclamatory question introduced by the מִי יִתֵּן formula. B. Jongeling, "L'expression *my ytn* dans l'ancien Testament," *VT* 24, no. 1 (1974), 40, presents two conclusions about this formula: "1. L'expression *my ytn* est toujours suivie d'un complément d'objet, soit un objet nominal, soit une proposition-objet. 2. Pour établir le sens de l'expression dans tel ou tel contexte il faut tenir compte des diverses nuances de signification du verbe *ntn*." Therefore the verb of appointment nuance should be considered in this clause: "Would that all the people of Yahweh be appointed prophets!" or as a nominal clause "I wished that all the people of the Lord were prophets!"

<sup>65</sup> The LXX has ὅταν δῶ κύριος τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ ἐπ' αὐτούς, which translates as "whenever the Lord would give his spirit on them."

<sup>66</sup> See Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2nd edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), §449.

<sup>67</sup> Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 326.

<sup>68</sup> See my discussion of this stich in David C. Hymes, "Numbers 12: Of Priests, Prophets, or 'None of the Above,'" *AJBI* 21 (1998), 11. The article may be downloaded from: <http://hebrewscripturesandmore.com/APTS-Subpages/BOT640/Documents/Numbers-12-Paper.pdf>.

<sup>69</sup> See my arguments for going against the scholarly consensus of separating 12.6-8 from its context in chapters 11ff. *ibid.*, 12-13.

gathering several other rebellious factions.<sup>70</sup> Milgrom enumerates the four major rebellions as: "the Levites against Aaron; Dathan and Abiram against Moses; the tribal chieftains against Aaron; and the entire community against Moses and Aaron."<sup>71</sup> I will break up the following discussion according to these four rebellions rather than developing a hypothetical redactional analysis.<sup>72</sup>

In verses 1-4 of chapter 16 the different rebellious leaders are introduced, one after the other. The legitimacy of the leaders may vary. Korah may have a certain level of legitimacy as a Levite, while we cannot be sure of the Reubenites, Dathan and Abiram.<sup>73</sup> It is possible that they were from a military faction, but the evidence is weak.<sup>74</sup> If military, were they elders like those of Exod 18 that combined the role of judge with military leadership? The 250 are described as tribal leaders/chieftains, but chieftains that were somehow deeply integrated into the עדה (נשיאי עדה, 16.2). Moses and Aaron are generally charged with *lèse majesty* against the קהל/עדה by an unspecified act or attitude of "arrogance or presumption."<sup>75</sup>

Korah and a group of Levites are depicted first as pitting themselves against Aaron in 16.5-11. The leadership struggle here is not governance in general, but specifically that of ministerial access, i.e., "to approach" or "to draw near" (√קרב), therefore Aaron and his priesthood (16.10, 11) are the object of their envy. A precedent had been set when the tribal leaders offered gifts and dedicatory offerings and Num 7 could have been the narratological thorn. The root used to describe this was קרב, thus possibly opening the door to an irritant in which Korah and his disaffected cohorts secede from the עדה of Israel and establish their own. Milgrom has differentiated the two עדות by pointing out that the עדה of Israel in these chapters are designated by a definite article or lack the clarifying pronominal suffix that is used

---

<sup>70</sup> See Davies, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Numbers*, 162-68 for a summary of the redactional history of chapter 16. See also George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 156-84.

<sup>71</sup> Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 129. Risto Nurmela, *The Levites: Their Emergence as a Second-Class Priesthood*, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism, no. 193 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 129 divides Num 16 into only three groupings: "Three different formations can thus be discerned in Numbers 16: a rebellion against Moses, a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, and a rebellion against Aaron, whereby Moses acts as a neutral judge who lets Yahweh settle the quarrel."

<sup>72</sup> Jacob Milgrom, "The Rebellion of Korah, Numbers 16-18: A Study in Tradition History," in *Society of Biblical Literature: 1988 Seminar Papers*, SBL Seminar Paper Series, no. 27. ed. David Lull (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 570-573.

<sup>73</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 134-35, notes that the Korahites and Reubenites were encamped in close proximity, therefore possibly accounting for their joint contention. Scholars utilizing source analysis tend to divide the groups according to the JE and P sources. This then would place the contentions in different time periods.

<sup>74</sup> H. S. Nahmani in Magonet, "The Korah Rebellion," 8, argues that Dathan and Abiram were from a military faction that was staging a coup in light of the failed attempt to go up into Palestine (14.40-45). His main evidence is that in 16.27 they are described as coming out of their tents and "taking their stand" (יצאי נצבים פתח אהליהם).

<sup>75</sup> Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 412.

for Korah's עֲדָה.<sup>76</sup>

The narrative does not indicate that the Levites that were accompanying Korah were judged. Moses' retort in 16.8-11 may have been sufficient to have checked their revolt. The concluding episode concerning the staff of the tribal leaders (Num 17.16-35 [17.1-13]) may function as a chiasmic closure to their complaints. However, if so, its conclusion is ambiguous since it was not a test on a sub-tribal level within the Levites.

The second rebellion episode is between Dathan, Abiram and Moses in Num 16.12-15. Unlike Korah and his levitical עֲדָה, Dathan and Abiram are not present and are summoned by Moses. They defiantly refuse this summons ( לֹא נֵעֲלֶה , 16.12, 14). The struggle is a governance issue since they refuse Moses' summons,<sup>77</sup> contests his guidance in the wilderness (16.13) and his leadership style is questioned (כִּי־תִשְׁתַּרְר עֲלֵינוּ גַם־הַשְׁתַּרְר).<sup>78</sup> The Hithpa'el of the verb שָׁרַר that is used here indicates that Dathan and Abiram charged Moses with "elevating himself to a higher position of authority over the people."<sup>79</sup> Milgrom claims that the form of this verb connotes "playing or pretending to be the lord."<sup>80</sup> This is not the first time that such accusation against Moses has been made (Exod 2.14 the noun שָׁר is used here). According to Dathan and Abiram, Moses had failed in his promise to bring the people to a land flowing with milk and honey,<sup>81</sup> therefore he has been deceiving them<sup>82</sup> and should be removed from leadership.<sup>83</sup> The affirmation of Moses' leadership and the rejection of Dathan and Abiram's charges are ultimately recorded in Num 16.27-34. It is important to note that it was a divine act, i.e., "the earth opened up its mouth and swallowed them up" (וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת־פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם) (16.32a). It is usually deduced that Korah being mentioned in 16.27, met his demise along with Dathan and Abiram.

