WHY WAS MOSES BANNED FROM THE PROMISED LAND?
A RADICAL RETELLING OF THE REBELLIONS OF MOSES
(NUM. 20:2-13 AND EXOD. 2:11-15)

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Abstract:
Num. 20:2-13 has long been regarded as one of the most difficult sections of the Torah. This article shows how a structuralist approach enables us to make better sense of its problems. Although Moses is presented in both the ‘water-miracle’ text of Exod. 17:1-6 and Num. 20:2-13 as a conflicted subject, Num. 20 is unique in the Moses story in that Moses sends himself a message to rebel against YHWH. This runs counter to Moses’ previous responses as subject. Far from being a technical offence, or no offence at all, the combined effect of Moses’ words and actions in Num. 20:2-13 communicates an act of open rebellion against YHWH. This is confirmed by semiotic recognitions internal to the text. Moses’ offence is structurally equivalent to Israel’s rebellion against YHWH in Num. 14 and accordingly attracts the same penalty: death in the desert and exile from the Promised Land. In addition, there is a range of structural correspondences between Num. 20:2-13 (where Moses rebels against YHWH) and Exod. 2:11-15 (where Moses rebels against Pharaoh). When read as parallel texts, they amount to a radical retelling of the arc of the Moses story.

I. INTRODUCTION

The fall of Moses – in which Moses’ behaviour by the waters of Meribah-Kadesh results in his premature death and exclusion from the Promised Land – has historically presented major challenges to classical, medieval and modern scholars. Nearly 500 years ago, Rabbi Yitzhak Arama confessed that “none of the conclusions advanced is satisfactory.” Matters have improved little since then with a more recent rabbi describing Num. 20:2-13 as “one of the most veiled sections of the Torah.” Modern scholars agree. In this article, I shall argue that the particular challenges of this specific text can be helpfully addressed by means of a structural approach (see II, below). The method will highlight key similarities and differences between Exod. 17:1-6, Num. 20:2-13 and Exod. 2:11-15. In contrast to the ‘water-miracle’ of Exod. 17:1-6 (see III, below) Moses’ behaviour in Num. 20:2-13 can be characterised as open rebellion.

* I am greatly indebted to Prof. Bernard S. Jackson (Liverpool Hope) for his help in working through the detailed application of his proposed method to the biblical texts. An earlier version of this article was presented at Westminster Seminary, Calif. and to a work-in-progress seminar at J. Reuben Clark Law School, Brigham Young University. I am deeply grateful to Prof. David VanDrunen (Westminster) and Prof. John (Jack) W. Welch (Brigham Young) for organising these events and to the participants for their lively responses. I also wish to record special thanks to Prof. Reinhard Achenbach (Münster), Dr. Stefan Kürle (Londrina) and Prof. Gordon Wenham for additional input and bibliographic support. Biblical texts quoted are from the English Standard Version (ESV), unless otherwise noted.

2 Rabbi Yehuda Nahshoni, Studies in the Weekly Parasha (ArtScroll Mesorah Publications, New York 1989), vol. 4, p. 1076. “It may well be that when the Torah said ‘No-one knew his burial place’ (Deut. 32:24), the secret of Mei Meriva [‘the waters of Merivah’] was included as well.”
3 Eugene Arden, ‘How Moses Failed God’ (1957) 76 JBL, 50, 50 describes it as “perhaps the most enigmatic incident of the Pentateuch.”
rebellion. This attracts a proportionate response from YHWH (see IV, below). The method will also demonstrate a series of structural similarities between Num. 20:2-13 and Exod. 2:11-15, suggesting they can be read as parallel texts (see V and VI, below). It is a radical retelling of the arc of the Moses story. In Num. 20:2-13, Moses strikes a blow, not merely at the rock, but at the heart of his calling.⁴

II. BETWEEN MOSES’ ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: THE CHALLENGE OF NUM. 20:2-13

The challenges of interpreting Num. 20:2-13 go back a long way. Philo’s De Vita Mosis – the earliest non-biblical account of the life of Moses – does not seem to contain any reference to Num. 20:2-13 at all⁵ whilst Philo’s flowery version of Moses’ death ignores the reason for his exclusion from the Promised Land (Book II, LI, lines 288-291). Josephus’ Antiquities, despite describing the deaths of Miriam and Aaron at great length (Book IV, 78-84), omits Num. 20:2-13 and the very reason for Aaron’s demise.⁶ No reference is made to Moses’ offence, either. As with Philo, Josephus’ account of the death of Moses (Book IV, lines 320-331) fails to mention any wrong. For both writers this could be simple hagiography but it equally points to difficulties in handling the text, even in antiquity.⁷ We are about to see that the challenges are just as real in modernity. We are caught between the ‘rock’ that Moses struck and the ‘hard place’ of what Num. 20:2-13 actually means.

A. The challenge of interpreting Num. 20:2-13

The first, and most basic problem, is making sense of the textual presentation of Moses’ behaviour. We know that Moses utters certain words to the people (Num. 20:10) and strikes the rock twice (Num. 20:11) but what does he actually think he is doing? Is Moses obeying YHWH, partially obeying⁸ or disobeying YHWH? Martin Noth claims that Moses’ behaviour is “completely incomprehensible”⁹; many are inclined to agree.¹⁰ Yet it is fair to assume, given

⁴ Num. 20:2-13 presents Aaron as equally culpable. Limits upon space mean this deserves to be the subject of a separate study and so I do not discuss Aaron’s liability in this article, except insofar as it affects my argument in relation to Moses. As it happens, the focus of Num. 20:2-13 is on Moses, as the string of singular verb commands from YHWH to Moses in Num. 20:8 suggests. Aaron’s participation is not integral to determining the nature of Moses’ own offence.

⁵ Philo of Alexandria, Philo with an English translation, translated F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker, Loeb classical library (London: Heinemann, 1939), vol. VI. 384. Richard A. Freund, “‘Thou shalt not go thither: Moses and Aaron’s punishments and varying theodices in the MT, LXX and Hellenistic Literature’ (1994) 8 Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament, 105, 115 thinks Philo combines the water-miracles of Exod. 17 and Num. 20: “For they [the Israelites] filled all their water vessels as they had done on the former occasion from the springs that were naturally bitter…” (Book I, XXXVIII, lines 210-212). Freund assumes that “the former occasion” refers to Exod. 17. However, the earlier event might more naturally be taken to refer to Exod. 15:22-25, in which case Philo combines the miracles of Exod. 15 and Exod. 17, not Exod. 17 and Num. 20. In addition, Philo’s reference to Moses striking the rock “under inspiration” (line 210) must refer to Exod. 17:6, where Moses acts in obedience to a divine command, and not to Num. 20:11.


⁷ The problem is not restricted to ancient biographers; even the Booker Prize-winning novelist Thomas Keneally ignores Num. 20:2-13 in Moses the Lawgiver (Harper & Row 1975).


⁹ Martin Noth. Numbers (SCM, 1968) 147.

the specificity of the text, that the textual presentation of Moses’ behaviour is not intended to be obscure. It does have meaning; the challenge is to draw it out. Assuming that Moses’ behaviour does make sense then the second, related, problem is why Moses’ conduct is considered wrongful. It is widely recognised that “the exact nature of the sin… is not stated explicitly”, so much so that some have asked: “Was there even a sin?” Perhaps it was a mere technicality, or even a misunderstanding? But we cannot minimise the wrongfulness of Moses’ actions. A measure of their wrongfulness can be seen in the fact that YHWH refers to Moses’ wrong no less than four times in the Pentateuch (Num. 20:12; 20:24; 27:14; Deut. 32:51). Rather than deny the wrongdoing, the challenge is to identify it.

Suppose we can identify the wrong, this leads to the third, connected, problem, namely, the basis of the divine punishment. How could Moses have known he was at fault? Some scholars have denied that Moses is even punished (“God’s decree was not… a punishment in the classical sense of the term…” but this is mere evasion. YHWH’s word of judgement upon Moses, in Num. 20:12; 20:24; 27:14 and Deut. 32:51 is just as punitive as previous words of judgement upon the people (Num. 14) and the Levites (Num. 16-17). Even Moses’ subsequent appeals to YHWH (Deut. 3:23-27) assume Moses’ own guilt.

If we can understand why Moses’ behaviour attracts a penalty, this brings us to the fourth, related, problem: why is this particular penalty – premature death and exclusion from the Promised Land – justified? Commentators throw up their hands in despair, citing lack of proportionality. Yet as might be expected of punishments that embody some kind of poetic justice, Moses’ penalty is thought to have some educative effect. In Deut 4:21-22, Moses warns the people to take notice of his own fate. The punishment therefore cannot be random.

Finally, Num. 20:2-13 is unusual in that it is the subject of a fair amount of inner-biblical commentary, across several different genres (Deuteronomy and Psalms). This in itself might be taken as evidence both of the text’s comprehensibility and its seriousness – contrary to the views already noted. In response, scholars have claimed Deuteronomy and Psalms refer to a different, invented, tradition about Num. 20 that does not have any bearing on the original text. But this, again, evades the issue, namely, why, for example, in the Psalms and elsewhere Moses’ exclusion made sense to the (then) contemporary reader in a way it does not to us. For them, it is simply obvious why Moses was treated in this way. Such inner-biblical references are further evidence that the text made sense then: it does not make sense now. So what are we

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12 Pinchas Kahn, ‘Moses at the waters of Meribah: A case of transference’ (2007) 35 JBQ, 85, 89, 86. Baruch A. Levine. Numbers 1-20 (Douleday 1993), 483 assumes that, by his actions, Moses “undoubtedly… [thought] he had thereby demonstrated God’s providence.” He is then “startled” to learn, in verse 12, that Moses’ behaviour showed “a serious lack of trust in God.” In saying “The reader is left with the sense that he is missing something”, Levine is typical of many who object to ‘problems’ in the text which are of their own devising.

13 Nachmanides Ramban (Nachmanides), Commentary on the Torah (Charles B. Chavel tr, Shilo Pub. House 1974), 218 thinks “the meaning of the phrase ‘and speak ye ‘el (unto) the rock’ [in verse 8] is like ‘al’ (concerning) the rock.” In other words, Moses mistakes YHWH’s command [‘al’] to speak ‘on’, in effect ‘from’, the rock for la (‘el’), meaning to speak ‘to’ the rock.


15 E.g. Culley 30; Cohen 155 (“There were certainly no grounds for any punishment to be meted out…”).

16 Cohen, Freund.
missing? Can we identify, today, an approach to Num. 20 which is compatible with accounts elsewhere in the biblical tradition?

Unfortunately, instead of addressing these interrelated challenges, scholarship has often been reduced to waving a white flag. George B. Gray speaks for many when he asserts that “the exact nature of the sin of the leaders must remain doubtful” whilst others, in a sure sign of giving up on the extant text, resort to conspiracy theories claiming, without any evidence, that the details of Moses’ sin have not been preserved accurately or that the original story has been deliberately suppressed to avoid incriminating Moses. This would certainly come as a surprise to the average reader of the Pentateuch, where the failures of the patriarchs and the tribal heads of Israel are repeatedly laid bare for all to see.

In the light of these specific challenges, how might we take things forward? My starting point is the assumption, articulated by M. Margaliot, that it is “very improbable that the transgression of Moses should not have been stated in very clear terms.” I agree that if matters are unclear to us, it is most likely because we are not reading what is already provided in the text in the right way. In the remainder of this article, I would like to suggest that one way of helping us to make better sense of the text is to adopt a structuralist approach. I am aware that this proposal will elicit groans along the following lines: “The structuralist would lumber along, laden down with some massive Greimasian apparatus to arrive at some conclusion where, almost invariably, the unencumbered historical exegete would be waiting, having already attained it by means of a few economical strides.” But the scoffers need reminding that Num. 20:2-13 is a case where the light-footed exegete has got precisely nowhere. So we have everything to gain from seeing what light may be shed by a structural analysis.

B. A structuralist approach to Num. 20:2-13

The remainder of this article explores the narrative structure of Num. 20:2-13, and related texts, following the analysis of stories developed by A. J. Greimas, who in turn followed the pioneering work of Vladimir Propp. For the benefit of readers who may be less familiar with this method it should be said at once that it is not as forbidding as it may seem. I see it as standing in a tradition of rigorous literary awareness and criticism which tries to set out, in a more systematic way, what is going on within the text and exposing some of its presuppositions and perhaps closing some gaps in a controlled manner.

Greimasian semiotics makes a number of theoretical claims regarding the universal grammar used by human beings in sense construction. Although far more could be said about the nuances and development of Greimas’ thought, two particular ideas are essential for the purpose of this article.

17 Gray, 262.
18 Cohen, 165.
19 Davies 205-206; Gray 258; Arvid S. Kapelrud, ‘How tradition failed Moses’ (1957) 76 JBL 242, though if the intention was to whitewash Moses, the redactors made a very poor job of it. Propp, 25 goes to the other extreme, imagining that “The Priestly author removed the punishment of Moses from his spy story, also at Kadesh (Num. 13:26), and created a new tale in which Moses is actually at fault.” I find this unconvincing.
First, for Greimas, all human actions whether real or fictional make sense in terms of a basic three-part narrative (or ‘semio-narrative’) sequence, consisting of (1) ‘Contract’; (2) ‘Performance’ and (3) ‘Recognition.’ Put briefly, a ‘Contract’ institutes a subject in relation to particular goals (which they are supposed to achieve) and certain competences (which affect whether they achieve those goals or not). Goals may be set by communicating to the subject either a volition (known technically as $vouloir$-faire) or an obligation to do something (devoir-faire). In seeking to attain the goals, the subject will be helped or hindered by the actions of other social actors and even by the subject’s own character traits – all of which affect the subject’s ‘competence’ to perform the desired action. The ‘Performance’ element concerns what the subject does in order to achieve the goals. The final element, ‘Recognition’, takes seriously the fact that human beings do not simply perform actions but also reflect upon them. Recognition thus is the particular sense that is made of the subject’s actions, which of course includes whether the subject achieves, or does not achieve, the established goals based upon the subject’s competences and/or their negation.

Second, Greimas claims that the narrative sequence of Contract → Performance → Recognition necessarily involves a set of interactions that are congruent to setting goals, performing them and helping or hindering their achievement. Such interactions take the form of a structured series of abstract participants (termed actants, which may not always be people) and which can be presented, diagrammatically, in the following ‘actantial schema’:

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\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{Sender} & \rightarrow & \text{Object} & \rightarrow & \text{Receiver} \\
\text{Helper} & \rightarrow & \text{Subject} & \rightarrow & \text{Opponent}
\end{array}
\]

Fig. 1: Basic Greimasian actantial schema (Greimas 1966)

Suffice it to say that the ‘sender’ initiates the action, with the aim of securing a certain ‘object’, which benefits the ‘receiver’ (who may be himself). To achieve this objective, the ‘sender’ uses (perhaps not always intentionally) a subject who is the protagonist of the action, and who is helped or hindered in his task by a ‘helper’ or an ‘opponent’, both of which may include character traits on the part of the subject. Again, more could be said regarding the development and refinement of this model; however, we merely note that Greimasian semiotics has come to view the independent actants of ‘helper’ and ‘opponent’ not as actantial but, instead, as modal values which may affect subjects in their capacity to fulfil the task at hand. As a result, the category of ‘helper/opponent’ has been subsequently replaced by an abstract concept of the presence (or absence) of the competences the subject needs to perform the action. These competences are represented by the terms savoir-faire and pouvoir-faire, which refer, respectively, to the subject’s knowledge of how to act and the subject’s power to act.

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24 Although a ‘Contract’ is always confined to the constitution of the subject of the performance, in any story there may be more than one subject, in which case this form of analysis is a way of highlighting their different perspectives.


26 See the helpful summary in Jackson. Semiotics and Legal Theory, 69-73.
Greimas’ model claims to offer a universal account of human sense-construction, including one particular manifestation of it: story-telling. As such it also claims to apply to biblical texts and biblical narratives and indeed Greimas’ work has been incorporated into biblical studies in a variety of ways, though not without criticism. As with any method, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: what counts is a better understanding of the text. Rather than engage in any wider discussion of the merits and demerits of Greimas’ approach in the hands of other biblical scholars I simply propose to demonstrate its usefulness in this particular context.

