

Whose Staff is it, anyway?¹

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Exegetes throughout the centuries have been wrestling with the issue of the staff which was used in striking the rock in Num 20:9. Was it the staff of Aaron or was it the staff of Moses? In this article we seek to explore this small but significant question.

Arguments which have been put forward in favour of Aaron's staff include the following: From the text we are told that Moses took the staff 'from before the Lord' (מלפני יהוה). We also know that Aaron's staff is mentioned in Num 17 and it is placed by Moses before Yahweh in the tent of the Testimony (Num 17:22) which later sprouted, blossomed and produced ripe almonds (Num 17:23). Furthermore, Moses has been told by Yahweh to put back Aaron's staff before the העדות as a warning against rebellion and also probably for those who question the special status of Aaron and the tribe of Levi. Finally, from a source-critical viewpoint this chapter is generally accepted as a Priestly writing which has the Aaronid's interest at heart. Hence, all this argumentation seems to point to the logical conclusion that the reference in Num 20:9 is Aaron's staff.

Scholars like Ehrlich² also holds the view of the staff belonging to Aaron and is

¹I would like to thank my colleague Andy Lie for reading an earlier draft of this paper and offering a helpful critique.

²Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1909), 186.

supported by Blum³ who says that 'Moses took Aaron's staff that lies before Yahweh (verses 8a,9) that is kept according to Num 17:25ff before the covenant to indicate the rebelliousness of the people.' Propp⁴ also opines that 'it was Aaron's rod because it was a symbol of fertility that should alleviate the drought of the sterile desert.'

Although these arguments are plausible, there is a one big stumbling block. Exegetes have to emend the text in verse 11 from מטוה to מטו. Thus for Propp there is a textual error introduced subsequent to the redaction of JE and P whereby 'a scribe might naturally have equated this rod with the rod of Moses in Exod 17:1-7 as in elsewhere.'⁵

Moreover, this emendation has neither sufficient warrant nor support from any textual tradition. So the question is, Why emend when the text makes sense as it stands? The answer seems obvious. Since this passage is considered to be a Priestly writing and that P has the Aaronid's interest at heart, it could be emended to give the impression that it is Aaron's rod.

This is textually unacceptable because such reasoning is fundamentally flawed. It is like a person attempting to make the hole to fit the peg instead of making the peg fit the hole. At best the reconstruction is speculative. Hence the force of the argument is severely weakened. It is difficult to perceive how the elimination of the suffix waw from מטו and the definite article in the LXX proves that it is Aaron's staff that Moses carries.

Those who argue for the staff of Moses have put forward the following arguments.

³Erhard Blum, *Studien zum Komposition des Pentateuch* (BZAW 189; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 273-274.

⁴William H. Propp, 'The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107/1 (1988):22. This is also the view of Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, *Genesis to Deuteronomy* (Vol 1; London: James Nisbet, 1868), 564.

⁵Propp, 'The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses,' 22.

First, Moses was ordered by Yahweh to take not any staff but the staff (אֶת הַמַּטֵּה) in Num 20:8 and he did exactly that.⁶ The implication being that it must have been a staff that has great significance. The מַטֵּה (staff) that Moses is instructed to take is the one he used in Egypt to perform the signs in connection with the plagues.⁷ Moreover, the people must have associated it with miracles performed by Yahweh and the incident at Massah, a miracle which was exactly what they would expect in the present situation. Ellicott also argues that 'it is natural to assume that the rod was the same as that with which some of the previous miracles in Egypt, Red Sea and at Rephidim. The reason being that the name of Aaron is not mentioned in this verse until after the mention of the rod, and that Moses is said, to have smitten the rock 'with his rod'(בַּמַּטֵּהוּ) in verse 11.'⁸

Second, since the issue here has nothing to do with Aaron's position of legitimacy nor about the Israelites' rebellion (from the narrator's viewpoint), the use of Aaron's staff is irrelevant and unnecessary.⁹

Third, Gressmann's view is not implausible which he suggests that the possibility that the staff in the tabernacle belonged to Moses and he maintains that in Numbers 17:25 the mention of Aaron's staff being put before the testimony was a later addition since Aaron needed his staff to exercise his duty.¹⁰

⁶Cf Num 20:9.

⁷See Exod 17:5, 9; Cf Exod 4:2-4, 17; 7:10-20; 14:16-18; 17:5,9.