The third episode, Num 16.16-18, focuses on Korah as a leader of the 250 tribal leaders who were introduced in 16.2. The use of the censers as a test tends to blur the dividing line between the Levites of

---

<sup>76</sup> Milgrom, "Priestly Terminology and the Political and Social Structure of Pre-Monarchic Israel," 71-72. Korah's עֲדָה is found in 16.5, 6, 11, 16; 17.5, while Israel's עֲדָה is found in 16.19, 21, 22, 24, 24; 17.6, 7, 10, 11.

<sup>77</sup> Magonet, "The Korah Rebellion," 18.

<sup>78</sup> Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness*, 178. Coats writes, "the complaint has nothing to do with the issue of the Exodus but with a problem of Moses' authority over the people."

<sup>79</sup> Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness*, 165.

<sup>80</sup> Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 133.

<sup>81</sup> See Nurmela, *The Levites: Their Emergence as a Second-Class Priesthood*, 132-33.

<sup>82</sup> The meaning of "Would you put out the eyes of these men?" (וַיִּכְרַם הָעֵינִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָהֵם תִּנְקָרָם) is obscure. Does it mean that Moses is accused of bribery (Coats, 165), hoodwinking (Milgrom, 134), punishing the people as "runaway slaves, prisoners, and rebellious vassals" (so Levine, 414)?

<sup>83</sup> Timothy Ashely, *The Book of Numbers*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 303 suggest that the contention was the the Reubenites "felt slighted that the rights of the firstborn had been lost . . ." Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 424, sees the problem as a "Transjordanian dispute and to Moses' insistence that all of the tribes take part in the conquest of Canaan, west of Jordan."

16.5-11 and these chieftains.<sup>84</sup> This interpretative problem may be artificial and caused by an inappropriate division between secular – governance issues and the sacred – religious struggles.<sup>85</sup> The rebellion of the 250 is concluded by a notification that they were incinerated (16.35a-bα). The issue of "approach" (קרבן), continued from chapter 7 may be behind their contentions since the root appears frequently in their execution and the disposal of the censers.

The fourth episode (16.19-22) is initiated by Korah in his attempted coup. He assembles, not just his own עדה, but in 16.19 and 22 it is the true Israelite עדה. They are an important and legitimate governing body, but one wonders if their Achilles heel is not their susceptibility to mass hysteria with their collective constitution. As a whole they lack culpability and therefore they are made to separate themselves from Korah's עדה (העדה הזאת, 16.21aβ). The עדה is spared in 16.23-27a, only to respond negatively to Moses and Aaron in 17.1-15 (16.36-50) and thereby incur their own deserved divine punishment. It is poetic justice that Aaron and his censer stand at the line of demarcation between those who would live and those who would die, thereby affirming once again Aaron's divine appointment.

The overall thrust of the narrative of Korah's rebellion is one of rejection of divine leadership. The spheres of the sacred (priestly hierarchy) and secular (governance hierarchy) are intertwined and contested. The tests via censers and staff are not normative means of testing the validity of leadership. The punishment of earth swallowing up the obstinate or being incinerated are outside the normal purview of disciplinary activity. It ultimately argues that generally speaking, Moses and Aaron must be placed outside the parameters of a repeatable model of leadership legitimation.<sup>86</sup>

## 5. Miriam & Aaron

Aaron's divine appointment as the head of the tribe of Levi and the priesthood has a core component that resists general application. In Num 3.6 the Levites are to stand (עמדו) before Aaron and serve him

---

<sup>84</sup> Nurmela, *The Levites: Their Emergence as a Second-Class Priesthood*, 131, argues that 250 is a rather low number for a major rebellion when compared with the 603,400 figure of Num 1.46 and the 14,700 take die in Num 17.14. Therefore, "the figure 250 might be appropriate to an account about tensions within the priesthood. Thus it might, in fact, reflect historical circumstances, at least concerning the number of Levites who opposed the Aaronic priests."

<sup>85</sup> Martin Noth, "Office and Vocation in the Old Testament," in *The Laws in the Pentateuch and other studies*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (London: SCM Press, 1966), 229-30 writes: "In the ancient Near East . . . - and this is especially true of the Old Testament – the spheres of the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the worldly, the divine and the human, were not separated off from one another. A separate set of laws for the "worldly" institutions and offices could not have existed. This is particularly true since Old Testament belief recognizes no order or events on earth which are not created by God, and over whose history God has not stood as Lord. In Old Testament belief one had to be constantly aware of God's direct and unexpected action."

<sup>86</sup> Philip J. Budd, *Numbers: Word Biblical Commentary*, Volume 5, electronic edition (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1984), argues that 16.1-35 was actually used to justify the establishment of a post-exilic priestly hierarchy. The above argument based on the uniqueness of Moses and Aaron would make such application within post-exilic struggles hard to sustain.

(וּשְׂרָתוֹ אֹהֶל). His family becomes a priestly dynasty that receives special treatment (Num 3.2-3). They have exclusive rights to ministry (שְׂמֵרָה), while others are prohibited to approach (קִרְבָּה). At the same time, there are some aspects within the narrative depictions of Aaron that can be applied without twisting basic exegetical principles, however they tend to be negative rather than positive.

In the book of Numbers, chapter 12 stands out.<sup>87</sup> Here it is both Aaron and Miriam that are contesting the singular authority of Moses with two complaints. It seems Miriam takes the lead in speaking against<sup>88</sup> Moses and his Cushite wife in 12.1, while 12.2 focuses on Moses' monopoly of divine revelation.<sup>89</sup> Both of these complaints are heard by YHWH (12.2b וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה). In 12.4-5 the three leaders are summoned to the "tent of meeting" (אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד), not to be confused with the Tabernacle.