In doing so, I wish to highlight, and apply, Bernard Jackson’s proposed reformulation of Greimas’ actantial schema which seeks to integrate the actants more meaningfully within the narrative (syntagmatic) scheme (Fig. 2, below). The benefits of this approach will become obvious in III, below, where the narrative sequence of Contract → Performance → Recognition as applied to Num. 20:2-13 makes it easier to integrate Moses’ behaviour (a matter of ‘Performance’) with evaluations of its significance (a matter of ‘Recognition’).

![Jackson’s narrative syntagmatic scheme](Jackson_1995_147.jpg)

Fig. 2: Jackson’s narrative syntagmatic scheme (Jackson 1995:147)

Jackson’s integrated narrative syntagm has never previously been applied, not least by biblical scholars. I see this as a loss since scholars, such as N. T. Wright, who have profitably applied

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Greimas to advance their arguments would, in my view, have benefited even more by adopting Jackson’s version. Perhaps its use in this article will encourage widespread adoption in future. The appropriate test for its effectiveness is that it should: (1) gather in all of the relevant data; (2) make sense of this as simply as possible and (3) shed light on surrounding issues. I shall argue that a structuralist approach helps us make sense of this notably difficult text by: (1) accounting for all the data in Num. 20; (2) explaining this in simple but non-reductionist terms and (3) illuminating the broader story of Moses and Exodus-Deuteronomy.

There are a number of reasons why I think this particular text (Num. 20:2-13) benefits from the application of this particular method (structural analysis). First, in contrast to the tendency to characterise Moses’ behaviour in reductionist terms (e.g. that it is all ‘about’ Moses’ “insubordination,” his “self-centredness” or his “failure… to be transparent”), a structuralist approach helps us to be more precise about what is actually going on. In contrast to widespread complaints that the text is vague we find that we can in fact be very specific regarding both Moses’ wrong and its wrongfulness (see IV C, below). For one thing, structuralism helps us to identify any gaps in the actantial sequence. To give one example, although Jeffrey M. Cohen finds Moses (and Aaron’s) failure to ‘sanctify the divine name’ in Num. 20:12 “enigmatic” it makes perfect sense when we discover that Moses deliberately chooses to rebel against YHWH. The subject (Moses) refuses to fulfil his obligation (the devoir-faire) and turns the means of his empowerment (the pouvoir-faire) against the sender (YHWH) with the result that the sender is robbed of the benefit of the action (being glorified as Israel’s sole Deliverer). What may have seemed cloudy now becomes clear.

Second, there is a marked tendency in scholarship to play off the component parts of Moses’ offence against each other. Scholars and commentators routinely assume that Moses’ crime must be exclusively concerned with one element or another. Even Johnson Lim Teng Kok’s monographical treatment of Num. 20:1-13, which I have otherwise found very stimulating, sees Moses’ “unsanctioned” use of the staff as key to Num. 20:2-13 (“the sin of Moses has to do with his action rather than his speech”; italics original). But any attempt to find one element that can bear all the weight of Moses’ punishment is naturally going to fail because the penalty itself is a response to an integrated Performance. By contrast, a structuralist approach encourages us to give due weight to each specific actant and to consider how they function, in combination, within the syntagm. We shall see that, contrary to scholarly assumptions, Moses’ behaviour should be understood as a composite activity and that there is a close fit between Moses’ words and his actions.

33 E.g. Sakenfeld, 147: “divergences from God’s command is [sic] especially in view, but what or which divergences is not specified.” Cf. also Cohen 162 and Culley 30.
34 Cohen 157.
35 E.g. W. H. Bellinger, Jr. *Leviticus and Numbers* (Hendrickson 2001), 256-257; Philip J. Budd. *Numbers* (Word 1984), 218; Davies 205 and Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. *Numbers* (Eerdmans 1995) 114 think Moses’ speech was the main offence, whilst others, including Kok, favour his striking the rock.
36 Kok, 5.
37 Kok, 136.
38 E.g. Cohen, 163 who, having decided Moses’ offence is purely a matter of ‘speaking rashly’, then objects that this “hardly sounds a serious misdemeanour.” Similarly, Margaliot 206 – 27 rhetorically asks “whether the striking can really be regarded as a transgression.”
Third, there is a failure in scholarship to see the wood for the trees. For example, although Katherine Doob Sakenfeld is one of the few who spots that seeing Moses’ offence in terms of either his words or his actions “seem … to state the options too narrowly…” even she does not say what the big picture actually is. Again, by showing where the main emphases of a narrative lies (which may not always be where we are used to looking) a structuralist approach helps us see how Moses’ behaviour connects up with larger issues. This includes how Num. 20:2-13 is characterised in other biblical texts, the literary structure of the Kadesh cycle (Num. 13-20) and the narrative of Exodus-Deuteronomy as a whole.

Fourth, a structuralist analysis counters what we might call ‘semantic’ readings of the text. For example, Eryl Davies avers that “if no explicit directions were given [regarding the rod]… it is impossible to deduce whether… [Moses] was obeying or disobeying the divine command.” Such readings presume that Moses’ wrong (if there is one) is a matter, as Sakenfeld suggests, of whether he followed “instructions as given….” Thus Kok claims “YHWH was angry with Moses for not having obeyed his instructions to the letter…” whilst Ashley primly notes that “inexact obedience… is the same as disobedience.” Wenham states that “…Moses’ failure to carry out the Lord’s instructions precisely was as much an act of unbelief as the people’s failure to trust God’s promises [in Num. 14]…” I do not find any of this convincing, not least because equating technical error with overt rebellion tends to confirm mistaken stereotypes about divine justice being purely a response to breaking semantic ‘rules.’ By contrast, a structuralist approach helps to correct such semantic readings by staying rooted in the underlying narrative structure. We will see that the wrongfulness of Moses’ actions goes beyond mere technicalities to derive its seriousness more deeply from the underlying narrative of Exodus-Deuteronomy.

To conclude, by taking a structural approach to Num. 20:2-13, I argue that we can: (1) make sense of Moses’ behaviour; (2) identify the wrongdoing; (3) identify the basis of the divine punishment; (4) explain the proportionality of the punishment; and (5) do all this in a manner compatible with accounts of Num. 20 elsewhere in the biblical tradition. The hope is that by applying this method to the hard flint of the text, we may be rewarded, not with a trickle of speculation, but a cataract of revelation.

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39 E.g. Cohen 1984:154 claims Moses’ sin “did not lie in the act of striking the rock [and that this] is implied… in the fact that that act is never referred to” in subsequent biblical texts.
41 Davies, 205.
42 Sakenfeld, 134. Cf. also Vince Sawyer, ‘The fall of a great leader as illustrated in the life of Moses’ (1989) 12 Calvary Baptist Theological Journal, 12, 14 who claims Moses only obeyed “with perfect obedience on two of the three commands.”
43 Kok, 165.
44 T. R. Ashley, Numbers (Eerdmans 1993) 379.
III. **BOUND FOR THE PROMISED LAND:**
**THE ‘EXODUS WATER-MIRACLE’ (EXOD. 17:1-6)**

Before applying Jackson’s narrative syntagmatic schema to Num. 20:2-13 we pause to consider the first ‘water-miracle’ described in Exod. 17:1-6. Such are the (surface) similarities between the two passages that scholarship has expended a great deal of effort trying to establish some form of literary dependence.46 My purpose here is to provide a ‘worked example’ of Jackson’s integrated schema in Figs. 3 and 4, below, with reference to Exod. 17:1-6. This will also form a useful point of comparison with Figs. 5 and 6 (see IV, below) and will, I trust, make my argument even clearer.

Exod. 17:1-6 starts in the same way as Num. 20:2-13. It concerns Israel’s rebellion at Massah and Meribah, for want of water (Exod. 17:1, 3) and for lack of faith in Moses and YHWH (Exod. 17:2, 7). The text is as follows:

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” 3 But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” 4 So Moses cried to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” 5 And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Exod. 17:1-7 ESV)

Figs. 3-5, below, show the application of Jackson’s revised Greimasian narrative syntagm of Contract → Performance → Recognition to the text of Exod. 17:1-6. The text is coded according to the various Greimasian *actants*; however, since the biblical narrative can be told from the point of view of any subject – with each *actant* having a different function in others’ stories – a basic choice has to be made regarding ‘whose story it is’ and hence the point of view from which the story is being analysed. Thus one could reconstruct the narrative from the viewpoint each of YHWH, the elders and Israel (each then being subject/receiver).47 Since the

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46 Summarised by Kok, 90-93. More recently, Hans-Christoph Schmitt, “Dtn 34 als Verbindungsstück zwischen Tetrateuch und Deuteronomistischem Geschichtswerk” in Eckart Otto and Reinhard Achenbach (eds.) *Das Deuteronomium zwischen Pentateuch und Deuteronomistischem Geschichtswerk* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 181 – 192 has argued (following Ludwig Schmidt, at n. 30, 187) that Num. 20:1-13 is only modelled on Exod. 17:1-7 from a late stage onwards. In particular, references to the staff (vv. 8-9) and Meribah (v. 13) belong to this secondary reworking. Horst Seebass, *Numeri*, Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament. IV/2 (Neukirchener Verlag, 2002), 271 believes there is a link between Exod. 17 and Num. 20 but concludes that the underlying problem in both texts is very different. For Seebass (278) Exod. 17 does not necessarily stand behind Num. 20 because YHWH proves himself gracious at Kadesh towards the new generation, despite Moses’ and Aaron’s failings. Herbert Specht, “Die Verfehlung Moses und Aarons in Num. 20:1-13*P*” in Christian Frevel, Thomas Pola and Aaron Schart (eds.) *Torah and the Book of Numbers* (Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 273-313 concludes (308) that the genre of Num. 20:1-13 is a narrative on the failure of Moses and Aaron and not a parallel ‘water miracle’ narrative. In contrast, Thomas Römer, “Egypt nostalgia in Exodus 14 – Numbers 21” in Christian Frevel, Thomas Pola and Aaron Schart (eds.) *Torah and the Book of Numbers* (Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 80 claims that Num. 20 is “a rewritten version of Exod. 17.”

47 This might even include YHWH as the subject of a separate narrative syntagm whose *vouloir-faire* has actually failed. One limitation is that the ‘audience’ is only the ‘receiver’ of the ‘narrator’s’ story. It would, in any case, be
The purpose of this article is to make better sense of the textual presentation of Moses’ behaviour. I proceed on the basis that Num. 20:2-13 is Moses’ story.

A. Contract

The first, Contract, stage shows the various senders, objects and receivers which together constitute Moses as ‘subject.’ Because YHWH and Israel are sending different messages (and objects) to Moses, these can be diagrammed as five separate instantiations of contract (Fig. 3, below). Moses is presented as receiver because he is being constituted as the subject of the intended action.

![Diagram of Contract stage in Exod. 17:2-6]

The arrows pointing from different Senders (YHWH and Israel) to Moses represent different sets of messages from different sources that constitute Moses as a subject. On the one hand, Moses receives three messages from YHWH. The first (devoir-faire) concerns what Moses should do as a heteronomous subject whilst the second (savoir-faire) and third (pouvoir-faire) are:

- **Devoir-faire**: Serve as YHWH’s agent in delivering Israel (from thirst) by following YHWH’s commands (vv. 5-6).
- **Savoir-faire**: Instructions from YHWH (vv. 5-6).
- **Pouvoir-faire**: Instrument (rod); YHWH ‘standing’ before Moses “on the rock”; the rock (vv. 5-6).

Moses similarly receives messages from Israel:
- **Vouloir-faire**: Thirst for water (vv. 2-4).
- **Negation of the pouvoir-faire**: Belief that Moses and YHWH cannot help them (vv. 2-4).

Israel

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hard to reconstruct this pairing as we do not have any evidence of the Contract, or even Performance (other than the existence of the text) or the manner in which the audience recognised the narrator’s story.
concern his competences (in terms of both knowledge and power, respectively) to perform the devoir-faire.\textsuperscript{48}

There are three aspects to Moses’ empowerment; the rod, YHWH’s Presence on the rock and the rock itself. As far as the rod is concerned, YHWH sends Moses a message regarding its status as a pouvoir-faire. The rod itself does not have any existential status as a pouvoir-faire from YHWH; instead it is invested with a power in the narrative by YHWH who commands Moses to take the rod “with which you struck the Nile” (verse 5). YHWH has previously sent a rod to Moses (Exod. 4:2-5); here YHWH sends a message to Moses about an object that has already been sent and which has previously been used to miraculous effect (Exod. 7:20). Likewise, the rock is not itself a pouvoir-faire: it is the message about the rock and its function that is the pouvoir-faire. YHWH’s Presence on the rock, on the other hand, does have existential status as a pouvoir-faire. Indeed, the implication of verses 5-6 is that it is only when YHWH is “standing there before you on the rock at Horeb” (verse 6, JPS) that it will produce water when struck.\textsuperscript{49}

On the other hand, Moses receives two further messages from Israel. The first concerns the people’s sense of thirst (their wish, vouloir-faire, for water) whilst the second is their belief that Moses cannot help them. This negates the pouvoir-faire Moses has received. It highlights the sad irony that the devoir-faire (Israel’s deliverance) is opposed by the very ones who are supposed to benefit. The result of these different messages is that Moses is constituted as a conflicted subject.

\section*{B. Performance}

The Performance element concerns what the subject does in order to achieve the goals. As noted in Fig. 2, above, the sending of an ‘object’, in Lévi-Straussian terms, to a receiver includes the sending of people, things and messages. In terms of Moses’ acts upon an object (persons and things) the Performance element can be represented as follows (see Fig. 4(a) below):

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
  \node at (0,0) {Moses};
  \node at (0,-1.5) {Takes the staff (v. 6)};
  \node at (0,-3) {Assembles the elders (v. 6)};
  \node at (0,-4.5) {Strikes the rock (v. 6)};
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{48} In an older style of Greimasian schema, the rod and the rock would have been presented as ‘helpers’ (cf. Fig. 1 above) but that is exactly the kind of personalisation which the move away from ‘helper’ and ‘opponent’ seeks to avoid.

\textsuperscript{49} In Exod. 17:6, YHWH promises Moses that when he performs the miracle: ‘I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb.’ This may, in part, be an answer to the Israelites’ specified complaint in Exod. 17:7.
Taking the staff is the performance of an action on an object, as is assembling the elders and striking the rock.

A further aspect of Performance is the sending of an ‘object’ to a ‘receiver’ in the form of a message. The narrator sends a message (the story) to the audience and when YHWH, Moses and the people speak to another in the story they too send messages. In this respect, we can say that performance includes not only striking the rock to produce the water, but also a message about the production of the water (see Fig. 4(b) below):

![Diagram](image_url)

This is apparent in verse 6 (“And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel”) which makes it clear that Moses is sending a message through a visual medium.

C. Recognition
Despite being constituted as a conflicted subject at the Contract stage (Fig. 3, above), the text is clear that Moses carries out YHWH’s instructions successfully (Fig. 5, below). The recognition of Moses’ obedience is straightforward. The first half of the statement: “And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel” (Exod. 17:6 ESV) is the narrator communicating Moses’ successful performance to the audience, while the second half records the implicit (visual) recognition by the elders. This implies not only the sending of a message from Moses and YHWH to the elders of Israel but also the sending of a message from Israel to Moses and YHWH, because it implies how the elders of Israel (and perhaps Israel as a whole) reacted to this sight. As such it provides a further recognition internal to the story (rather than internal to the telling of the story). The implication is that the elders of Israel recognise that YHWH is the sole deliverer of Israel; however, there may well be some ambiguity at this level of the recognition for Israel as a whole. The people may recognise that Moses’ performance has been effective in terms of producing water but they still may not recognise either Moses or YHWH as their legitimate leader(s).