⁸Charles John Ellicott (ed), *An Old Testament Commentary for English Readers* (vol.1; London: Cassell and Company, 1897), 536.

⁹The whole point of Num 16:1-35 is to demonstrate the superiority of the Aaronic priesthood over other Levites and a validation of the Aaronid's role.

¹⁰Hugo Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit: Ein Kommentar zu den Mose-Sagen* (FRANT 18; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), 280-281.

Contra Horst Seebass who thinks that traditionally it was Aaron's rod but Moses subsequently took over the position of authority that Aaron occupied. See Horst Seebass, *Mose und Aaron, Sinai und Gottesberg* (AZET 2; Bonn: Bonvier, 1962), 28-31.

Fourth, the MT clearly states that 'Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff' (במטהו).

Fifth, the translator(s) of the LXX of Numbers in a few manuscripts have understood it to be Moses' staff by translating Num 20:8 *λαβε την ραβδον σου*.¹¹

Finally, although Num 20:11 may simply be a reference to Moses holding the staff, the Hebrew grammar could quite easily have made this point by using the definite article and omitting the possessive suffix.¹² Therefore, verse 11 is best understood as mentioning the rod belonging to Moses.¹³

An argument that is sometimes raised against the interpretation that the staff belongs to Moses is that we have no indication in the Pentateuch that the staff of Moses is ever placed before the Lord. This objection has been refuted on three grounds. One, it is an argument from silence. Two, to take the staff from its place before Yahweh may be simply a reference to a specific place where Moses kept his staff when not in use. Three, when the text says that 'Moses then took the staff from before Yahweh' - it is reasonable to assume that it is the same staff with which had been employed in the performance of God's miracles in the wilderness (Exod 14:16; 17:9).¹⁴ Finally, this interpretation gains credibility when we discover that the staff of Moses had been called

¹¹Eg the Vaticanus, 4th century manuscript has the possessive pronoun whereas the MT has **את המטה** *Qaf*. The Targum Onqelos also has the possessive pronoun *his*. The Syriac has **לך הב** - *take to yourself*.

¹²MT does this in verse 9 while the LXX does in both phrases.

¹³Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, 'Theological and Redactional Problems in Numbers 20:2-13,' in James T. Butler, et al (eds), *Understanding The Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W. Anderson*, (JSOTSup,37; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 145.

¹⁴Cf 'And more relevantly, it was used in a previous incident of drawing water from a rock (Exod 17:1-7), in which it was identified as the one used to strike the Nile (eg. Exod 7:19-20). See Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 165.

the staff of God (מטה האלהים) in Exod 4:20 and 17:9. This seems to indicate that there is something special and sacred about the staff of Moses. Is it not logical then to assume that it is the same staff that was kept in a special place (before the Lord)? We also note that Moses has not taken the staff in his hand since the victory over Amalek (Exodus 17:9). From verse 9 in the present chapter, the staff has been placed *before God*, ie in the Sanctuary, next to the Ark of the Testimony.

Some scholars have suggested the possibility that there was only one staff and it is sometimes called the staff of Aaron (Exod 7:12) as well as the staff of Moses (Num 20:11). This is the view of Coats who says that in the tradition, the rod belongs to both Moses and Aaron and texts like Exod 7:12; 8:1 are references 'to the same rod rather than two different ones employed by the two different figures.'¹⁵The problem with this suggestion is that it is difficult to be sure that those texts refer to common ownership of the staff. Moreover such assertion is open to serious challenge.

In our judgement, the arguments for Aaron's staff cannot be ruled out completely. Although the arguments for Aaron's staff and the suggestion of the interchangeability of both staffs are attractive, they are not ultimately compelling nor decisive. Our ineluctable conclusion is that when we weigh the arguments evenhandedly, the cumulative force of the evidence suggests that the staff of Moses has a stronger case.¹⁶

¹⁵George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God* (JSOTSup,57;Sheffield: JSOT, 1988), 67.

¹⁶Commentators who identify the staff Moses' are inter alia C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (vol 2; trans James Martin; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1864); N. H. Snaith, 'Numbers', in Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (eds), *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (England: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1962) and J. de Vaulx, *Les Nombres* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1972).

Those who identify as Aaron's staff inter alia George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical And Exegetical Commentary On Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1903); Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1993); Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* (WBC; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984) and J. Gordon Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: Intervarsity, 1981).