Several pericopes with events taking place at this "tent of meeting" form a thematic cluster that is called the "old Tent of Meeting" tradition,<sup>90</sup> that is helpful in interpreting the leadership significance of this pericope. The primary texts are Exod 33.7-11; Num 11.14-17, 24-30; Num 12, but Tryggve Mettinger suggest that Deut 31.14-15; Josh 18.1; 19.51; 1 Sam 2.22; 2 Sam 6.17; 1 Kgs 8.4 may be added.<sup>91</sup> Erhard Blum includes some verses from Exod 34 along with Deut 34.10-12.<sup>92</sup> These texts have recurrent elements according to Blum:

- 1) Der Ohel Mo'ed: Ex 33,7-11 (A); 34,34f. (B); Nu 11,16 (C); Nu 12,4ff. (D); Dtn 31,14f. (E).
- 2) Jhwhs Herkommen (יֵרֵד) in der Wolkensäule (עַמֻּוֹד הָעָנָן): Ex 33,9f. (A); 34,5 (B); Nu 11, 25 (C); 12,5.[10] (D); Dtn 31,14f. (MT: נִרְאָה statt יֵרֵד) (E).
- 3) Moses »face-to-face« - Umgang mit Gott: Ex 33,11 (A); 34,5ff.29b (B); Nu 12,8 (D); Dtn 34,10 (F).
- 4) Mose und die Prophetie/Propheten: Nu 11 (C); 12 (D); Dtn 34,10 (F).
- 5) Josua, Gehilfe (מֹשֶׁרֶת) und Nachfolger Moses: Ex 33,11 (A); Nu 11,28 (C); Dtn 31,14f.23 (E)<sup>93</sup>

Mettinger enumerates the following:

It is located outside of the camp. Its function is non-cultic. Neither sacrifice nor priests are named, nor is the Ark; rather, this Tent functions in connection with oracular consultations. A theophany takes place at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting; here the divinity descends (yārad), and the murky cloud (‘ānān) is the vehicle of communication. The theophany is concluded when the cloud "removed [sūr] from over the Tent." God is

<sup>87</sup> Critical scholarship has tended to argue that the negative depictions of Aaron are earlier, while the later sources are more positive. The golden calf incident of Exod 32 would be another so-called earlier text. I have argued against the use of the standard source critical analysis in Num 12 and suggested reading it within the context of the so-called "old Tent of Meeting" tradition. See Hymes, "Numbers 12: Of Priests, Prophets, or "None of the Above," 17-25. The most exhaustive treatment of Numbers 12 is Ursula Rapp, *Mirjam: Eine feministisch-rhetorische Lektüre der Mirjamtexte in der hebräischen Bibel*, BZAW, no. 317 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 31-193.

<sup>88</sup> Naomi G. Cohen, "דָּבָר . . . ב'": An Enthusiastic Prophetic Formula," *ZAW* 99, no. 2 (1987), 220 argues that the formula ב' . . . דָּבָר, used here "refers to the content of an 'enthusiastic' prophetic experience - i.e. that this is a *terminus technicus* for a specific type of the first stage of prophetic experience."

<sup>89</sup> Rapp, *Mirjam*, 126

<sup>90</sup> See Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, BZAW, no. 189 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 76-88.

<sup>91</sup> Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies*, Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 18, (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1982), 81.

<sup>92</sup> Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, 76.

<sup>93</sup> Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, 76.

not constantly present in the Tent; rather, the idea represented is a sort of rendezvous-theology.<sup>94</sup>

As I argued back in 1998,<sup>95</sup> my contention is that, although the Num 11.14-17, 24-30 pericope includes the strong notion of prophecy and Num 12.6 specifically mentions prophets, neither Exod 33.7-11 nor Deut 31.14-15 highlight this arena. Instead, the texts deal with political realities. In Exod 33.7, 8, and 10 the pericope emphasizes that there were observers (כל-העם, כל-עם, כל-מבקש יהוה), while in Exod 33.11, Joshua would not leave the tent site. These "public" acts affirmed Moses' unique leadership role. The pericope being written in a "frequentative" format sets the stage to understand "what customarily happened at the tent of meeting."<sup>96</sup> In Num 11.14-17, 24-30, it is not the prophesying, but the initiation of the designated elders that necessitated the congregating at the tent of meeting. The prophesying is described as a one time act (ויתנבאו ולא יספור) and therefore secondary to receiving a portion of the רוח. The very fact that Eldad and Medad can prophesy within the camp implies that the tent of meeting is not necessarily a prophetic loci. Moses' response to Joshua, "Are you jealous for my sake" (המקנא אתה לי) highlights the political nature of their actions. While the enigmatic phrase, "Would that all of Yahweh's people were prophets, and that Yahweh would put his spirit on them!" detaches prophesying from the tent. I would agree with Philip J. Budd's observation that "in both components - the elders and the activity of Eldad and Medad – there is evidently a concern that possession of the spirit should play its part in the professional institutions, represented by the elders, and in the charisma of men freely raised by God to declare word."<sup>97</sup> However, his conjecture that "for the Yahwist a leadership which has no place for the prophetic insights is doomed to be misled,"<sup>98</sup> goes too far. Wonsuk Ma answers this contention, "One can say the manifestation is purely symbolic rather than functional, since they are not to be prophets."<sup>99</sup>

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

Returning to Numbers 12, the contention that Miriam and Aaron bring up deals with Moses' being the one through whom Yahweh speaks. The issue is not prophetic authorization, since neither Miriam

---

<sup>94</sup> Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies*, 81-82.

<sup>95</sup> Hymes, "Numbers 12: Of Priests, Prophets, or "None of the Above," 22-24.

<sup>96</sup> Thomas W. Mann, *Divine Presence and Guidance in Israelite Traditions: The Typology of Exaltation*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 144.

<sup>97</sup> Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 5, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), 126-27.

<sup>98</sup> Budd, *Numbers*, 130.