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50 In semiotics, this often corresponds to the distinction between the oratio directa of the actants and the voice of the narrator. For the possibility that the narrator here sends a recognition to the audience see note 47.
Although Exod. 17:1-6 concerns a miracle, it is wholly ordinary in terms of its presentation of Moses as a subject who performs the *devoir-faire* received from YHWH and who receives recognition from YHWH and the narrator (at least) for having done so. It is a conventional, even repetitious pattern – so much so that Moses acting as YHWH’s faithful agent serves as the *leitmotif* for the whole of Moses’ life.\(^{51}\) As Coats, writing broadly about Mosaic tradition observes: “Mosaic authority may be understood… [as] his participation in the power of God.”\(^{52}\) Moses is constantly being called by YHWH to save Israel from, *inter alia*, thirst, hunger, slavery and death and, in this way, to accomplish the *devoir-faire* of serving as YHWH’s agent in delivering Israel and glorifying YHWH as Israel’s sole Deliverer.\(^{53}\) This is not surprising: it is this very *devoir-faire* that lies at the heart of Moses’ calling at the burning bush.

Moreover, the particular sequence in Exod. 17:1-6 (*viz.* the people bring a complaint to Moses (vv. 2-3); Moses brings it to YHWH (v. 4); YHWH tells Moses what to do (vv. 5-6) and Moses obeys (v. 6)) is itself a recurring pattern. It recalls, *inter alia*, the ‘desert adjudications’; five normative presentations of adjudication procedure that are set in the wilderness and most of which are recorded in *Numbers*, namely the unclean celebrants (Num. 9:6-14); the Sabbath-

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\(^{51}\) In this article I am using the word ‘agent’ in a legal sense; i.e. where the issue is acting autonomously or as the agent of God. I am *not* using it its Greimasian sense, where it is equivalent to ‘subject’.


\(^{53}\) It has been suggested that my actantial analysis of Exod. 17:1-6 could be supplemented by a study of Num. 16 (the Korach rebellion). I have not done so, partly for reasons of space but also because there is clearly a very large number of potential texts which one could, potentially, include that would reinforce the same point.
breaker (Num. 15:32-36) and the two cases involving the daughters of Tselophehad (Num. 27 and Num. 36). 54

Exod. 17:1-6 is just one example among many that create an extremely strong narrative presumption of how Moses should act in such circumstances. The power of this narrative is in direct proportion to the multiple narrative syntagms that are repeated since Moses’ commissioning in Exodus 3-4. He is to act as YHWH’s agent in delivering Israel and glorify YHWH as Israel’s sole Deliverer. As we turn to Num. 20:2-13 we find that this is not what happens, however. Like the opening of the rock itself, this has seismic consequences.

IV. BANNED FROM THE PROMISED LAND:
MOSES’ REBELLION AGAINST YHWH (NUM. 20:2-13)

In turning to the heart of this article we note that a structuralist account lends itself to the final form of the text and so, like others, I shall accept the unity of the text. 55 Meeting the challenge of Num. 20:2-13 means engaging with the final form of the text since it is in this form that many of the problems, identified in II above, arise. There is little point trying to make them disappear by ascribing them to different, or competing, literary traditions. 56 The text is as follows:

2 Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 7 And the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! 4 Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? 5 And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.” 6 Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the LORD appeared to them, 7 and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 8 “Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle.” 9 And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he commanded him. 10 Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” 11 And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. 12 And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the

54 The exception is the case involving the blasphemer (Lev. 24:10-12).
55 Scholars who treat the text as a unity include George W. Coats, ‘Legendary motifs in the Moses death reports’ (1977) 39 CBQ, 34; Davies (1995); Kok and Levine. More recently Horst Seebass, “Numeri als eigene Komposition” in Christian Frevel, Thomas Pola and Aaron Schart (eds.) Torah and the Book of Numbers (Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 87 – 108 has defended the literary unity and purposeful conception of Numbers in its own right. Others (e.g. Gray, 262) assert that “the story is mutilated” whilst Margaliot 198 claims no two source critics can agree on how to divide Num. 20:1-13 into three, or even two, originally independent accounts. More recently, Christian Frevel. Mit Blick auf das Land die Schöpfung erinnern. Zum Ende der Priestergrundschrift. HBS 23. (Herder, 2000) has eliminated 20:12 as a later gloss on the ground that the Priestly Narrative (Pg) exempts Moses and Aaron of all wrongs. Seebass (2002:275), in contrast, finds Frevel’s approach unconvincing on the grounds it is too complicated and ignores the final form of the text. Seebass himself notes that v. 13 does not fit smoothly into the narrative (270) but argues it cannot be split off from verses 2-12 because of the play on variant words of “holy.” Indeed, for Seebass, existing tensions in the text are there on “synchronic purpose” (270).
56 Noth 146-147 suggests Exod. 17:1-7 and Num. 20:2-13 refer to the same event, told twice in different ways (by JE and P, supposedly) and this is followed, with some variations, by Budd, 216-217, Levine, 484 and Sturdy, 139. I do not find this convincing because such proposals ignore the structure of the two events, which are entirely different (and cf. Davies’ disagreement with Noth, 202). George W. Coats. Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Tradition of the Old Testament (Abingdon 1968), 71-82 suggests a complex literary history of the tradition and sources behind P.
land that I have given them.” These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and through them he showed himself holy. (Num. 20:2-13 ESV)

A. **Contract**
The Contract stage of Num. 20:2-13 is set out in Fig. 6, below:

![Diagram](image)

Comparison with the Contract stage of Exod. 17:1-6 (Fig. 3, above) shows close structural similarities with Num. 20:2-13. (This does not amount to a claim that Num. 20:2-13 is a reworking of Exod. 17:1-6; Num. 20:2-13 describes a quite different event as the Recognition stage in Fig. 8 makes clear). As in Exod. 17:1-6 the arrows pointing from different Senders (YHWH and Israel) to Moses represent different sets of messages from different sources that constitute Moses as a subject. Remarkably, as in Exod. 17:1-6, Moses receives three messages from YHWH (*devoir*-faire, *savoir*-faire, *pouvoir*-faire). As in Exod. 17:1-6, Moses’ empowerment includes a message about the rod and a message about the rock but unlike Exod. 17:1-6 – and this is the only difference – there is no *pouvoir*-faire regarding YHWH’s Presence ‘standing on the rock’ (cf. Exod. 17:6). Since the implication of Exod. 17:6 is that it is only when YHWH is “standing there before you on the rock at Horeb” (JPS) that it will produce water when struck, this omission is consistent with the different *modus* of the *savoir*-faire:
Moses is to speak ‘to’ or, as Margaliot suggests, ‘about’ the rock (Num. 20:8) instead of striking it (Exod. 17:6). Since the goal of the action is to demonstrate that YHWH is Israel’s sole deliverer, Moses is obliged to say something about the forthcoming divine help. Moses’ devoir-faire from YHWH is to speak in a way that, inter alia, reinforces Moses’ role as YHWH’s agent and highlights YHWH’s role as the one who empowers Moses’ action.

Moses also receives, as in Exod. 17:1-6, a set of messages from Israel. The first concerns the people’s sense of thirst (their wish, vouloir-faire, for water) whilst the second is their belief that Moses cannot help them. This negates the pouvoir-faire Moses has received. Unlike Exod. 17:1-6 this unbelief expressly extends to YHWH as well. The result of these different messages is that Moses is constituted as a conflicted subject.

The most striking difference between Fig. 3 and Fig. 6 is that, at some point, Moses clearly sends himself a message which is additional to, and different from, those already received from YHWH and Israel, thus adding to the “conflicted subject.” It is this message which constitutes Moses as an autonomous, as opposed to a heteronomous, subject. But although we have evidence in the text of the different messages from YHWH and Israel, we have no evidence of any message Moses sends to himself. We can, however, say, on the basis of the text, that when Moses goes to the Tent of Meeting in verse 6 he is seeking YHWH’s solution but, after he is given it, he clearly decides not to act on it. At that point, Moses has sent himself a message which is, effectively, to rebel. The fact of the decision is clearly in the text of Num. 20:2-13 because it is what Moses does and it forms the basis of divine judgment (see C below). The question arises: what is the modality of the message Moses sends himself? Is it a matter of devoir-faire (obligation) or vouloir-faire (desire)? It is impossible to know: all we can say is that the answer depends on Moses’ commitment. (His personal motivation is, of course, a separate question and I offer my own suggestion at C(4), below).

The structural analysis provided in Fig. 6 immediately challenges the widespread scholarly view that Exod. 17 is “almost identical with that of Num. 20.” Indeed, Thomas Römer asserts that “It is almost uncontested that the narrative of Num. 20:1-13 refers to Exod. 17:1-7 which it re-interprets and continues.” Of course there are plenty of surface similarities between the two passages but, clearly, the texts do not have the same structure. This becomes even more apparent as we turn to the Performance and Recognition stages.

57 “Speak” is plural because Aaron is Moses’ interpreter (Propp, 23; Margaliot, 205). A literal translation of YHWH’s command in verse 8 (“so that it may yield its water and you shall produce water”) seems to emphasise the message about the rock and its function as a pouvoir-faire.

58 So Margaliot, 205.

59 Note that there is no semiotic term for ‘taking a decision’ which may reflect the super-positivist Greimassian suspicion of psychology. A physical text placed on a desk in front of a reader can be examined; a human mind cannot. All we can say is that Moses has sent himself a message and he clearly acts on it.

60 Cohen 1984:155. Cf. Kahn’s claim that Moses “[seems] to repeat events of 40 and 38 years in the past...” referring also to Exod. 17 (91).

B. **Performance**

We remind ourselves that the ‘Performance’ element concerns what the subject does in order to achieve the goals and does not include evaluations of their success or meaning. Moses’ actions can be set out as follows (see Fig. 7(a), below):

![Fig. 7(a): Narrative syntagm of Num. 20:9-11 (focusing on Performance element)]

In addition, as in Exod. 17:1-6, the object, once again, is not only the water but also a message about how the water is produced (see Fig. 7(b), below):

![Fig. 7(b): Narrative syntagm of Num. 20:10-11 (focusing on Performance element)]

The assembly of Israel receives not just the water (v. 11) but a message about the production of the water (vv. 10-11). Moses’ Performance makes it clear to the Receivers that the manner in which the water is produced constitutes a personal rebellion by Moses against YHWH. These messages about Moses’ Performance are communicated aurally (by Moses’ addressing the assembly and verbally claiming to be Israel’s sole deliverer) and visually (by Moses’ raising his hand against YHWH in the sight of the assembly). We will consider each message in turn.

1. **Moses rebels against YHWH by verbally claiming to be Israel’s deliverer**

   This is signified by Moses’ words in verse 10.62 YHWH’s instructions form a clear sequence: “[1] Take the staff, and [2] assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and [3] tell

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62 The argument in this section that Moses’ words were wrongful is consistent with the reference to “rash words” in Ps. 106:32-33, contrary to the views of some modern scholars. Cohen 1984:163 complains that the reference to
the rock before their eyes to yield its water…” (Num. 20:8). Verses 9 and 10 repeat the threefold sequence of verse 8, right up to the moment when Moses is about to speak: “[1] And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he commanded him. [2] Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock. [3] and he said…” We expect this to be about or to the rock, but there is a sudden twist – instead “he said to them.”

That Moses is now rebelling against YHWH is confirmed by what Moses actually says to the assembly of Israel: “Listen, you rebels (hammadim), shall we get water for you out of this rock?” (Num. 20:10). Of course, the people are rebels; verse 2 describes how the ‘edah (here functioning as a mob) “assembled themselves together against Moses” (wayyiqqahalu ‘al-Moshe). Exactly the same phrase is used to describe the rebellion of Korach and his followers in Num. 16:3. But the motivation attributed to Korach is very different: Korach’s rebellion is exclusively about the legitimacy of Moses’ assumed divine authority (16:3), whereas the dispute in Num. 20:2-5 is (ostensibly) about water. They are rebels; but not in the Korach sense. For although the narrator characterises the people’s revolt as being against YHWH (20:13), the ‘edah themselves only see it as being against Moses. Certainly if the people had been consciously rebelling against YHWH we might expect them to incur punishment, but they do not. In my view, the narrator includes these words (Num. 20:10) for ironic effect: it is Moses himself who rebels against YHWH, as Num. 20:24 explicitly states,

However, in my view, the critical phrase is: “… shall we get water for you out of this rock?” (20:10). The phrasing of the question (literally, “from out of this rock shall we bring out for you water?”) emphasises the miraculous nature of the act (to which the implied answer is, of course, ‘yes’). But instead of speaking words that reinforce YHWH’s message of devoir-faire to Moses and YHWH’s messages of pouvoir-faire empowering Moses to save Israel, there is no reference to YHWH at all. Instead of saying something along the lines of “In the Name of YHWH, I command you, this rock, to produce your water” the stress is on what is about to be performed by Moses and Aaron. They present themselves, rather than YHWH, as Israel’s

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Num. 20 in Ps. 106:32-33 is “a model of… contrived abstrusity” whilst Freund (1994:121) avers that the Psalm “does not follow the contents or ideas of Numbers.” Freund further claims that the “he” of Ps. 106:32-33 refers to YHWH, but what does YHWH say that is ‘rash’? The Palæa recounts how Moses “struck a staff on the rock with bitterness” (Bauckham et al, Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, 646). But although the Psalmist only highlights Moses’ words this should not be taken to imply a reductionist approach, as per modern commentators. Nor does it ‘prove’ that Moses’ actions in Num. 20:11 are innocent; the Psalms frequently offer truncated or reordered versions of events (cf. Pss. 78 and 105 regarding the Exodus) in common with ANE literary practice (e.g. K. A. Kitchen. On the Reliability of the Old Testament (Eerdmans 2003). “When prose and poetry accounts coexist, it is prose that is the primary source and poetry that is the secondary celebration” (italics original), 252).

63 Margaliot (1983:212, at n. 51) thinks the reference to “rebels” is itself wrongful. Against this, the narrator seems to share Moses’ view (cf. the closing summary where the Israelites are said to have “quarreled with the LORD”; Num. 20:13). Devarim Rabbah II.8 has Moses querying the wrongfulness of the word, since God Himself had used it previously (p. 36).

64 Moshe Anisfeld, ‘Why was Moses barred from leading the people into the Promised Land?’ (2011) 39 JBQ, 211, 216 thinks the “we” cannot include Moses because Deut. 34:10 lauds Moses as Israel’s greatest prophet, though this is hardly an argument. Arden’s view (1957:52), shared independently by Margaliot (1983:213-215) that it refers to Moses and YHWH has found little support. The Palæa Historica (a ninth century Christian retelling of Num. 20) claims Moses should have said “God is blessed”; Richard Bauckham, James R. Davila and Alexander Panayotov, Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures (Eerdmans 2013), 646. I am grateful to Jack Welch for this reference.

65 Sakenfeld (1985:148) helpfully considers three nuances of the question: (1) an open-ended question, whereby the people must beg Moses and Aaron; (2) “can we bring forth water” or (3) an indignant refusal (“shall we indeed?”). Whichever is preferred the effect is the same: Moses and Aaron arrogate the divine power to bring forth water. Sakenfeld (1985:135) herself rather misses the point by suggesting that: “The content of the words could for some reason be regarded as inappropriate” (italics added).
This is also emphasised by the LXX rendering of verse 10: “Listen to me….”66 Kok draws attention to a change from the *hiphil* form of the verb in verse 8 (*ta'awwh*) to the *qal* of verse 11 (*wacyw*) and, although he does not pursue this, the grammar confirms the underlying structural issue.68 Moses and Aaron *should* have acted as intermediaries, as signified by the *hiphil*, but did not do so.

However, it contrasts with prominent sources in rabbinic tradition which downplay the significance of Moses’ words.69 Of all the *Rishonim*, only the Ramban comes closest to the view expressed in this section; quoting Rabbi Hananel, Nachmanides says that, by saying, “are ‘we’ to bring forth water out of the rock” (Num. 20:10) the people thought Moses and Aaron brought forth the water out of the rock through their own wisdom, [and] that it was not a Divine miracle.”70 Even this does not put the matter as sharply as it could be because the focus is on the people’s misunderstanding rather than on Moses’ rebellion. Nachmanides’ argument would proceed along exactly the same lines had Moses’ words been a mere slip of the tongue.71

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66 Budd (1984:217) spots that Moses’ speech was “in some measure a claim that *they* had the power to provide the water” but does not develop the insight (similarly Cole 2001:327-328). Similarly, Davies (1995:205) considers the possibility that Moses and Aaron were “effectively usurping Yahweh’s prerogative” but does not consider how this relates to Moses’ actions or to the rest of the text. Ashley (1993:385) hesitatingly starts on the right lines: “If …Moses thought he and Aaron were the miracle workers, he was diverting the people’s attention from God…” but spoils things by claiming, lamely, (at 383) that “Moses forgot that he was only God’s instrument…..” Harsh punishment for a ‘senior moment.’ There is some overlap between the argument I am developing and that of Jacob Milgrom inasmuch as Milgrom is clear that “Moses ascribes the miracle to himself and to Aaron….”; Jacob Milgrom. *Numbers* (IPS 1990), 165. However, instead of seeing this squarely as an act of rebellion in which Moses rejects his calling before YHWH, Milgrom sees it as wrong on the narrow ground of “heresy.” For Milgrom, the particular issue is that, in speaking at all, Moses vitiated “all the pentateuchal passages which impose a uniform silence on Moses during his initiation of all the miracles”, lest the people think he was performing (foreign) magic (Jacob Milgrom, ‘Magic, Monotheism and the Sin of Moses’ in H. B. Huffmon *et al* (eds.) *The Quest for the Kingdom of God* (Eisenbrauns 1983) 251, 261; followed by Budd 1984:219. Since in verse YHWH explicitly commands Moses to “speak” to the rock, Milgrom follows Ramban in reading ‘el (“to”) the rock, in verse 8, as ‘al (concerning) the rock (see n.13, above). Moses is expected to inform the assembled Israelites of the imminent miracle. I do not see the justification for restricting our understanding of Moses’ behaviour in this way. For a critique of Milgrom’s position see Kok 124-125. Kok himself (1997:164) mistakenly puts all the weight of Moses’ offence on just one element (his use of the staff) and glosses over Moses’ words. Kok briefly recognises that, by his words, “Moses shows that it is not YHWH’s actions that have been brought to the fore but his own actions…” but the point is not developed.

67 Kok, 151.
68 Kok, 149.
69 Even to the point where Moses’ death in the desert is seen vicariously as atonement for the Golden Calf affair (*Sotah* 14a; R Hersh Goldwurm (ed.) *Tractate Sotah* (Vol 1, Mesorah 2000). Similarly, the location of Moses’ burial outside the Promised Land is seen as expiation for “the Peor incident [in Num. 25]” (*Sotah* 14a). Even where Moses’ words are seen as problematic, as in *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19.10, they are seen as comparable to Moses’ lack of faith in Num. 11:22 (*Bamidbar Rabbah*, 760). But this twelfth-century midrash reduces the issue to ‘lack of faith in God’s provision’ whereas, structurally, it is about something far more radical.
70 Ramban (Nachmanides), *Commentary on the Torah* (Charles B. Chavel tr, Shilo Pub. House 1974), 215-216. Pinchas Kahn, drawing on the work of the nineteenth century Rabbi Moshe Sofer (in his *Hatam Sofer*) and Rabbi Meir Simhah ha-Cohen (in his *Meshekh Hokhmah*, on Deut. 4.15) thinks Moses’ behaviour played into a general tendency on the part of the people to attribute the miracles to Moses’ superior abilities (though this hardly squares with the lack of deference shown to his leadership in the wilderness narratives). Kahn, 89 writes: “By using only a verbal command, the miracle… would have been correctly perceived as being the work of God.” But this does not follow at all: if there was, as on this argument, a tendency to deify Moses (which seems unlikely!), his performance of a yet greater miracle could just as well mean that Moses deserved to be worshipped to an even greater extent. Kahn himself puts Moses ‘sin’ in inverted commas, seeing it merely as an “error” that has its origins in “an intense emotional transference” from previous events in Num. 16 and Exod. 17. But whilst there are clearly resonances between these texts (and others), Kahn makes Exod. 17 determine the meaning of Num. 20 by claiming it is purely a reaction to previous events, with no independent meaning.
My approach contrasts even further with modern scholars who do not see any problem with Moses’ words at all. Several, breathtakingly, go so far as to claim Moses’ behaviour fulfils YHWH’s command to “… produce water for them from the rock…” (Num. 20:8). But this conclusory statement (“thus”, or, “in this way you shall produce water…”) is wholly dependent on the previous command to “order the rock to yield its water” (20:8). The idea Moses can go about the task however he likes so long as he produces water for the people, makes no sense given the narrative structure. Even worse, Moses and Aaron mischaracterise YHWH’s intention to provide water for the people. The corollary of Moses and Aaron claiming to perform the miracle is that the people believe YHWH does not want to provide the needed water. It also ignores the narrative requirement that YHWH be recognised “in the sight of” all Israel as her deliverer (as stated in 20:12). As Jacob Neusner rightly sees, writing broadly about Mosaic authority, Moses represents God to the people, not himself. His authority arises exclusively from his role as a channel for divine teaching and activity and not from his own personality or charisma. What makes Num. 20:2-13 so remarkable is precisely that Moses, here, abandons his vocation and speaks with his own authority.

In modern terms, it is a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). It is rather like Moses saying: I am no longer the Governor-General of Canada but the President. Or, I no longer represent the Queen, I am now supreme Head of State of the nation – not just its representative. In the light of Moses’ call in Exod. 3:4-4:17, and the entire narrative that has dominated Exodus-Numbers to date, it is hard to imagine more incendiary or seditious speech.

(2) Moses rebels against YHWH by raising his hand against YHWH

The statement that “Moses raised his hand…” (Num. 20:11), in the sight of all the people, is overlooked by nearly everyone but visually communicates Moses’ rebellion against YHWH. The ‘raised hand’, perhaps as a clenched fist, is a stock image for public acts of aggression in the Egyptian backdrop to Moses’ life, Pharaoh is widely portrayed on stelae as vanquishing his enemies portrayed on stelae as vanquishing his

72 William Propp (23, n. 22) objects that if the author or editor of Num. 20 “had wanted to make clear that Moses was sinfully claiming the power to work miracles,” then YHWH ought to have said: “Thus I shall produce [wəhotseti]…” rather than: “Thus you shall produce [wəhotseta]…” (italics added). But this semantic reading ignores the underlying structure. Either way, Moses is the agent who acts on behalf of YHWH to deliver Israel. As written, the reference to “you” (rather than “I”) affirms the underlying narrative: Moses is supposed to bring out water, as YHWH’s agent, and so must be seen to be acting as such. Propp (23 n. 22) also claims that the writer or redactor should have had Moses claim that he will produce the water, rather than ask a question, but this, too, is a redundant suggestion. Moses is still required to act as agent and, either way, his words have the effect of opposing his role within the syntagm.

73 Cohen, 162 claims that procuring water from the rock “was achieved exactly as divinely ordained and intended…” Cf. Gray, 261 “it is not recorded either that they obeyed or disobeyed the command to speak to the rock, but they carried out the divine intention of procuring the people water.”

74 In any case, the syntagm (Fig. 6) makes it clear that water is not the Israelites’ only need. Even if it was a simple case of ‘the end justifying the means’, Israel’s unbelief in YHWH is not slaked by Moses’ actions. Far from it, Moses’ behaviour, left unaddressed, would give Israel a more powerful reason not to trust YHWH.

75 Won W. Lee. Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel’s Migratory Campaign (Eerdmans 2003), 154.


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enemies with a ‘raised hand.’

79 Moses’ public act also recalls the person who sins with a so-called ‘high-hand’ (hmr dyB; Num. 15:30) using the same verbal root (~wr) as in Num. 20:11. Indeed, Num. 15:30 states that the person who acts in this way “defiantly reviles the LORD.”

Consequently there is a close fit between Moses’ words and his actions in terms of the message sent regarding his Performance. ‘Raising a hand against a king’ – as Moses does here in relation to YHWH – is an act of the utmost gravity. The juxtaposition of the hiphil form of the verb (~rYw) with the object (wdy-ta) is elsewhere used of Jeroboam, who “raised his hand” against King Solomon (1Ki. 11:26-27). There, the circumstances refer to nothing less than tearing the kingdom from Solomon’s hands (1Ki. 11:28-40); a revolutionary act which led to the irrevocable division of Israel. Moses’ behaviour, likewise, has drastic political consequences (see (C)(3)(iii), below).

C. Recognition

The Recognition stage concerns evaluation(s) of the action(s) and so, by looking carefully at each recognition, we are able to understand both the significance of Moses’ actions and the proportionality of YHWH’s response. 80 Strikingly, the Recognition section of the syntagm (Fig. 8, below) matches the Contract section (Fig. 6, above). In both sections different actants (or people) are sending different modalities (or messages). In the Contract section, this results in a conflicted subject whilst in the Recognition section it results in a conflicted message regarding the significance of what has happened. The people have vouloir-faire for water; YHWH empowers Moses to do it in a certain way and Moses succeeds in producing water, but by a different means to that which YHWH intends. The result is that the people are happy to get water, but YHWH is angry because He has been rebelled against. The result is that there are separate Recognitions. This further supports the argument that there are parallels between the Contract and the Recognition stage. From the people’s perspective, Moses is successful in performing the action although, crucially, from the perspective of YHWH (and the narrator) he is not. 81

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80 Of course, there are other examples of Moses doubting divine instructions, and questioning YHWH’s power (e.g. Exod. 3:11; 4:1, 10, 13; 5:22; 6:12, 30; Num. 11:11-15). But they cannot be lumped together with Num. 20:9-11, as some have tried to do (e.g. Stubbs who thinks Num. 20 is similar to Num. 11:13, 22). This is because, in each and every one of these other cases, the actantial sequence is entirely different. The fact that not every character flaw, or opposition, of Moses is reducible to the same actantial schema found in Fig. 8 strengthens my overall argument. For example, when Moses opposes YHWH in Exod. 3:11, 4:10 and 4:13 (“send someone else!”) the opposition arises precisely because Moses doesn’t want to be involved. It is a different problem to Num. 20:9-11, where he actively presents himself as Israel’s deliverer. Similarly, in Exod. 5:22 Moses’ complaint (“you have not rescued your people at all”) is a complaint that the ‘sender’ has not yet achieved the ‘object’ and benefited the ‘receivers’ (again, a different schema). Even Num. 11:11-15, which Cohen, 153, identifies as an equivalent ‘rebellion’ to Num. 20:2-13, is simply Moses confessing his inability to save the people (“I cannot carry all these people by myself”); Num. 11:14). Num. 20:9-11 is concerned with a unique problem in Moses’ life and an actantial analysis helps us to be clear as to what, exactly, is at stake.

81 We can usefully compare this ambiguity to that noted in the Recognition section of Exod. 17:1-6 (Fig. 5, above). The people get water to drink but this does not necessarily mean they regard Moses (or YHWH) as their legitimate leader(s).
Note that Moses appears twice in this diagram because he also sends a message to himself (see (4) below), as well as being the sender of messages to YHWH and Israel.

It is readily apparent that there are the following Recognitions:
- implicitly by Moses to Israel that he has personally rebelled against YHWH (see (1), below)
- implicitly by Moses to YHWH that he has personally rebelled against YHWH (see (2), below)
- explicitly by YHWH to Moses that Moses has personally rebelled against YHWH (see (3), below)
- implicitly by Moses to himself that he has personally rebelled against YHWH (see (4), below)

We shall explore each of these in 1-4, below.
Recognition from Moses to Israel
There is an implicit Recognition that Moses rebels against YHWH when Moses verbally claims to be Israel’s deliverer and raises his hand against YHWH. We have already considered this in (B), above.

Recognition from Moses to YHWH
There is an implicit Recognition that Moses rebels against YHWH when Moses verbally claims to be Israel’s deliverer and raises his hand against YHWH (see (B), above). In addition, there are two further aspects to the implied recognition vis à vis Moses and YHWH. These are seen in (i) Moses striking the rock rather than speaking to it and (ii) Moses’ misuse of the rod. We consider each in turn. (They do not form part of the recognition from Moses to Israel because there is no indication in the text that the assembly of Israel knew precisely what YHWH had commanded Moses and Aaron).

(i) Moses strikes instead of speaking
This constitutes an implicit recognition of Moses’ rebellion by virtue of the intertextuality between Exod. 17:1-6 and Num. 20:2-13. In Exod. 17:6, Moses was instructed to strike the rock upon which YHWH is ‘standing’. This implies, as we noted at III A above, that the rock will only produce water when YHWH is ‘standing’ there. In Num. 20:2-13 there is no reference to YHWH’s Presence at the rock. This might, in itself, be enough to indicate that Moses is not supposed to strike the rock this time. Indeed, YHWH does provide different instructions that Moses should, on this occasion, speak to the rock. This confirms the implicit message: don’t strike the rock. The absence of YHWH’s Presence and the new instruction means that when Moses strikes the rock he is not simply saying: ‘I will produce the water by a different means.’ What he is saying is: “I will produce the water, by striking, even when YHWH is not standing there.” It further emphasises Moses’ desire to be seen to be acting independently from YHWH.

This reading runs counter to those who enquire why Moses is commanded to take the rod in verse 8 “if he is not to use it [for striking].” But this wrongly assumes that the only use of the rod is to strike the rock, which is hardly the case. As noted in the Contract stage (Fig. 6, above) the rod is the symbol of divine authority. It is with this very authority Moses is empowered to command and not, in this case, to strike the rock. Sakenfeld thinks “no use for the staff is given” presumably because nothing is explicitly stated. But this overlooks the fact that Moses’ staff would retain its symbolic status even when not used for striking. Just because Moses is not commanded to strike the rock we cannot conclude that the rod has no function; on the contrary, having it ‘with’ him when he speaks to the rock is the message he sends to the assembly that he has the pouvoir-faire. Although scholars find YHWH’s command in Num. 20:8 baffling, it makes perfect sense given the underlying narrative structure: Moses is to

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83 1985:134.
84 Gray, 261 takes a narrowly semantic approach in claiming “[since] the narrative does not record what directions Yahweh gave as to the use of the rod… it is impossible to say whether… Moses was guilty of disobedience or unbelief.”
wield the rod in a manner that successfully performs the *devoir-faire* received from YHWH. Instead, Moses does the exact opposite.

This approach contrasts with leading rabbinic authorities which locate Moses’ wrong in his words and so downplay his actions. It also contrasts with rabbinic approaches which see Moses’ actions as problematic but do not characterise these in terms of rebellion. It also contrasts with modern scholars who tend to see nothing at all wrong with Moses’ actions. Nathaniel Helfgot complains that: “if the error was hitting instead of speaking, why doesn’t the text accuse him directly of this sin? (italics added).” But this demands that the text should make one particular element bear all the weight in a semantic fashion (just like modern commentators). Propp thinks Moses should be excused because he is carrying out YHWH’s commands “by the method he knows best.” But this wrongly assumes Moses is carrying out YHWH’s commands. On the contrary, Moses is not authorised to act in a way that publicly negates the message of *devoir-faire* received from YHWH. Similarly, Sakenfeld claims that, by speaking to the people and striking the rock, Moses and Aaron do not specifically act in accordance with YHWH’s command, but do not openly contradict it either. Both scholars imply Moses’ offence is a mere technicality, or procedural error. Nothing could be wider of the mark.

(ii) Moses misuses the rod

This is, of course, closely related to Moses’ act of striking rather than speaking to the rock. It is another implicit recognition of Moses’ rebellion because the message of the rod as a *pouvoir-faire*, in verse 8, is set in the context of previous messages from YHWH to Moses about the same object. The MT is clear that Moses struck the rock with “his rod.” This is the rod Moses

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85 Contra Cohen 153: “it is quite obvious… that the striking of the rock was, *ab initio*, the desired divine intention” (italics original), citing Exod. 17 as though that settles the matter. Kok 147 misses the point, charging Moses with “modifying YHWH’s instructions and showing no respect for the symbol of God’s presence…. But there is far more going on here than mere ‘modification.’