<sup>99</sup> Wonsuk Ma, *The Spirit (רוח) of God in the Book of Isaiah and Its Eschatological Significance*, (Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1996), 89.

nor Aaron should be considered prophets per se.<sup>100</sup> The issue is Moses' unique leadership role which in its present literary context was meant to be highlighted as superior to the 70 elders, Miriam and Aaron. Even the justification for the punishment of Miriam places Moses in the role of father verses Miriam as child (Num 12.14).

Ursula Rapp has recently protested that I have viewed these tent of meeting texts too narrowly, focusing singularly on the "political." Rapp has correctly indicated that prophecy and specifically revelation (*Offenbarung*) does integrally relate to the leadership conflict in this pericope.<sup>101</sup> The issue should not be taken as an either/or, the revelatory is a function in both Mosaic leadership (which will be discussed below) and in the contentions of Miriam and Aaron.

The inappropriate challenge to Moses ultimately did not disqualify Miriam and Aaron from a continuance of their leadership roles. The recording of Miriam's death in Num 20.1, right before the critical "Waters of Meribah" (20.2-13) debacle is significant, since Aaron's death report<sup>102</sup> quickly follows the same pericope in 20.22-29. Both of these death notifications play a significant structural role in the narrative, as they follow the ritual for purification from death defilement in chapter 19.<sup>103</sup>

Miriam's death redactionally functions as a "warning to Moses and Aaron. Nevertheless both of them miss it."<sup>104</sup> What does this death report tell us about Miriam? Rita Burns has ventured the following suggestions:

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

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

Thirdly, in placing this early notice of Miriam's death and burial in Numbers 20 (instead of with another

---

<sup>100</sup> Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*, SBL Dissertation Series 84, (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1987), 79: "Regarding the biblical portrait of Miriam as prophetess, I conclude that, although Miriam figures prominently in Num 12.2-9 as an oracular figure, her role there is not specifically a prophetic one. Neither is her activity which is described in Exod 15.20-21 specifically prophetic. When it is said, then, that Miriam was called a prophetess, it must at the same time be admitted that the title is probably anachronistic and hence does not shed much light at all on the portrait of Miriam in the scriptures."

<sup>101</sup> See Rapp, *Mirjam*, 162, where she writes: "Hymes kann allerdings diesen vermeintlichen Gegensatz zwischen politischem und prophetischem Interesse kaum begründen. Er behauptet, es gehe den AutorInnen um die alleinige Autorität des Mose, die aber nichts mit Prophetie zu tun habe. Dem lässt sich nur der Textbefund entgegenhalten, denn die AutorInnen verbinden die politische Führung eben gerade schon mit der Frage nach Prophetie, was nur daran liegen kann, dass die Führung etwas mit Offenbarung bzw. ihrer Auslegung oder anders mit Toraauslegung und Toraaufentötung zu tun hat. So gesehen erhält die Frage nach der Prophetie einen zentralen Ort im Konflikt um die Führung Israels."

<sup>102</sup> On Num 20.22-29 as a "Death Report" rather than a "report of commissioning" for Eleazar, see Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 235.

<sup>103</sup> See Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 463-467, where he parallels the structure of chapter 21 with chapter 22. The theme, "failure of the leaders" is followed in chapter 22 with the failure of the people and their deliverance.

<sup>104</sup> Aaron Scharf, *Mose und Israel im Konflikt: Eine Redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie Zu Den Wüstenerzählungen*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, no. 98 (Freiburg, Schwiez & Göttingen: Universitätsverlag & Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 113. See also Rapp, *Mirjam*, 233.

reference to Kadesh) a late writer (editor) implicitly contributes to the tradition that Miriam was a leader of some import in the wilderness community. It can hardly be accidental that, in the texts as they now stand the deaths of Miriam, Aaron and Moses coincide with the last three stops on the wilderness journey.

Finally, Martin Noth has written that "a grave tradition usually gives the most reliable indication of the original provenance of a particular figure of tradition." If this is true (and, to my knowledge it has not been refuted in recent scholarship), then the notice which appears in Num 20.1b most likely indicates that the Hebrew tradition about Miriam had its starting point at Kadesh. At the very least, it can be said that early (and probably authentic tradition firmly linked Miriam with Kadesh, an important shrine for the wilderness generation of Israelites.<sup>105</sup>

Although the exact nature of Miriam's leadership role is hard to decipher, enough is given in the Wilderness narratives to indicate a powerful presence. On the other hand, it is not difficult to weigh the considerable role of Aaron as the anointed priest.<sup>106</sup> As has already been touched on, Aaron's special role in approaching YHWH was defended against the Levites, Korah and the 250 leaders in chapters 16-17. Beyond this, the crucial pericopes in Numbers are 20.1-13, which deals with the sin of Moses and Aaron and 20.22-29, Aaron's death report.

Jacob Milgrom makes reference to the fact that Num 20.1-13 "has been regarded as one of the Gordian knots of the Bible."<sup>107</sup> One of the more intriguing puzzles in this pericope is the identification of the sin of Aaron, which leads to his demise. Num 20.24b indicates that "because you (plural) rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah" (על אשר-מרייתם את-פי למי מריבה); see also Num 27.14); while earlier in Num 20.12, we read: "Then YHWH said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you (plural) did not believe me (האמנתם) to sanctify me (להקדישני) in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you (plural) shall not lead (תביאו) this assembly (הקהל הזה) into the land that I have given them." In the context of both of these verses Aaron's judgment seems to be based on his association with Moses and not a specific act on his part.<sup>108</sup> The Masoretic Text of 20.2-13, however is not so clean cut, and thereby has fostered complex source critical and redactional studies.<sup>109</sup> The oscillation between

---

<sup>105</sup> Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*, 119-20.

<sup>106</sup> Daniel Fleming, "The Biblical Tradition of Anointing Priests, *JBL* 117, no. 3 (1998), 401-14, argues against the critical consensus that the "anointed priest" was a post-exilic adaptation of the anointing of kings. He evidences ancient Near Eastern parallels and also identifies "two dissimilar rites" of anointing as depicted in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8.