86 Against Sakenfeld 139 and Margaliot who focus on Moses’ words as the source of his wrong and exclude his actions. Helfgot, 56 n. 1 rhetorically asks: “how does this situation differ from Exodus 17 where the Almighty Himself commanded Moses to strike the rock?” But we have already seen in II C, above, that the situation in the ‘Exodus water-miracle’ is entirely different. There Moses wields the rod as agent; here, in Num. 20:9-11, he publicly rejects that role. Kok, 164 says that Moses’ use of the staff ‘crosses the line’ between the human and the divine, akin to the Garden of Eden. This broadly relates to my overall argument regarding Moses’ rebellion and the rejection of his calling but, even so, Kok focuses on Moses’ wrongful use of the staff and does not connect this to Moses’ words at all.

87 For example, Rashi, following *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19.10, claims the first strike produced only “single drops” because God had not commanded him to strike it.

88 Helfgot, 56. But as we have seen, Moses’ ‘speaking’ is problematic as well; there is no ‘either/or.’ Anyway, we need to be more precise than speaking of the ‘sin’ of ‘hitting.’

89 Propp, 24.

90 Sakenfeld, 147.

91 Colc, 319 completely misses the point in categorising Moses’ striking the rock in terms of “leadership” (his label), akin to Moses’ appeal for faith in Exod. 14:13 and his intercession in Num. 11:2 (at 319-320). But far from being the apotheosis of Moses’ leadership (as in Exod. 14 and Num. 11), Num. 20 is Moses’ nadir. Sakenfeld also misses the mark by suggesting that Moses and Aaron merely ‘spoil’ the “sacred moment” (150).

92 If the rod “undoubtedly [refers to] the one he used in Egypt to perform the signs” (Levine, 489) it certainly adds a further dimension to my argument. Gray, 262 and Propp, 22 both claim the reference to Moses’ rod is a textual error, consistent with their assumption that the rod is Aaron’s. This is rather like assembling a jigsaw puzzle with the aid of a pair of scissors and cutting round the pieces that don’t fit. Ashley, 382 claims the MT in verse 11 merely signifies Moses’ possession of Aaron’s rod (and cf. Cole, 326; Sawyer, 14 and Sturdy, 140) though Sakenfeld, 143 had earlier noted that “the Hebrew could quite easily have made this point by using the definite article as MT does in verse nine and as in fact the LXX does in both phrases.” She takes the view that verse 11 refers to the rod belonging to Moses, as does Milgrom 1990:165.
was given by God at the burning bush (Exod. 4:2) and used by Moses to bring plagues on Egypt (Exod. 9:23; 10:13) as well as the dramatic parting of the Sea of Reeds (Exod. 14:16). In sum, this stick is the signifier *par excellence* that Israel will be delivered by YHWH and not by a mere mortal. Even in the unlikely event that Moses borrowed Aaron’s rod, the point still stands that the rod is an emblem of divine authority “equivalent to the baton of a commander, [or] the sceptre… of a king.” It is this symbol of the power of YHWH which is used *against* YHWH in striking the rock. Moses strikes the means of YHWH’s provision (the rock) with the instrument of YHWH’s power (the rod). This further underlines the seditious nature of Moses’ actions. By striking the rock with the rod, Moses uses one aspect of YHWH’s *pouvoir-faire* against the other. Both are turned against the original Sender and are used by the subject to defeat the *devoir-faire* and, from Moses’ point of view, to assert his autonomy.

(3) **Recognition from YHWH to Moses**

There are three explicit recognitions from YHWH to Moses: (i) that Moses has rebelled against YHWH; (ii) that Moses has failed to uphold YHWH as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel and (iii) that Moses should be punished.

(i) **Moses rebels against YHWH**

YHWH’s word of judgment in Num. 20:24 is an explicit Recognition of the previous Performance element in the syntagm. This states: “…you rebelled (~tyrm) against my command” (Num. 20:24). The use of the standard verb for rebellious behaviour (cf. Deut. 21:18, 21) clearly indicates that Moses’ behaviour amounts to rebellion against YHWH. There is further, explicit, recognition although it is external to Num. 20. In Num. 27:14, as the moment of Moses’ death draws near, Moses is reminded that the reason for his and Aaron’s (premature) death is because “… you rebelled (~tyrm) against my word”, which also uses the standard verb for rebellion (hrm).

(ii) **Moses fails to uphold YHWH as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel**

The second explicit Recognition is YHWH’s word of judgement upon Moses in verse 12: “…you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy (ynvyDqhl) in the eyes of the people of Israel.” This too is Recognition of the Performance element in the syntagm. The language emphasises Moses’ autonomous actions. He does not merely fail to uphold YHWH as holy – he decides not to. Moses deliberately sabotages the *devoir-faire* he has received from YHWH,

93 Cf. Kok, 160.
94 Kahn, 88.
95 My approach contrasts with modern scholars who take exactly the opposite line and downplay the rod’s significance (e.g. Bellinger, Davies and Sakenfeld). Budd is typical of many who miss what is going on (“it is far from clear that the rod material really is intended to explain the sin of Moses and Aaron”, at 217). The point is also missed by Kok, despite making Moses’ misuse of the staff the sole issue. For Kok, the striking is “an illegitimate use of the staff” (at 160) only because Moses did it without God’s instruction. But the issue cannot be reduced to mere semantics: Moses’ actions communicate far more, namely, his rebellion against YHWH.
96 The verb here takes the plural form as it refers to both Moses and Aaron. Kok (1997:165) claims that “failing to do *exactly* what YHWH had commanded is [here] interpreted as rebellion” (emphasis supplied). But we do not need to rely on semantic arguments to make the case: it really is a rebellion, and as blatant as they come.
97 Contrary to those who claim the description of Moses’ sin in verse 12 is “rather generalised” (Budd, 220) and reflects the redactional circumstances of the text in exile more than “a close elucidation of the tradition.” From a structural perspective the description is, in fact, highly specific. Davies, 205 considers the possibility that Moses and Aaron were “effectively usurping Yahweh’s prerogative” but denies this stacks up with the charges in Num. 20:12, 24. “Unless a great deal is read between the lines… the narrative as it now stands does not properly bear out either charge” of ‘unbelief’ or ‘rebellion’ (italics added, 205; cf. also Gray, 261). But no eisegesis is required: we just need to pay closer attention to the text, ‘as it now stands’ in fact.
namely, to glorify YHWH as Israel’s sole Deliverer and to serve as YHWH’s agent in delivering Israel from death. We noted in Exodus 17:6 that water comes from the struck rock only when God is standing on it. In Num. 20:10-11 Moses decides to show that he can extract water from the rock even when YHWH is not ‘standing’ on it. By exaggerating his claim to produce water independently Moses increases dishonour to YHWH and robs Him of the goals of the intended action.

Moses’ failure to perform the devoir-faire is of great significance because it means YHWH is not honoured for His unique qualities, namely, His ‘holiness’. The use of the verb קְדָשׁ in verse 12 emphasises the ‘otherness’ of YHWH’s character and hence the great power and might by which YHWH alone is capable of delivering Israel (e.g. Deut. 33:2). It is this that has been denied. In an important aside, Kok notes a link between the use of the staff and the knowledge of YHWH (“By this you shall know that I am the LORD”; Exod. 7:17). Although Kok does not explore this, Num. 20 is in fact a singular example where the use of the staff does not lead to the knowledge of YHWH, specifically, the knowledge of YHWH being “holy” (20:12). It is this lack of knowledge that is remedied by YHWH ‘showing himself holy’ in verse 13; the very quality eclipsed by Moses.

A key aspect of the Recognition is that Moses’ action has meaning “in the eyes of the people of Israel.” This too is of great significance. Unlike the ‘Israel’ of the first water-miracle (Exod. 17:5-6) which refers to the Exodus generation, the ‘Israel’ of Num. 20 is the generation born in the wilderness. Num. 20:2-13 is thus presented as the first major miracle performed ‘in the sight of’ the new generation. Num. 20:1 is traditionally understood to signal the end of Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness. The wanderings began at Kadesh (Num. 14:25) and this is where they end. The status of ‘speaking to’ the rock to produce water as a ‘major miracle’ is evidenced by the fact it is without parallel in Israel’s experience (as opposed to, say, an act of judgement such as that performed against Korach and his followers in Num. 16).

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99 Acts such as ‘cleaving rocks in the wilderness’ are classically ‘God-like’ within biblical tradition (e.g. Ps. 78:15-16 and Ps. 114:8). They typify YHWH’s role as the great Shepherd of Israel who provides water for his flock (Ps. 78:15-16). Although there is no specific reference to ‘shepherding’ the narrative image of providing water is present. Again, when Moses performs such an act, as though he alone is Israel’s deliverer, it can only be understood as usurping YHWH.

100 Kok, 163-4.

101 Specht highlights the importance of the motif of knowing (“Erkenntnismotif”) in Num. 20 (280f). He rightly points out that the focus of the chapter is on ‘knowing God’, which is exactly where Moses and Aaron fail. The people drink without any word of recognition or thanks that the water comes from YHWH, thereby showing that Moses and Aaron have failed to contribute to the knowledge of the people regarding God. Similarly, Suzanne Boorer, “The place of Numbers 13-14 and Numbers 20:2-12 in the Priestly Narrative (P)” (2012) 131 JBL, 45 argues that Moses’ and Aaron’s behaviour in Num. 20:2-12 negates their behaviour in Exod. 16 inasmuch as they “block the knowledge of YHWH from the people” (60). Neither Specht nor Boorer connect the motif of ‘knowledge’ to the staff, however.

102 Seebass (2013:94) rightly notes that Moses’ and Aaron’s failure is in “hiding” (verborgen) YHWH’s decision to perform a first miracle for the new generation; however, he does not draw out the full implications. Indeed, Seebass characterises the failures of Moses and Aaron as “a missed chance to crown their leadership role…” (2002:282), claiming: “One gets the impression that 20:1-13 very discreetly seeks a form of ‘minimal guilt’ in order to be able to justify the narrative fact that neither Moses nor Aaron can enter the Promised Land within the framework of a theology of individual guilt.” However, there is far more going on in Num. 20 than a ‘missed chance.’ Nor are we talking about ‘minimal guilt’ but, rather, an overt act of rebellion.
This means that although Num. 20:2-8 parallels the content of the ‘Exodus water-miracle’, it does not parallel its function. In that respect, the equivalent event to that anticipated in Num. 20:2-8 is the first miracle(s) performed for the Exodus generation which, we note, also involved the use of Moses’ rod (Exod. 4:2-5). Just as the miracles described in Exod. 4:2-9 were performed “in the sight [yny[l] of the people” (4:30), in preparation for their Exodus from Egypt, so the miracle of Num. 20:2-8 is to be performed ‘before the very eyes’ [~hyny[l] of the assembly103 (Num. 20:8), in preparation for their entry to the Promised Land.104 The positive outcome of the first miracle(s) of Exod. 4:2-9 – namely, that “the people were convinced” (Exod. 4:31) – is equally intended here for the wilderness generation. Consequently, when Moses deliberately fails to carry out the intended goals in Num. 20:2-8, it is the equivalent of sabotaging the very first miracles for the Exodus generation. It is as though Moses had said to the entire Exodus generation: “You unbelievers! Shall we [Moses and Aaron] now turn water from the Nile into blood?” before striking the Nile twice with his rod.

A related Recognition is found in verse 13 where, it is said, YHWH “showed himself holy” in counter-response to Moses’ rebellion.105 It is not entirely clear whether YHWH is ‘sanctified’ through the provision of water for the Israelites or through punishing Moses and Aaron, or both.106 Num. 14 describes how, following the people’s rebellion against YHWH (Num. 14:9) and Moses (Num. 14:10), “the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel” (Num. 14:10). This can possibly be seen as a parallel event to YHWH ‘showing himself holy’ in the context of Moses’ rebellion, especially when both ‘appearances’ are followed by a word of judgement on the people (Num. 14:11-12) and on Moses (Num. 20:12). Therefore, I take the view that the phrase is related to Moses’ punishment.

The Recognition of Num. 20:12 finds a resonance outside the book of Numbers. Deut. 32:51 recalls YHWH’s reasons for Moses’ punishment in the following terms: “For you both [Moses and Aaron] broke faith [~TI[m] with Me among the Israelite people… by failing to uphold My sanctity among the Israelite people.”107 This too is an internal Recognition of the events of Num. 20:2-13. Interestingly, Deut 32:51 shows the connection between the Recognition in Num. 20:12 and that of Num. 20:24 (see (1) above). It combines the ‘rebellion’ language of Num. 20:24 with the ‘not upholding YHWH’s holiness’ language of Num. 20:12. Notably, it uses a different Hebrew verb for rebellion (l[m]) which is the standard verb for unfaithfulness.

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103 The first water-miracle takes place before “some of the elders” (Exod. 17:5) acting as representatives of the people. In Num. 20:8 and 10 the miracle is performed ‘before the very eyes’ of the “congregation” (hEC) which may refer to a group of elders, again acting in a representative capacity. In both cases there is the sense of the whole people being involved.

104 This change of perspective may explain why the wilderness generation, in Num. 20:5, addresses the dual aspect of deliverance noted in the call of Moses (viz. deliverance from Egypt and deliverance to the Promised Land, here characterised by grain, figs, vines and pomegranates; cf. Num. 13:23).

105 Although this form of Recognition, like that of verse 12, is also internal to the narrative there is a distinction to be made between what the narrator is claiming YHWH recognises in verse 12 and where the narrator is offering his own recognition (i.e. that ‘YHWH shows himself holy’) in verse 13. It is the difference between the narrator speaking about the actant and the narrator giving his own evaluation directly to the audience of the text (and not speaking about the actant). The latter is still a form of recognition internal to the text, because it is the narrator speaking, but it is an evaluation that is not attributed to any particular participant within the narrative.

106 Rashi thinks YHWH’s sanctification is achieved through the punishment of Moses and Aaron; Noth, 147 thinks verse 13 refers only to the provision of water, whilst Ashley, 386; Cole, 330 and Stubbs, 159 see it as referring to both.

107 Freund (1994:122) also states that Deut. 32:51 records “a different crime” from that described in Num. 20:9-11. This is extremely unlikely especially when Deut. 32:51 specifies exactly the same geographic location and both texts make the same point regarding the failure to uphold YHWH’s “sanctity.”
toward YHWH and human beings. It is also the same verb used in Num. 5:11-31 to describe the woman who acts unfaithfully (commits a *ma‘al*) against her husband by having sexual relations with another man (Num. 5:12). Since suspected adultery may be regarded as rebellion against the husband, Deut. 32:51 ties in with a pun on the terminology “waters of bitterness” (*mey hammarim*) of Num. 5:23 (see (5), below), further confirming the sense in which Moses’ behaviour is regarded as rebellion.

(iii) The announcement of Moses’ punishment

The third explicit message in the Recognition stage is YHWH’s announcement of Moses’ punishment (“…therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them”; Num. 20:12). The default position among scholars and commentators is that the punishment is either unintelligible or grossly disproportionate. This is understandable. If Moses is thought not to have committed an offence, or if the offence has not been correctly identified, then of course the punishment will be problematic. Since we have argued that Moses’ offence is perfectly clear it will be apparent in this section that the punishment is wholly proportionate.

The text itself is absolutely clear regarding the correlation of offence and punishment. YHWH’s word of judgement upon Moses and Aaron states: “Because you did not trust (*Tnmah*—Me enough… therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them”) (Num. 20:12). The significance of this part of verse 12 has not so far been discussed. Strikingly, the only other place in the Hebrew Bible where we find this same formulation of the verb ![ma](hiphil perfect, second person masculine plural) is in Deut. 9:23, where it refers to Israel’s rebellion in Num. 14: “And when the LORD sent you on from Kadesh-barnea, saying, ‘Go up and take possession of the land that I am giving you,’ you flouted the command of the LORD your God; you did not put your trust (*Tnmah alw*) in Him and did not obey Him.” This squares with the explicit Recognition in Num. 20:24 and the internal recognition of Num. 20:10-13 that Moses rebels against YHWH.

In addition, the reference to the people ‘flouting the command’ (*yP-ta wrmTw*) of YHWH in Deut. 9:23 parallels the reference to Moses and Aaron ‘disobeying the command’ of YHWH (*yP ~tyrm*) in Num. 27:14, further strengthening the connection between Num. 20:12 and Deut. 9:23. The verb ![hrm](is repeatedly used in *Deuteronomy* to describe Israel’s behaviour

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108 Helmer Ringgren, *[m]* in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds.) *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, tr. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1986), vol. VIII, pp. 460-463 claims that “from a different perspective the verb could be circumscribed by the expression ‘to deprive someone of something to which he is entitled’”; in the context of Num. 20, YHWH is deprived of the glory and honour due to His Name.

109 E.g. Culley, 30: “What [Moses] did wrong, and even this is not clear, does not seem to merit the punishment.” Sherwood, 171, breathtakingly, has Moses “going about his duties as if nothing had happened.” Dan Ben-Amos, ‘Comments on Robert C. Culley’s “Five Tales of Punishment in the Book of Numbers”’ in Susan Niditch (ed.) *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (Scholars Press, Atlanta 1990) 35, 37 bizarrely includes Num. 20:1-13 in support of his claim that the ‘punishment narratives’ of *Numbers* “[vindicate] the actions of Moses….” Coats (1977) sees Moses’s premature death as a characteristic of ‘hero stories’ but does not address its punitive aspect, whilst *Sotah* 13b denies Moses’ actual death.


111 These connections are ignored by commentators. Mann 484 thinks it surprising that the root ![hrm](relates to “Moses’ transgression, not the people’s” (italics original) but does not see how this is consistent with the seriousness of Moses’ own conduct in Num. 20. Margaliot, 224 rightly notes that the punishment of Moses and Aaron is exactly the same as that of the people; however, he overlooks Deut. 9:23 and cites a parallel, but different, expression in Num. 14:11. Ashley, 385 says that “Moses and Aaron succumb to the same sin” as the
generally (Deut. 9:7; 9:24; 31:27) and the mass rebellion against YHWH in Num. 14 in particular (Deut. 1:26; 1:43; 9:23).

The similarity between Moses’ offence and that of Israel is perhaps more apparent from the identical language used in Deut. 9:23 than from the content of Num. 14 and 20 themselves. This is because the presenting issues of Num. 14 (the people’s fear of entering the Promised Land) and Num. 20 (Moses’ claim to be Israel’s deliverer) might, at first glance, seem very different. However, there is a structural parallel between Num. 14 and 20; in both cases, the parties (Israel and Moses) are opposed to the sender’s object (deliverance), the result of which is to withhold benefit (in this case, honour) from YHWH as recipient. This is explicit in YHWH’s charge against Israel in Num. 14:11 (“How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?”), as well as by Moses’ response to YHWH’s threatened punishment, which expressly appeals to YHWH’s honour (Num. 14:13-16). Both Israel and Moses, in their different ways, deny YHWH’s role as deliverer. The people do not think YHWH can bring them into the Land (Num. 14:1-4), whilst Moses denies YHWH’s ability to produce water. Later, Israel tries to enter on their own terms (Num. 14:44-45), just as Moses tries to summon water from the rock on his own authority. Both Israel and Moses refuse to play their designated role in the story; both refuse to trust in YHWH and both rebel. This is explicit in Num. 14:9 where Caleb warns the people “do not rebel against the LORD” and in Num. 20:24 which expressly references Moses’ rebellion. It thus makes perfect sense that Moses’ behaviour is condemned in exactly the same way as Israel’s behaviour in Num. 14. It also explains why Moses’ punishment is appropriate. Israel’s punishment, in Num. 14, is a ban on entering the Promised Land and death in the desert (Num. 14:23-24; 29-35). Moses’ punishment in expressed in similar terms: “… you [Moses and Aaron] shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them” (Num. 20:13).

My approach in this section contrasts with the midrash that claims Moses’ death in the wilderness has no parallel of any sort with the generation that died there. Remarkably, the parallel between Num. 20:12 and Deut. 9:23 is overlooked. For example, Badmidbar Rabbah 19.13 claims Moses died in the desert, along with the wilderness generation, specifically to prevent people from thinking that “that the generation of the wilderness have no share in the World to Come!” Such a reading, which stresses the fact that Moses should not have died in the desert and did so for the people’s sake, as some form of vicarious atonement, is the exact opposite of my argument.

people in Num. 14 of ‘refusing to rely on YHWH’s promises’ although Moses’ own offence is characterised rather broadly as “modelling an illegitimate type of leadership”; in both cases the points can be sharpened up considerably. Cole, 321 recognises that Moses was punished “like the rebellious first generation” but does not pursue it.

112 There is some resonance between the structuralist argument made here and Boorer’s identification of thematic correspondences between Num. 13-14 and 20:2-12, in particular the parallel between the people’s “negation [in Num. 13-14] of the Abrahamic covenant promise of the land of Canaan” (55) and Moses and Aaron’s negation of their behaviour in Exod. 16 by failing to obey YHWH’s commands. Both represent the ‘uncreation’ of the nation of Israel.

113 762. Cf. also Devarim Rabbah 2.9 (37-38).

114 Contrast too Sotah 13b: Moses “cannot enter Eretz Yisrael, for then Joshua’s reign as leader would have to be delayed.” Modern scholarship has essayed similar views. E.g. Eckart Otto, “The Pentateuch in Synchronical and Diachronical Perspectives: Protorabbinic Scribal Erudition Mediating Between Deuteronomy and the Priestly Code” in Eckart Otto and Reinhard Achenbach (eds.) Das Deuteronomium zwischen Pentateuch und Deuteronomistischem Geschichtswerk (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 14 – 35 claims that: “With Moses’ death ended the time of the torah’s revelation. From then on the torah, that Moses wrote down the day he died, took over his function of mediating between God’s will and his people’s ethos. Thus Moses had to die the day before the
Likewise, my approach contrasts with the views of modern scholars who flatly deny any correlation between Moses’ offence and his punishment or assume that if such a correlation exists, it must be unintelligible.\(^{115}\)

To sum up, understanding Moses’ behaviour in structural terms helps us to identify the basis of the divine punishment, which is not be found in the breach of a particular semantic rule but in terms of Moses’ rejection of his calling before YHWH.\(^{117}\) Like Israel, who rebels against YHWH by rejecting the divine purpose in Num. 14 of entering the land, so Moses rebels against YHWH by rejecting the divine purpose in Num. 20 of being YHWH’s instrument in delivering Israel. Therefore, just as rebellious Israel was punished for her rebellion by not entering the Promised Land, so Moses is punished for his rebellion by not entering the Promised Land.

(4) **Recognition from Moses to himself**

The previous three Recognitions all concern YHWH’s explicit messages to Moses concerning his Performance. But there is also the question of Moses’ own reflection on his Performance of the message he sends himself in the Contract stage (Fig. 6, above). We have no indication of an explicit Recognition in the text, though Moses does, later, send a message of Recognition regarding this event to Israel, blaming them for their hand in the affair (Deut. 1:37; 3:26).

The critical question is: why would the events recorded in Num. 20 be seen by Moses as an appropriate occasion to assert his autonomy? Surely the easiest way out of the popular revolt in verses 2-5 is simply for Moses to do whatever YHWH says in Num. 20:7-8? After all, YHWH has provided Moses with a way out on every other previous occasion, so why doesn’t Moses take it, this time?

With this in mind, I draw attention to what is usually regarded as an odd feature of the literary presentation of Num. 20:2-13, namely, the record of the death of Miriam in Num. 20:1. Miriam belongs to the Exodus generation that dies in the wilderness, along with nearly everybody else, for being part of the popular revolt against the spies’ report (Num. 14).\(^{118}\) Right at the start of Num. 20 her death reminds us of the penalty for rebellion – exile from the Promised Land. This is hardly accidental because, as we saw in 3 (iii) above, there is a close structural link between the people’s rebellion in Num. 14 and Moses’ rebellion in Num. 20.

My proposal is this. Moses knows that when Israel rejects the message of *devoir-faire* she has received from YHWH – to be delivered from Egypt and enter the Promised Land – the result is death in the desert and not being allowed to enter. He thus knows perfectly well that if he rejects the message of *devoir-faire* that he has received from YHWH – *his* calling – the results are likely to be the same. The equivalent for Moses of Israel’s actions in Num. 14 is for him to refuse to serve as YHWH’s agent and present himself as Israel’s sole deliverer. This Moses chooses to do. Unlike some commentators, I do not see his actions as accidental or the product

\(^{115}\) E.g. Cohen 155, Freund, 111 and Helfgot 51.

\(^{116}\) Freund, 105, seeking at 113 to explain away textual challenges on the basis of source criticism; the P strand “appears to think that God’s justice in [sic] unintelligible to human beings and therefore any attempt to understand it is fraught with hubris.”

\(^{117}\) Contra Cohen: “There were certainly no grounds for any punishment to be meted out….” (155).

\(^{118}\) Contra Adriane Leveen, *Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers* (Cambridge, 2008), 150 who claims, without justification, that her death “is not associated with divine punishment.”
of a technical misunderstanding. I suggest Moses knows full well the implications of his actions, and their likely consequences. He is, after all, Israel’s supreme jurist. He can discern patterns, precedents and their consequences better than anyone else. It is true that YHWH provides him with a way out from the popular revolt but, this time, Moses does not want to take it. He chooses a different way out. His peer group, with whom he travelled out of Egypt, is now gone and even Miriam, his own sibling, is now dead. Faced with a re-run of the events of Exod. 17:1-6 – replayed this time with the second generation – Moses must have felt the worst kind of déjà vu. Psychologically, he has had enough. To put it crudely, at this point Moses has a ‘death-wish.’ He decides to rebel, and go the same way as Miriam. Moses’ words and actions – performed in full view of all the people – are an effective and public resignation from office. They are as clear as day and leave no possible room for doubt. How ironic, then, that we have missed it.

Of course, we cannot from a semiotic perspective make claims about what went on in the minds of characters in the text. Nevertheless, the tight juxtaposition of Miriam’s death with Moses’ rebellion is part of the textual presentation. We are entitled to draw such conclusions as we may, especially given both the structural and the linguistic links between the events of Num. 14 and Num. 20.

Further corroboration is suggested by Römer’s proposed chiastic structure for the rebellion narratives of Num. 11-21. Römer’s chiasm is framed by Num. 11:1-3 and 21:4-9 and centres on Israel’s refusal of conquest in Num. 13-14. This has the interesting effect of pairing Num. 11:4-34 (characterised by the people’s concern for food and what Römer characterises as “Moses’ revolt against YHWH”) with Num. 20:1-13 (characterised by the people’s concern for “water” and “Moses’ and Aaron’s revolt against YHWH”). I set aside Römer’s attempt to characterise Moses’ behaviour in Num. 11:4-34 and Num. 20:1-13 as equivalent ‘revolts.’ Clearly Moses’ actions in Num. 11:4-34 do not convey the public repudiation of his vocation in the eyes of all Israel, as is the case in Num. 20:2-12, and so the effect of labelling both as ‘revolts’ either exaggerates the one or minimises the other. This is easily remedied however; there is no reason why Moses’ behaviour cannot, in both cases, be relabelled more generically as a ‘reaction.’ Regardless of the labelling, however, Römer’s juxtaposition of Num. 11:1-3 and 21:4-9 is very suggestive for my argument because it suggests there may be a parallel between the two texts regarding Moses’ state of mind. This is in fact what we find. In Num. 11:14-15 Moses states: “I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.” This is very close to my suggestion that Moses knows full well the implications of his actions, and their likely consequences. He is, after all, Israel’s supreme jurist. He can discern patterns, precedents and their consequences better than anyone else. It is true that YHWH provides him with a way out from the popular revolt but, this time, Moses does not want to take it. He chooses a different way out. His peer group, with whom he travelled out of Egypt, is now gone and even Miriam, his own sibling, is now dead. Faced with a re-run of the events of Exod. 17:1-6 – replayed this time with the second generation – Moses must have felt the worst kind of déjà vu. Psychologically, he has had enough. To put it crudely, at this point Moses has a ‘death-wish.’ He decides to rebel, and go the same way as Miriam. Moses’ words and actions – performed in full view of all the people – are an effective and public resignation from office. They are as clear as day and leave no possible room for doubt. How ironic, then, that we have missed it.

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119 Do we have, perhaps, a replay of Moses’ emotional state in the life of the ‘prophet-like-Moses’, Elijah? (cf. 1 Kgs. 19:4)?

120 Here we note the limits of structural analysis. Members of the Paris School of semiotics sought to distance themselves from making psychological claims regarding characters in texts not least because, in their view, many of the narratives with which they were concerned did not involve ‘real people’ anyway. Their focus is on what characters do in a text, not their actual motives and this creates tension between the formal interests of semiotics and psychology. From a semiotic perspective, characters make sense in a story to the extent that we as readers attribute sense to them on the basis of information that is provided for us in the story by the narrator. In other words, what makes sense is our comprehension of characters’ behaviour and actions, as presented by the text; we cannot meaningfully speculate on their actual motives. Instead, we ask whether there is any information in the text which might suggest why Moses acted as he did. It is nevertheless important to ask this question since otherwise Moses’ motive is inexplicable.

121 2013, 68-69.
If this was what was going on in the mind of Moses – and we cannot know for sure – his deliberate rebellion must be tempered by compassion that this, uncharacteristic, choice was preferable to his carrying on as Israel’s leader.\textsuperscript{122} Strangely enough this reading fits the tender accounts of Moses’ death; a punishment with strangely no aura of punitiveness.\textsuperscript{123} Resisting the accusations of the people was Moses’ life-long challenge. Even whilst testifying to his legendary forbearance, to be overcome so close to the goal of reaching the Promised Land is the irony and the tragedy of Num. 20.

\textit{(5) Recognition from narrator/final redactor to the audience/reader?}

We have noted at several points the difficulty of formally including the narrator or final redactor as an \textit{actant} within the narrative syntagm. Without it being necessary to argue for this directly, I highlight two further Recognitions within the text, and its context, which support the argument that Moses’ behaviour constitutes rebellion against YHWH.

First, the narrator’s naming of the “waters of Meribah” (\textit{mey Meribah}) in verse 13. This refers explicitly to the Israelites ‘quarrelling’ with YHWH, punning on the root of the verb \textit{byr} (to quarrel, or dispute). It also acknowledges the people’s ‘quarrel’ with Moses (v. 3) in assembling against him (v. 2). But there may, in addition, be a further pun on the “waters of bitterness” (\textit{mey hammarim}) of Num. 5:23 (and cf. also Num. 5:18, 19, 24) as the first two of the three letters of the words for ‘bitterness’ (\textit{rm}) and ‘rebellion’ (\textit{drm}) (i.e. \textit{mem} and \textit{resh}), as well as “waters”, are referred to in both cases.\textsuperscript{124} If so, it confirms that what is at stake in Num. 20 is Moses’ rebellion because the issue in Num. 5 is also a form of rebellion (the unfaithfulness of a wife leading to doubt regarding the paternity of her unborn child).\textsuperscript{125} It is Moses’ rebellion against YHWH which is at stake in Num. 20, as the people do not see themselves rebelling (or even ‘quarrelling’) against YHWH. It is, in any case, Moses who is expressly said to ‘rebel’ and who is punished for his rebellion (Num. 20:24; 27:14).