<sup>107</sup> Jacob Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism and the Sin of Moses," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, ed. H. B. Huffmon, F. A. Spina and A. R. W. Green (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 251. Milgrom's article gives an excellent review of the older Jewish interpretations along with modern scholarship. Johnson Lim, "A Fresh Perspective on a Familiar Problem," *Henoch* 19 (1997), 161-63 continues the summary of scholarship.

<sup>108</sup> William H. Propp, "The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses," *JBL* 107, no. 1 (1988), 24. Propp, writing about what he understands as the P author, states, "evidently, he wrote Aaron into the story just enough to implicate him by association. Although Aaron does nothing wrong, the misuse of his own rod by his brother taints him as if by sympathetic magic, and thus Moses causes the death of Aaron." Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Theological and Redactional Problems in Numbers 20.2-13," in *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard Anderson*, ed. James T. Butler, Edgar W. Conrad and Ben C. Ollenburger, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 37 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 133, states as the thesis of the article "that the relationship between Moses and Aaron is a focal concern of Numbers 20.2-13 and that a number of theological and redactional problems associated with the passage can at least be comprehended, if not solved, by keeping this focal concern at the forefront."

<sup>109</sup> See M. Margalio, "The Transgression of Moses and Aaron – Num. 20.1-13," *JQR* 74, no. 2 (1983), 196-228, who attempts to deal with the text without making source critical divisions. However, his harmonistic approach loses credibility

the singular and plural number throughout the text shifts the onus from Moses to both Moses and Aaron.<sup>110</sup> Although Moses is the one that strikes the rock (20.11a), it is both Aaron and Moses that assembled the assembly (הקהל)<sup>111</sup> and spoke to them in a defamatory manner, "Listen, you rebels (המררים), shall we bring out water for you from this rock?" (20.10b).<sup>112</sup> It is more than ironic that Aaron and Moses have called the קהל rebellious, when in fact their words and deeds amounted to rebellion. Is it possible that part of the sin of Moses and Aaron involved an inappropriate accusation against the collective legal body? Is it not possible that the "not sanctifying" (קדש√) YHWH before the בני ישראל involved the breach of the governance infrastructure of the wilderness community? A breach that had no valid basis when Moses and Aaron had been charged with it in Num 16.3,<sup>113</sup> but now, they are guilty as charged. Furthermore, if the intended rod that was supposed to be taken and made visible to the קהל was Aaron's rod of Num 17,<sup>114</sup> then the striking of the rock by Moses with this rod would have further implicated him and Aaron for allowing Moses to use it.

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

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

Whatever our modern opinions about the gravity of some specific action, P understood what transpired as disbelief and as a failure to sanctify God before the people. For God's chosen leadership, no sin could be more serious than that which by lack of trust impedes God's mercy to the community. The tragic and painful warning which P offers to Israel's leadership in the crisis of the exile echoes down through the ages and stands as reminder even to us today. For the sake of the people, God needs faithful leadership. Because God cares for the people,

---

when he proposes that the plural verbs in 20.4, 5 refer to Moses and YHWH rather than Moses and Aaron. (See, pages 203-4).

<sup>110</sup> Plurals or both Aaron and Moses are referred to in verses: 2, 4, 5, 6 (although the first verb in the verse is singular the actual subject is both Aaron and Moses), 8aβ (Both Moses and Aaron are to speak to the rock!), 10, 12; the singular with Moses or specifically name on Moses as the referent is used in verses: 3, 7 (YHWH addresses only to Moses), 8aα (The second part commands both Aaron and Moses with a singular verb.), 8b (The bringing out water out of rock and giving it out to drink is in the singular.), 9, 11.

<sup>111</sup> I understand the קהל and the עדה to be basically synonymous in the book of Numbers. Both therefore should be understood as the collective governing body.

<sup>112</sup> Lohfink, "Original Sins in the Priestly Historical Narratives," 113-14, argues that the sin of Aaron and Moses is that of "lack of faith and trust," based on verses 10 and 12. Sakenfeld, "Theological and Redactional Problems in Numbers 20.2-13," 147-50; Eugene Arden, "How Moses Failed God," *JBL* 76 (1957), 50-52; and M Margalio, "The Transgression of Moses and Aaron," 211-21, all find the sin of Aaron and Moses in the words that were spoken.

<sup>113</sup> Note the use of קדש√ and the combination of עדה and קהל in 16.3.

<sup>114</sup> Propp, "The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses," 22-23.

unfaithful leadership, especially any leadership which disdains or disparages the flock, will not finally endure.<sup>115</sup>

## 6. Moses

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

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

The narrators of these stories picture Moses' life as an ongoing effort to educate and lead the people along a divinely ordained path, in accordance with directives communicated to him from time to time by God. They seem to be occupied more with Moses' failures – which were numerous and frequent – than with his successes; but in the final analysis these failures add up to a monumental success: an entire nation was subject to the rule of its divine king and opened its hearts to His words and His commandments. Balancing the narrators' inner fervor was a tendency to theological reflection, thanks to which they refrained from projecting Moses into the realm of the mythical and the superhuman, as happened so commonly to the legendary heroes of other nations.<sup>116</sup>

The centrality of Moses' failures are incontestable, however, it would be wrong to view the stories as utilizing the classic *deus ex machina*, in some mechanical way. Ari Zivotofsky, for example offers a series of "preselection" stories (Exod 2.11-12, 13-14, 15-19; 3.1-4) in which Moses is depicted as the ideal candidate to lead the בני ישראל out of Egypt and through the wilderness. He understands that there is a common theme that can be pieced together from these texts, i.e., "Moses is consistently portrayed as not only caring and concerned for others, but also as willing and ready to act upon those feelings. He was the true Empath."<sup>117</sup> Zivotofsky is not alone in this type of analysis. George Coats earlier wrote concerning Exod 2.11-22 that the intention of the pericope was to describe:

... the heroic Moses in order to depict his leadership as an event that unites leader and led in a very intimate bond. The leader does not simply tolerate the people who live under his care. This shepherd of the sheep identifies with his people so that their suffering becomes his suffering, their cry for redemption his cry.<sup>118</sup>

The birth story in Exod 2.1-10 may be even more proleptic. Scholarship has attempted to interpret this pericope based on the birth of Sargon of Akkad.<sup>119</sup> Putting to the side Brevard Child's view that the *Vorlage* of the story is "the common ancient custom of exposing the unwanted children,"<sup>120</sup> Coats

<sup>115</sup> Sakenfeld, "Theological and Redactional Problems in Numbers 20.2-13," 151.