Second, there is the significance of Moses’ behaviour at a wider, literary, level. Wenham persuasively argues that Num. 13-20 forms an identifiable cycle within \textit{Exodus-Numbers}\textsuperscript{126} whilst Milgrom rightly notes that Moses’ and Aaron’s behaviour can be seen as the climax of

\textsuperscript{122} Of course Moses was hoping YHWH might relent and still allow him to enter the land (Deut. 3:23-27).
\textsuperscript{123} Seebass (2002:284) thinks there is a conflict between the portrayal of Moses in Num. 20 as a fallible human being and Moses’ presentation in Deut. 34:10. For Seebass, Num. 20 emphasises YHWH’s leadership of Israel and restrains the over-elevation of Moses. More recently, Schmitt has argued that Deut. 32 and 34 belong to Pg’s Moses-tradition and not to a redactional layer which attempted to join priestly and Deuteronomistic material (190f). I suggest that we do not have to approach the matter as a conflict between texts and sources. We can resolve the tension in narrative terms: Moses does rebel against YHWH (and this is reflected in the seriousness of his punishment) but his rebellion takes place under mitigating circumstances (and this is reflected in the manner of its execution). Within the broader biblical tradition Moses’ behaviour is not altogether surprising: there is a patterning in a number of biblical narratives of Israel’s heroes and leaders going ‘off the rails’ toward the end of their lives (including, \textit{inter alia}, Noah, Gideon and Asa, King of Judah).
\textsuperscript{124} I owe this point to Bernard Jackson. Cf. prophetic uses of the adultery metaphor (e.g. Hos. 4:13). Any infidelity (for example, between YHWH and Israel and, conceivably, also between YHWH and Moses as Israel’s leader and representative) can be regarded metaphorically as adultery but only in the sense that it is seen as the violation of a relationship of hierarchical loyalty which, in the biblical patriarchal mindset, is essential to marriage. Note that Exod. 15:23-24 concerns an instance of the people ‘murmuring’ against Moses in respect of the “bitter waters” (\textit{mayim mimmara') of Marah.
\textsuperscript{125} The outcome for the guilty woman, in Num. 5:27, appears to be a miscarriage which suggests that the issue is her pregnancy. This in turn suggests that the reason for the husband’s jealousy (Num. 5:14) is doubt regarding his paternity of the child.
\textsuperscript{126} Wenham 16-18.
several rebellions of ascending status, beginning with the people in Num. 14 and followed by the Levites and chieftains of Num. 16. However, Wenham sees Moses’ ‘rebellion’ in a somewhat limited sense as failing to follow YHWH’s commands to the letter (see II B, above) whilst Milgrom frames the issue, I think also too narrowly, in terms of heresy. If, instead, we can be clear about the multiple ways in which Moses’ behaviour can be characterised as an ‘out-and-out’ rebellion this only strengthens the links between Num. 14, 16 and 20. Consequently, the structuralist argument offered here connects with the literary presentation of Numbers as a whole, though it has been surprisingly overlooked.

(6) Summary
We have shown that a structural approach enables us to (1) make sense of Moses’ behaviour by showing consistency between his words and his actions; (2) be more precise about what is actually going on (i.e. rebellion against YHWH); (3) counter narrowly semantic readings and root the wrongfulness of Moses’ behaviour in the underlying narrative so that (4) we can explain the proportionality of the punishment; and (5) do all this in a manner compatible with accounts of Num. 20 elsewhere in the biblical tradition. It also does all this with simplicity, but without oversimplification, and takes account of all the data presented by the text. For many, it will seem a radical retelling of the arc of the Moses story. It runs directly counter to the great majority of rabbinic approaches and may be difficult to absorb for those who see Moses as a ‘hero-figure’, in whatever religious tradition. Perhaps some readers of Moses have just expected too much of him? Idealised accounts of Moses are well entrenched by the Greek period. The fact that Num. 20 is included suggests this story was included before hagiography set in. Is it too much to suggest that this story became part of the canon, at a period closer to the memory of who Moses was and what he was actually like?

V. MOSES’ REBELLION AGAINST PHARAOH (EXODUS 2:11-15)

Having considered similarities and differences between the first ‘water-miracle’ of Exod. 17:1-6 and Num. 20:2-13 we now introduce a third text, Exod. 2:11-15, to underline the conclusions so far. One of the advantages of a structuralist approach is how it can highlight hitherto unnoticed parallels between texts. This is especially useful when the surface details of those texts have not already pointed us in that direction. In this section, I argue that Exod. 2:11-12 parallels Num. 20:9-11 in key respects, although, to the best of my knowledge, this has not previously been recognised.

Many scholars regard Exod. 2:11-22 (of which verses 11-15 are a part) as a literary composite although there is no consensus as to which parts should be attributed to which sources.

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127 Cf. also Budd, 219.
128 See n. 63 above.
129 E.g. Mary Douglas, Thinking in Circles: An Essay in Ring Composition. (Yale University Press, 2007), 51 sees the whole of Num. 20-27 as parallel to Num. 10:11-14. Although juxtaposing a large block of material with a couple of verses is rather unrefined, it does make some loose connection between the people’s rebellion in Num. 14 and Moses’ rebellion in Num. 20. Except that, in Douglas’ analysis the relevant connection between Num. 14 and Num. 20 is the people’s complaint; Douglas does not recognise Moses’ rebellion at all.
130 Freund, 114-118.
Structuralism, however, generally lends itself to the final form of the text and this is the approach taken in this article. The text itself reads as follows:

11 One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. 12 He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. 13 When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together. And he said to the man in the wrong, “Why do you strike your companion?” 14 He answered, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid, and thought, “Surely the thing is known.” 15 When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian. (Exod. 2:11-15 ESV)

Given that Exod. 2:11-15 presents the very first description of the adult Moses – the human figure who goes on to dominate the Pentateuch – there is a strong prima facie argument for thinking this text, with typical Hebrew economy, has important things to say that will reverberate throughout the rest of the Moses story. It is somewhat surprising, then, that scholars have tended to disregard this text. This article will show what we have overlooked.

Figs. 9-11, below, show the application of Jackson’s revised Greimasian narrative syntagm of Contract → Performance → Recognition to the text of Exod. 2:11-15. As in III and IV, above, the text is also coded according to the various Greimasian actants; however, since the biblical narrative can be told from the point of view of any subject – with each actant having a different function in others’ stories – a basic choice has to be made regarding ‘whose story it is’ and hence the point of view from which the story is being analysed. Thus one could reconstruct the narrative from the viewpoint of each of Pharaoh, the Egyptian and the Israelite (each then being subject/receiver). Since the purpose of this article is make better sense of the textual presentation of Moses’ behaviour, I proceed on the basis that Exod. 2:11-15 is Moses’ story. This is the same approach taken in III and IV, above, regarding Exod. 17:1-6 and Num. 20:2-13, respectively.
The Contract stage (Exodus 2:11-14)

The first, Contract, stage shows the various senders, objects and receivers which together constitute Moses as ‘subject.’ Because Pharaoh and Israel are sending different messages to Moses, as well as Moses himself, these can be diagrammed as five separate instantiations of contract (Fig. 9, below). Moses is presented as receiver because he is being constituted as the subject of the intended action.

The arrows pointing from different Senders (Pharaoh, Moses and Israel) to Moses represent different sets of messages from different sources that constitute Moses as a subject. On the one hand, Moses receives an implicit message of *devoir-faire* from Pharaoh: as a prince of Egypt, there are things Moses should do as a heteronomous subject. It is not clear what kind of mandate, if any, Moses had from Pharaoh in relation to his two particular excursions (impliedly, his first) from the palace. Yet, in allowing Moses to live in the palace as Pharaoh’s daughter’s adopted son, Pharaoh sends an implicit message to Moses that he owed loyalty and obedience to Pharaoh. The evidence for this in the text is both the statement that Moses became the adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter (Exod. 2:10) and the Israelite’s objection “Who made you a prince and a judge over us?”; Exod. 2:14). At the same time, Moses also receives a
message from Israel concerning their desire (vouloir-faire) to be delivered from Egyptian oppression although, of course, this message is a general one. At this stage, Israel desires an end to her condition of slavery. There is no suggestion that the Israelites saw Moses as the instrument of deliverance (quite the reverse). The result of these different messages is that Moses is constituted as a conflicted subject.\textsuperscript{132}

In addition, and at some point, Moses clearly sends himself several messages which are different from those already received from Pharaoh and Israel. We have, however, no evidence in the text of any message Moses sends to himself. We can, however, say on the basis of the text that when Moses goes “out to his people” and “looked on their burdens” and “saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people” he clearly decides to act on that message.\textsuperscript{133} The fact of the decision is clearly in the text of Exod. 2:10-11 because it is what Moses does and it also forms the basis of Pharaoh’s vengeance (Exod. 2:15). The message may be understood either as an attempt to rescue the Israelite from death or as taking vengeance for a death that had already occurred. The verb used to describe the Egyptian’s action (hkn) in verse 11 may or may not refer to a fatal beating (cf. Exod. 21:20-21). However, the fact that Moses responds in kind in verse 12 (%Yw) – and the Egyptian dies – raises the possibility the Egyptian had already killed the Hebrew when Moses intervened.\textsuperscript{134} In so doing, Moses also sends himself a message to rebel against Pharaoh.\textsuperscript{135} It is a secret rebellion since Moses’ behaviour is covert both before and after the act. In rebelling against Pharaoh, Moses also, impliedly, sends himself a message that he should provide leadership to Israel. This is confirmed by his ‘going out’ the next day and challenging the violent Israelite in v. 13. It is the combination of these messages

\begin{itemize}
\item This conflict mirrors that of Moses’ own ethnic and personal identity as an Israelite, subject to Pharaoh’s murderous decree, who is brought up in the ‘house of Pharaoh.’
\item Note there is no semiotic term for ‘taking a decision’ (see n. 59, above). Consequently, all we can say is that Moses has sent himself a message and he clearly acts on it. It may be queried whether Moses knows he is Israelite when he leaves the palace to visit Goshen (impliedly for the first time). On the other hand, the narrator’s description of Moses’ going ‘out’ emphasises his blood ties: viz. “his people… a Hebrew… one of his people” (v.11). Moreover this emphasis follows immediately upon the observation wayyigdal Moshe (“when Moses had grown up”, contrasting with the reference in verse 10 to wayyigdal hayyeled (“When the child grew up”; JPS). This presentation strongly implies that Moses is aware of his personal history which was, of course, known among the Israelites. The question of who ‘sends’ Moses ‘out’ to visit his people is left unanswered by the text. Leaving the ‘sender’ unidentified is a common enough feature of narrative sequences (who sends the woodcutter to aid Little Red Riding Hood?). Its effect, as here, is to create mystery and raise questions. The ambiguity is preserved in the Jewish tradition to which the apostle Stephen appeals in his summary of Moses’ life, at his trial before the Sanhedrin: “When [Moses] was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel” (Acts 7:23, emphasis added). Was Moses’ behaviour self-directed (e.g. natural curiosity)? Or was he prompted, in some sense, by YHWH? Was he, even, sent by Pharaoh in some official capacity (whether Pharaoh knew Moses’ identity and accepted it, despite his decree)? This in turn begs the question of what was intended by Moses leaving the palace on that occasion and his goals in visiting the labour camp. Propp, Exodus, 166 suggests that his visit in verse 11 was already an indicator of his desire to foment change: “If one day [Moses] precipitously goes to see his brothers’ labours, we know his disquiet and commiseration have been growing.” Philo Mos. 1, 8 l. 40-44 presents Moses as regularly going out to alleviate his people’s distress, in various ways (n., 297-299). From this we might infer the possibility that Moses saw himself as initiating some kind of ‘mercy mission’ in Exod. 2:11-13. Acts 7:25 goes so far as to supply Moses’ motivation: (“He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand…”). The latter sources, interestingly, presuppose Moses already understood he was an Israelite.
\item So Terence E. Fretheim, Exodus (Int.; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 42 and Martin Noth, Exodus (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1962), 35-36. Childs, Exodus, 29 claims the latter “overlooks the writer’s subtlety in leaving its meaning [i.e. the verb hkn] indefinite.”\textsuperscript{136}
\item It could be questioned whether we can be sure that rebellion against Pharaoh was Moses’ (primary?) intention. Perhaps Moses thought he could be allowed to act in this way towards a minor functionary, or maybe even justify it? But if so, why does Moses take care to ensure he is not seen? The implication of his behaviour is that his actions will be understood by Pharaoh and his court as rebellion, as indeed they are.
\end{itemize}
which constitute Moses as an autonomous, as opposed to a heteronomous, subject. The question arises: what is the modality of the message Moses sends himself? Is it a matter of devoir-faire (obligation) or vouloir-faire (desire)? It is impossible to know: all we can say is that the answer depends on Moses’ commitment.

Moses’ messages to himself of savoir-faire and pouvoir-faire concern his competences, in terms of both knowledge and power, respectively, to perform either the devoir-faire (from Pharaoh) or the vouloir-faire (from the Israelites). Among the many benefits of an actantial analysis is the way in which it directs our attention, far more than would otherwise be the case, to the message of pouvoir-faire. This actantial insight can be developed further on traditional biblical grounds. Verse 12 states that Moses “struck down” (אָתַם) the Egyptian, impliedly with a lethal object in his hand. Remarkably, all other instances of this particular form of the verb הָטַם in Exodus–Deuteronomy, when used of human beings, refer to individuals striking with a rod. This is the case for Moses (Exod. 7:20; Num. 20:11), Aaron (Exod. 8:13) and Balaam (Num. 22:23, 27). This creates a strong presumption that, in verse 12, Moses strikes the Egyptian with a rod. All this further adds to Moses’s status as a ‘conflicted subject.’

**The Performance stage (Exodus 2:11-12)**

The Performance element concerns what the subject does in order to achieve the goals. In terms of Moses’ acts upon an object (persons and things) the Performance element can be represented as follows (see Fig. 10 below):

![Fig. 10: Narrative syntagm of Exod. 2:11-12 (focusing on Performance stage)]

136 In an older style of Greimasian schema, the rod would have been presented as ‘helpers’ (cf. Fig. 1 above) but that is exactly the kind of personalisation which the move away from ‘helper’ and ‘opponent’ seeks to avoid.
137 And not YHWH (Exod. 9:25; Num. 11:33).
138 Most likely a fairly long, plain, strong staff. Many officials carried staves.
The Recognition stage (Exodus 2:11-12)

The Recognition stage concerns the meaning(s) of the action(s) and so, by looking carefully at each recognition, we are able to understand the significance of Moses’ actions, as well as Pharaoh’s and Israel’s response. Strikingly, the Recognition section of the syntagm (Fig. 11, below) matches the Contract section (Fig. 9, above). In both sections different actants (or people) are sending different modalities (or messages). In the Contract section this results in a conflicted subject whilst in the Recognition section it results in a conflicted message regarding the significance of what has happened. In structuralist terms, from the perspective of Moses and Pharaoh, Moses is successful in acting on Israel’s behalf (whether by delivering the Israelite from death or taking vengeance) and in rebelling against Pharaoh. However, from the Israelite’s (and, impliedly, Israel’s perspective), Moses is not successful. Their evaluation is that Moses’ actions simply establish him as an opportunistic killer who is as likely to kill an Israelite as he is to kill an Egyptian (Exod. 2:14).

There are two recognitions from Pharaoh to Moses: (1) that Moses has rebelled against Pharaoh (and has therefore failed to keep his rebellion secret) and (2) that Moses is deserving of punishment.139 There are also three recognitions from Israel to Moses: (1) that Moses either succeeds in delivering an Israelite from death/or avenging his death; (2) that Moses is seen as a danger and a threat to Israel and (3) that Moses has acted in a self-appointed manner. There are also three recognitions that Moses sends himself, namely: (1) that Moses has rebelled against Pharaoh; (2) that Moses has, contrary to his intentions, failed to keep his rebellion secret and that (3) Moses fails to provide leadership to Israel (v. 15) (see Fig. 11, below).

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139 From Pharaoh’s perspective, the message that Moses has rebelled and that this is known publicly amounts to the same thing, whereas for Moses they are two separate messages.
Having been constituted as a conflicted subject at the Contract stage (Fig. 9, above), it is clear that Moses acts on his own messages of *devoir-faire* or *vouloir-faire*, and the message of *vouloir-faire* from Israel. However, he does not act on the message of *devoir-faire* received from Pharaoh.