<sup>116</sup> Benjamin Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel*, trans. David Louvish (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1999), 197.

<sup>117</sup> Ari Z. Zivotofsky, "The Leadership Qualities of Moses," *Judaism* 43, no. 3 (1994), 259.

<sup>118</sup> George W. Coats, "Moses as a Model for Ministry: An Exegesis of Exodus 2.11-22," in *The Moses Tradition*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 161 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 112. Also see his earlier article, George W. Coats, "The Birth Tale & the Midianite Tradition," in *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 57 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 49-53.

<sup>119</sup> Beginning with Hugo Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoe & Ruprecht, 1913), 1-16. See also the significant article by Brevard S. Childs, "The Birth of Moses," *JBL* 84, no. 2 (1965): 109-122. More recently James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 136-138, provides an important update.

<sup>120</sup> Childs, "The Birth of Moses," 110.

proposes that this "birth-adoption tale" of Moses qualifies as a heroic tale because the child is identified with his people.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, "the tale is heroic because of the mood of anxiety that threatens the birth of the child, a mood broken only by the careful planning of the child's family and, of course, the stroke of fortune which the audience can understand as the hand of God."<sup>122</sup> Moses therefore is ushered into the narrative as a leader of heroic proportions, called to save the בני ישראל.

It is this leader, with heroic potentials that stands out in graphic realism, when he is portrayed as repeatedly failing. Once again, Coats has captured this aspect, the failure in Moses' ministry from the get-go, in Exod 5, well. He understands Moses' first attempt to accomplish the task to deliver the בני ישראל as a gross failure,<sup>123</sup> one in which the people go as far as to bring a suit against him, therefore Moses and YHWH are viewed as having failed.<sup>124</sup> However, and this is the crucial element in Coats' proposition concerning Moses as a failure. He writes:

When the failure occurs, the hero goes back to the drawing board and creates a new plan. And then he tries again. Indeed, the hero receives a new plan from the hand of God. When God's plan for saving the people fail, then God tries a new plan. The hero demonstrates the tenacity of God to pursue the plan of salvation despite repeated failures in the plan.<sup>125</sup>

This pattern is heavily concentrated through Exod 10, but it takes on a paradigmatic stature for Coats. "This pattern of failure and renewed effort to gain success by approaching the issue from a new direction marks the entire history of God's efforts to save the people."<sup>126</sup> This then is the picture of Moses in the book of Numbers as well. His heroism is based on his empathetic care for the בני ישראל along with a cycle of failures and renewed efforts. The harsh stories of confrontation with all levels of governance, i.e., the עדה, tribal leaders/chieftains, the elders, the rebellious faction with Korah, some Levites, Dathan and Abiram, the 250 tribal leaders, Miriam and Aaron, all may be understood within this paradigm. The clash-point may not always be as dramatic as those already discussed. The intriguing Zelophehad's daughters episodes (Num 27.1-11; 36.1-12) are a case-in-point for a less volatile failure and regrouping process. The initial issue was "the question of the preservation of the father's name (chap. 27),"<sup>127</sup> which will be followed by "the question of property rights (chap. 36)."<sup>128</sup> Both of these issues had not been foreseen by Moses the leader and even more crucial, the second, in spite of the oracular decision (27.5ff.) had not been foreseen. The processing of a renewed plan based

<sup>121</sup> Coats, "The Birth Tale & the Midianite Tradition," 47.

<sup>122</sup> Coats, "The Birth Tale & the Midianite Tradition," 47-8.

<sup>123</sup> George W. Coats, "The Failure of the Hero: Moses as a Model for Ministry," in *The Moses Tradition*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 161 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 116-122.

<sup>124</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 259, on the other hand, views Moses' failure in Exod 5 as possibly caused by "Moses' inattention to his instruction."

<sup>125</sup> Coats, "The Failure of the Hero: Moses as a Model for Ministry," 120-21.

<sup>126</sup> Coats, "The Failure of the Hero: Moses as a Model for Ministry," 122.

<sup>127</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Zelophehad's Daughters," *Perspectives of Religious Studies* 14, no. 5 (1988), 40.

<sup>128</sup> Sakenfeld, "Zelophehad's Daughters," 40.

on oracular consultation was necessary in this harmonious inquiry.

An untapped area of research that may be applicable to the study of Moses' leadership is both Moses' laments and his intercessory prayers as presented in the Pentateuchal narratives. It is in light of Moses' first "on-the-job" failure (Exod 5) that he begins to lament and intercede (Exod 5.22-23). It may be argued that the lamenting and/or intercession are an important first step toward a renewed plan. The rubric here is that of a "loyal opposition," in contrast to a disloyal revolutionary. Coats, for example reflects on Moses' role in Exod 32-34 and writes, "the tradition presents Moses as a creative innovator who defends his people at the risk of the favor he holds with God. The basis of the relationship is, to be sure, a mutual *trust*. And out of the assumptions established by the trust, God apparently takes the audacious intercession as the work of a loyal devotee, a loyal servant."<sup>129</sup>

Two of what may be considered the most important verses to understand Moses' leadership as depicted in the book of Numbers are 12.3 and 12.6-8. The first, 12.3 "Now the man, Moses was exceedingly miserable more than any human being on the surface of the earth." I have followed Cleon Rogers in translating עני as "miserable." He has subjected the word to an etymological, overall biblical usages and contextual investigation. He concludes that the "meaning of the word and its specific context make it appear that the best understanding of Num 12.3 is that Moses was saying that in light of the burden of the people and the complaint of his family he was the most "miserable" person in the world."<sup>130</sup> Coats also finds the translation "meek" as problematic. He sees it as incongruous with the depiction of Moses when confronted by opposition to his leadership, especially in Numbers 16.<sup>131</sup> He argues that the root ʿnw connoted "responsibility or integrity,"<sup>132</sup> and it implies a loyalty to God in leadership. He concludes this study with three theological implications:

- (i) The legendary quality of leadership exemplified by Moses does not call for a deficiency of spirit and courage,

---

<sup>129</sup> George W. Coats, "The King's Loyal Opposition: Obedience and Authority in Exodus 32-34," in *The Moses Tradition*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 161 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 73. For further study in this area see: Samuel E. Balentine, "The Prophet as Intercessor: A Reassessment," *JBL* 103, no. 2 (1984), 161-73; Samuel E. Balentine, "Prayer in the Wilderness Traditions: In Pursuit of Divine Justice," *HAR* 9 (1985), 53-74; Samuel E. Balentine, "Prayer for Justice in the Old Testament: Theodicy and Theology," *CBQ* 51, no. 4 (1989), 597-616; Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 262-280; Michael Widmer, *Moses, God and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer: A Study of Exodus 32-34 and Numbers 13-14*, *Forschung zum Alten Testament*, no. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

<sup>130</sup> Cleon Rogers, "Moses: Meek or Miserable?" *JETS* 29, no. 3 (1986), 263. Rogers also explains the translation as "meek" as derived from the LXX πρᾶύς which has a broader semantic range. This combined with its usage in Zech 9.9 and the later development in Judaism, forged the notion: "Humility was a noble quality, and Moses was an important person in Judaism." N.B. Stephen B. Dawes, "Numbers 12.3: What was special about Moses?" *The Bible Translator* 41, no. 3 (1990), 336-340 argues for the traditional rendering. While Edgar Kellenberger, "Der Geplagte Mose: Plädoyer für ein nicht-moralisierendes Verständnis von נָנִי und πρᾶύς," *Protokolle zur Bibel* 6 (1997), 81-86 blames moralizing/spiritualizing tendencies in translations that inable them to follow the etymological and contextual evidence.

<sup>131</sup> George W. Coats, "Humility and Honor: A Moses Legend in Numbers 12," in *The Moses Tradition*, JSOT Supplement Series, no. 161 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 89.

<sup>132</sup> Coats, "Humility and Honor: A Moses Legend in Numbers 12," 92.

a meek, retiring, unassertive leadership. It calls rather for a strong, effective, responsible leadership. (ii) That leadership is not a strong silent type. Rather, it involves articulation of needs among the led. (iii) Loyalty within the scope of such leadership belongs to God. But loyalty to God means loyalty in responsibility to the hero's people. Moses does not show his obedience to God by a meek acceptance of Miriam's punishment as the obvious will of God. To the contrary, his obedience emerges only when he stands face to face with God and defends his own.<sup>133</sup>

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

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

- A. Please<sup>134</sup> Hear my words!
- B. If there should be a prophet of yours, of Yahweh,<sup>135</sup>
- C. In a vision, I will make myself known to him,
- D. In a dream, I will speak to him.
- E. Not so my servant Moses,
- E'. In all my house, he is most faithful.
- D'. Mouth to Mouth, I speak to him,
- C'. In clarity<sup>136</sup> and not in riddles,
- B'. But he looks on the form of Yahweh.
- A'. Why were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

This poem centers on the revelatory levels that are found in the prophetic, differentiating the degrees of revelation. Line B which I have translated, "If there should be a prophet of yours, of Yahweh" is most interesting. It is generally contextually presumed that the prophets mentioned are Miriam and Aaron.<sup>137</sup> However, I would argue that Miriam and Aaron are instead represented by the second person, masculine plural suffix, i.e. "of yours." In this case, Miriam and Aaron are viewed as Israelite leaders who rely on their own community of prophets. In this way Miriam and Aaron's use of their own prophetic advisers are contrasted with the direct and deeper level of revelation that is imparted to Moses. There is insufficient evidence to fully develop the role in governance that this prophetic system

<sup>133</sup> Coats, "Humility and Honor: A Moses Legend in Numbers 12," 98.

<sup>134</sup> Timothy Wilt, "A Sociolinguistic Analysis of NĀ'," *VT*, 46, (1996), pp. 237-255, has argued that the particle nā' "is indeed a politeness marker" that should be translated by the English "please." However, in the case of šim 'û nā' in Numbers a difference is noted. He writes, "all the Numbers speech situations, that nā' is being used by a divine or political superior that normally would not use nā' in addressing his subjects, nā' seems to be used sarcastically. . . ." pp. 254-255.

<sup>135</sup> This line which reads אִם-יִהְיֶה נְבִיאָכֶם יְהוָה, literally "if your prophet was Yahweh," is obviously corrupted. Although Freedman (David Noel Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy*, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1980), p. 167. Originally, "Early Israelite Poetry and Historical Reconstructions," *Symposia Celebrating the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research (1900-1975)*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1979), 237), has attempted to understand it as a broken construct chain without amending the text, Ehrlich through Levine (ibid., pp. 329-331) has been followed. Here then the "suffixed noun nebi'akem" is viewed as "an anticipatory genitive."

<sup>136</sup> I have followed F. M. Cross' emendation of בְּמִרְאָה לְדַמְיָהּ, with the support of 4QNum<sup>a</sup>, 4QNum<sup>b</sup>, G and Syr. in his *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 204.

<sup>137</sup> Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel*, 202, has, I believe, wrongly argued that the poem is dealing with "non-Israelite prophets, of whom the outstanding representative is Balaam."

implies.

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

First, a century before Moses, Canaanite vassals writing to Pharaoh could speak of themselves as loyal servants (*arad kitti*) of the suzerain. Second, a prayer inscribed on a Kassite seal describes the owner as a loyal servant (*ardu kinu*) of the god Lugalbanda.<sup>138</sup>

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

However, the term servant may well be attested more frequently as a title for a king. Antti Laato writes, "Another common title for the king in the Akkadian inscriptions is (*w*)*ardu*, "servant." It is often connected with the name of the god: "the servant of N.N." or with a suffix which refers to the divinity."<sup>139</sup> Moreover, the Ugaritic epic, *Kirta* utilizes the same epithet:

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

Kirta awakes – it's a dream!  
The Servant of El – a vision! (Column III, 50-51)<sup>140</sup>

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

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

"He-who-is-over-the-house" (i.e., the palace), if derived from a literal rendering of an Egyptian original, poses a conundrum, for the *hry-pr* was a much less important officer, and "vizier" with whom the title is often compared enjoyed an infinitely broader purview as head of the entire civil service.<sup>141</sup>

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

<sup>138</sup> J. S. Kselman, "A Note on Numbers XII 6-8," *VT*, 26 (1976), 503.

<sup>139</sup> Antti Laato, *The Servant of YHWH and Cyrus: A Reinterpretation of the Exilic Messianic Programme in Isaiah 40-55*, Coniectanea Biblica, Old Testament Series, no. 35 (Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1992), 54.

<sup>140</sup> Translation by Edward L. Greenstein in Simon B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, SBL Writings from the Ancient World Series, Volume 9 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), 18.

<sup>141</sup> Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 371.

grappled with the biblical materials.

Overall the poem accentuates the "means" of divine revelation as the point of differentiation between others and Moses. The phrases: "my words," "in a vision," "I will make myself known to him," "in a dream," "I will speak to him," "mouth to mouth," "in clarity," "not in riddles", "he looks on the form of Yahweh," all focus on modes of divine self-revelation. The awkward phrase פה אל-פה exaggerates the issue by offering an unusual alternative to the phrase אל-פנים in Exod 33.11. There the text adds an explanatory "as one speaks to a friend," making the point that Moses has a unique intimacy with God. Here also the issue is that Moses has this type of "deep" understanding that is not known by the prophets. The "form of Yahweh" (תמונת יהוה) that Moses sees is usually contrasted with other terms so that Exod 33.20 is no longer problematic.<sup>142</sup> Yet, Moses' relationship with Yahweh is such that his leadership is given priority.

Rodney Hutton capitalizes on the servant rubric and writes:

The picture of Moses as "chief steward" does not represent the vested interest of some narrowly defined social group, whether the priests, prophets, or royal administration. The analogy of the "chief steward" can result only from theological reflection, which in fact *refused* to allow Moses to be domesticated or co-opted by any single group or party. His authority is not simply unique: it is *singularly* unique and is identified with no institution - neither the "word" of the prophet nor the "law" of the priest nor the "counsel" of the elder nor the "judgment" of the king. To come in contact with Moses was to come in contact with the very primal form of legitimation itself.<sup>143</sup>

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

In fact, the Bible by no means portrays Moses as a decisive, strong hero, exercising personal initiative. such properties figure only in the legend of his youth: his mediation between two quarreling Hebrews, his rebuking of the stronger of the two and his slaying of the Egyptian taskmaster. This impulsive streak reappears in Moses' reaction to the Golden Calf, when he destroys it and orders all its worshipers killed (Ex. 32:15-30). At all other times, Moses is always dependent upon the word of God. So much so that at times of crisis, when the people appeal to him for help, or when they mutter against him and rebel against his leadership, he is helpless and cries to God for help. The miracles and wonders he performs are not the result of his own esoteric knowledge; they are generally preceded by a divine command, telling him what to do.<sup>144</sup>

The narrative characterization of Moses should not be viewed as a strong Moses that developed into a

---

<sup>142</sup> Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, 126; Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 96.

<sup>143</sup> Rodney R. Hutton, *Charisma and Authority in Israelite Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 34-5.

<sup>144</sup> Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel*, 204-5.

weak leader. Instead, the complex institutional infrastructure must first be taken into consideration. This infrastructure may have had a narratological purpose. In T. S. Frymer-Kensky's depiction of the בני ישראל, we may have a hint. She writes:

These people who came out of Egypt had been "chosen" by performing an act of faith at a considerable risk to themselves. Lest we think that they were in this way (although not genetically) superior, the Book of Exodus immediately presents a "history" of the group which shows that they did not have the ability to sustain a life of trust. All of the events subsequent to the actual exodus reveal the people as insecure, unable to endure a life of risk and, in effect the people as insecure, unprepared for a life of freedom. The narrative portions of Exodus and Numbers are almost a case study of the evolution of such a group. The "plotline" demonstrates their initial lack of the qualities necessary for independence and their resultant ever-increasing dependence on their leader, along the lines of an authoritarian "cult." It dramatizes the crisis to which this led, but then details the subsequent steps that were taken to prevent the group from becoming and staying an authoritarian "cult."<sup>145</sup>

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

. . . the sin of Moses is striking the crag with Aaron's rod and addressing the people instead of displaying the rod and commanding the rock to produce water. . . this rod was a monitory sign to the rebellious Israelites. It was also a symbol of the primacy of the tribe of Levi and in particular of the exclusive priesthood of the house of Aaron, which had just been confirmed in the Korah rebellion. In illegitimately employing the rod of Aaron, the Levite Moses disobeyed Yahweh and deserved death.<sup>146</sup>

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

## 7. Conclusion & Applications

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

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

---

<sup>145</sup> Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, "Moses and the Cults: The Question of Religious Leadership," *Judaism* 34, no. 4 (1985), 446.

<sup>146</sup> Propp, "The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses," *JBL* 107, no. 1 (1988), 26.

weaker Moses.

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

4. Furthermore, when Moses and/or Aaron come under attack, they rely on divine affirmation rather than taking legal or even military actions via the *עדה* or judge/military tribal leadership. The demise of Korah, Dathan, Abiram and the 250 tribal leaders are a good case-in-point. It is divine intervention that both affirms the divinely appointed leaders and administers justice to the rebels. A corollary is that in cases when the *עדה*, *בני ישראל*, or the Miriam and Aaron contest Moses' leadership or murmur, it is Moses as an empathetic leader that is shown in the narratives. Here Moses plays the role of the loyal opposition that intercedes on their behalf.

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

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

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