Considering the two recognitions from Pharaoh to Moses we turn, first, to the implicit recognition that Moses has rebelled against Pharaoh. This is reflected in the text by Moses’ killing of the Egyptian. This cannot plausibly be interpreted as merely a private attack on a minor functionary. The scene that Moses encounters in verse 11 – of an Egyptian striking another man – is stereotypical in Egyptian art, dating back to at least 3000 BC. As William H. C. Propp rightly notes: “The author is not primarily depicting the relationship between slaves and their bosses, but between Israel and Egypt.” Moses’ response is understood as fighting against Pharaoh on behalf of ‘foreigners’; in a word, revolution.

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140 Keel, *Symbolism*, 292 claims pictorial representations of the Egyptian ‘smiting motif’ may be traced to the predynastic period, appearing in a tomb at Hierakopolis in Upper Egypt.

141 Propp, *Exodus*, 166.


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The second recognition is Pharaoh’s explicit attempt to kill Moses (v. 15). It could be argued that Pharaoh’s death sentence on Moses is because Moses’ actions disclose to Pharaoh that he is Israelite, despite Pharaoh’s decree. This assumes Pharaoh did not know this already and that the point of the story is that it is this action that ‘blows Moses’ cover.’ However Moses only becomes afraid in v. 14 when the Israelite refers to the killing, whereupon Moses reacts “Surely the thing (haddabhar) is known.” Here, the dabhar which was previously ‘hidden’ refers primarily, and most naturally, to the dead Egyptian whom Moses “hid in the sand” (v. 12). Likewise, when Pharaoh is also said to hear of the “thing” (et-haddabhar) the most natural referent of the dabhar is, again, to Moses’ killing. We have seen that Moses’ actions can only be understood as rebellion and, indeed, Pharaoh responds as such. 143 Moses flees and is exiled from the sphere of Pharaoh’s authority (v. 15).

Turning to the recognitions from Israel to Moses we note, first, that Moses succeeds either in delivering the Israelite in verse 11 from death or avenging his death. However, by his actions, Moses is seen by the representative Israelite man as someone who is spoiling for a kill. 144 Thus the second recognition is that Moses is evaluated as a danger and a threat (“Do you mean to kill me…?”, verse 14). 145 The third recognition is the other remark by the Israelite man in verse 14 and, impliedly, by Israel as a whole: “Who made you a prince and a judge over us?” The rhetorical question and its lack of an answer indicates that Moses is acting on his own initiative and in a self-appointed manner. There is no recognition on Israel’s part that Moses is acting on behalf of the ancestral deity, even if we were to admit that as a possibility. 146

Finally, regarding Moses’ own recognitions of his actions, we note that Moses rebels against Pharaoh, as seen in his flight from Pharaoh’s presence (v. 15). Second, Moses recognises that he has failed to keep his rebellion against Pharaoh secret (v. 14). Third, he recognises that he has failed to provide leadership to Israel. This is reflected in his lack of an answer to the Israelite’s challenge, and in his exile from his people (vv. 14-15). 147

A further recognition of Moses’ actions is arguably provided by the narrator. Within the broader story of Genesis-Exodus it is significant that practically the first action which the adult Moses performs is striking an Egyptian (“he struck down the Egyptian”; wayyak et-hammitsri; Exod. 2:12). The patriarchal narratives already contain a promise of deliverance. God’s covenant with Abram contains the promise that when Abram’s descendants are “enslaved and oppressed four hundred years” (Gen. 15:13; JPS) God will “bring judgment (dan) on the nation that they serve” (Gen. 15:14). As Exodus unfolds and Egypt is indeed judged (although the specific word dan is not used) we find that the phrase ‘striking Egypt’ or ‘striking the Egyptians’ is closely associated with divine action, using the same verb as Exod. 2:12 (e.g. Exod. 3:20; 9:15; 12:12, 29). By killing the Egyptian it is as though Moses seeks to perform,

143 Although as Fretheim, Exodus, 42 points out, in becoming the subject of Pharaoh’s “murderous edict,” the prior edict of Exod. 1:22 catches up with Moses.
144 As George W. Coats, The Moses Tradition (JSOTSS 161; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 108 notes: “Whatever Moses did to the Egyptian was the same act that the Egyptian was doing to the Hebrews.”
145 As F.V. Greifenhagen, Egypt on the Pentateuch’s Ideological Map (JSOTSS 361; London: Continuum, 2002), 64; puts it: “…the murder of the Egyptian…was not an act of solidarity or liberation… it only confirmed for them the image of the oppressor… Moses was exactly what he appeared to be, a member of an oppressive Egyptian royal house.”
146 Acts 7:25 implies that Moses thinks he is so acting. Greifenhagen, Egypt on the Pentateuch’s Ideological Map, 65 n. 75 claims that “On a theological level, the narrative has Moses’ efforts fail… because the deity has not yet properly commissioned him” whilst Coats, Moses Tradition, 108 asserts that Moses’ act “is the beginning of God’s response.”
147 Childs, Exodus, 31 states it bluntly: “Moses does not succeed in his attempted deliverance.”
by his own personal authority, a uniquely divine action. The consequences are also notably
different: when Moses ‘strikes’, he goes into exile but when God ‘strikes’, Israel is delivered.
In the light of this broader narrative it is unclear who exactly sends this recognition, and to
whom; presumably it is the narrator to his audience. It certainly emphasises the recognition
sent by Israel to Moses (that he acts in a self-appointed manner) and the message Moses sends
himself (that he is unable to lead Israel on his own authority).

All this is relevant as we consider Num. 20:2-13 inasmuch as there appears to be a series of
structural similarities between this text and Exod. 2:11-15. By reading these as parallel texts,
we hope to draw some conclusions regarding the overall trajectory of the Moses story.

VI: READING NUMBERS 20:2-13 AND EXODUS 2:11-15 AS PARALLEL TEXTS

We begin by noting a series of structural similarities between Num. 20:2-13 and Exod. 2:11-15
at the Contract stage. This can be seen by comparing Figs. 6 and 9. In both texts:

- There is a rebellion against a sender by the subject. In Exod. 2:11-15 the sender is
  Pharaoh who sends a message of devoir-faire to Moses to serve as his agent by
  upholding Pharaonic rule. In Num. 20:2-13 the sender is YHWH who sends messages
  of devoir-faire to Moses to serve as YHWH’s agent in delivering Israel and to glorify
  YHWH as Israel’s sole deliverer. In both cases Moses sends himself a message to rebel
  against the sender, thus constituting himself as an autonomous subject.

- Israel (or a representative Israelite) sends Moses a message of vouloir-faire wishing to
  be delivered from death. In Exod. 2:11-15 the deliverance is from a violent death,
  whilst in Num. 20:2-13 the deliverance is from death through lack of water.

- There is a message of pouvoir-faire concerning a striking implement with which to
  perform the act of rebellion. In addition, though my argument does not depend on it,
  there is a strong presumption that Moses uses a rod in Exod. 2:12.

Second, there are structural similarities between Num. 20:2-13 and Exod. 2:11-15 at the
Performance stage. This can be seen by comparing Figs. 7 and 10. In both texts:

- Moses raises his hand against another.
- Moses wields a striking instrument against an object.

Finally, there is a series of structural similarities between Num. 20:2-13 and Exod. 2:11-15 at
the Recognition stage. This can be seen by comparing Figs. 8 and 11. In both texts:

- Moses’ actions are evaluated as those of a rebel. Moses rebels against Pharaoh and
  against YHWH. In both cases he asserts his autonomy by symbolically ‘raising his hand
  against a king.’
- There is a punitive response by the sovereign who is threatened by Moses’ rebellion. In
  consequence, in both cases, Moses suffers a loss of status. In addition, in both cases,
  Moses ends up in a symbolic place of exile (Midian/burial outside the Promised Land).

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148 As Houtman, *Exodus*, 294 says: “the writer intimates that redemption is not going to be a human achievement
but solely the work of God.” For the distinction between the *oratio directa* of the *actants* and the voice of the
narrator see n. 50, above.
• Moses’ role in seeking to deliver Israel is ambiguous. In both cases Moses is seen, at some level, to be effective (either in delivering or avenging the stricken Israelite in Exod. 2:12 and in releasing water for the stricken Israelites in Num. 20:11). At the same time, it is equally recognised that Moses is ineffective. In Exod. 2:15 Moses fails to deliver Israel (fleeing instead to Midian) whilst Num. 20:12 makes it clear (at least to Moses, Aaron and the narrator’s audience) that Moses lacks independent power to deliver Israel.

• Moses acts in a self-appointed manner. This is seen in the Israelite’s accusation of Exod. 2:14, whilst Num. 20:12 makes it clear (at least to Moses, Aaron and the narrator’s audience) that Moses acts on his own authority.

• Moses seeks to perform, by his own personal authority, an action that is closely associated with God. In Exod. 2:12 he strikes an Egyptian whilst in Num. 20:11 he appears to bring water from a rock.

• Moses’ position as Israel’s leader is negated. In Exod. 2:14 Moses’ leadership is rhetorically denied by the Israelite whilst in Num. 20:12 YHWH announces its effective termination.

Discovering structural parallels between Exod. 2:11-15 and Num. 20:2-13 has several obvious and weighty implications.

First, although nothing in my argument in III-IV is affected by my claim in this section, the structural similarities between Exod. 2:11-12 and Num. 20:9-11 strengthen the argument, established on other grounds, that Moses’ behaviour in Num. 20:9-11 should rightly be characterised as rebellion against YHWH.149 Given that this description of Moses’ behaviour in Num. 20:9-11 goes against the grain of exposition and scholarship on this subject, any additional textual support in favour is clearly significant. The combination of texts suggests that, just as Moses rebels against his patron Pharaoh in Exodus so he later rebels against his benefactor YHWH in Numbers. Of course, the circumstances of the rebellion are vastly different in each case but the parallel remains.150 The reference in Num. 20:12 to Moses’ behaviour “in the eyes of the people of Israel” may even allude to its visual correspondence to the earlier event. Did Moses’ display of anger and violence, with a ‘raised hand,’ ‘striking,’ with ‘a rod’ look like, and evoke, Moses’ first act in relation to Israel?151 Tg. Ps.-J. on Num. 20:11 intriguingly alleges that when “Moses raised his hand and smote the rock with his staff twice: the first time blood dripped….”

Second, if this argument is correct it tells us something important about the overall structuring of the Moses story. Commentators have questioned whether Exod. 2:11-15 provides “some

149 For arguments independent of this section for characterising Moses’ behaviour in Num. 20:9-11 as rebellion against YHWH, see Burnside forthcoming.

150 In saying this, I am not claiming that Moses’ behaviour in Num. 20:9-11 is problematic because it evokes a particular episode from Moses’ personal history. I am claiming it is problematic because it is an act of rebellion against YHWH, and this can be seen more clearly by its standing in parallel with a similar act of rebellion against Pharaoh.

151 The art historian Lawrence Silver has an interesting discussion on van Leyden’s 1527 painting Moses after Striking the Rock, noting that the artist chooses to dwell upon the aftermath of the striking. Van Leyden portrays Moses and Aaron gazing at the rod in shock, as if it were a lethal instrument, or murder weapon. Silver even describes it as “the fatal rod” (403); Lawrence A. Silver, “The Sin of Moses: Comments on the Early Reformation in a Late Painting by Lucas van Leyden” Art Bulletin 55 (1973): 401-409, here 401. We pause to note that Moses’ rod (unlike, say, the bronze serpent of Num. 21:4-9) is never heard of again. Was it a tainted object, not unlike a murder weapon?
kind of exposition for the larger Moses saga…”

My argument suggests an overall coherence to the narrative; in Moses’ beginning is his end, and *vice versa*. Interestingly, the argument that Exod. 2:11-15 and Num. 20:2-13 can be read as parallel texts has some precedent. In the midrash *Petirat Moshe*, Moses’ prayer for suspension of judgment pronounced in Num. 20 has Moses rhetorically ask of God: “Thou didst slay all the firstborn of Egypt, and shall I die on account of one single Egyptian that I slew?” (118-119).

There are also resonances within the biblical texts. First, we note that the people’s accusation in Num. 20:4-5 is not “Why has YHWH brought us up…” but “Why have you [Moses and Aaron] brought us up…..” (cf. Exod. 17:2-3). This evokes the motif of Moses as a ‘failed deliverer’ in Exod. 2:11-15. Second, the people frequently accuse Moses of threatening to ‘slay’ them (e.g. Exod. 5:21; 16:3; 17:3 and Num. 16:3), evoking the motif of ‘Moses the killer’ and especially the Israelite’s question in Exod. 2:14 “Do you mean to kill me…?” Finally, Dathan and Abiram’s revolt against Moses includes the following accusation: “Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also make yourself a prince (r’Tfḥ~G) over us?” (Num. 16:13). This recalls the Israelite’s question of Exod. 2:14 (using the noun rḤ, related to the verb rrf in Num. 16:13). There seems little doubt that the singular event of Exod. 2:11-15 remained ‘live’ throughout Moses’ lifetime. We should not, then, be surprised if motifs that recur in later ‘rebellion’ texts such as Exod. 17 and Num. 16 also appear in Num. 20.

Moreover, Yehuda Radday has argued that the books of the Pentateuch form an ABXBA chiasm (cf. also BT *Shabbat* 31a). The significance for reading Exod. 2:11-15 and Num. 20:2-13 as parallel texts is that if the events of Exodus 2 were to be repeated, according to Radday’s chiastic arrangement, Num. 20 is roughly where we might expect them. Indeed, if Radday is correct, we should even expect there to be verbal connections between Exod. 2 and Num. 20.

Texts brought, perhaps unexpectedly, into conversation in this way can helpfully shed light on each other and provide further angles on traditional questions regarding literary history and final form. Inasmuch as Num. 20:2-12 should be read in the light of Exod. 2:11-15, my argument challenges those, like Römer, who claim that “… the texts contained in Numbers cannot be read, whether linguistically or on a content-related level, as a continuation of the priestly or non-priestly texts of the previous books.” In this respect, my argument supports and develops Römer’s other claim that “[t]he rebellion narratives in Num. 11-21 have an important compositional function, not only with reference to the book of Numbers, but also for the Pentateuch as a whole.” But there are other implications as well. Lohfink contends that Num. 20 was written to convey a special message to Israel in exile, in particular, the danger of failing to trust in and proclaim the wonder-working power of God. If my argument is on the right lines, and assuming source critics have a point in assuming exilic redaction, Lohfink’s suggestion can be taken in a quite different direction: the message to the leadership is not merely about trusting in God; rather it is about trusting YHWH for deliverance and not initiating an armed rebellion while in exile.

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154 At 66.
155 At 84.
To sum up, a comparison of Figs. 6-8 with 9-11 shows there is a range of precise structural correspondences between Exod. 2:11-15 and Num. 20:2-13. There are simply no other texts in the Moses story where we find this precise combination of elements. Although the biblical text “shows little interest in [Moses’] life before he meets YHWH”\(^ {156} \) the little we are told in Exod. 2:11-15 is of crucial importance to what follows – and to making sense of Num. 20:2-13.

VII. CONCLUSION

Although Num. 20:2-13 has long been regarded as a difficult passage I have argued that applying a structuralist methodology helps us to understand what is actually going in the text and to see what we have missed. By applying Jackson’s pioneering reformulation of Greimas’ actantial schema we see that Num. 20:2-13 is structurally very different to the ‘Exodus water-miracle’ of Exod. 17:1-6. Although Moses is presented in both texts as a conflicted subject, Num. 20 is unique in the Moses story in that Moses sends himself a message to rebel against YHWH. This runs entirely counter to Moses’ previous responses as subject to messages received from YHWH. As such, Num. 20 radically destabilises the story told of YHWH, Moses and Israel since Moses’ call at the burning bush. Recognitions of Moses’ rebellion internal to the text include YHWH’s words of judgement in Num. 20:12 and 24 (which explicitly refers to rebellion). Further Recognitions can be found by looking at the significance of Moses’ Performance. Each of his actions, including his verbal claim to be Israel’s deliverer; ‘raising a hand’ against YHWH; striking instead of speaking and misusing the rod demonstrate Moses’ public rejection of the devoir-faire he has received from YHWH, that is, to serve as YHWH’s agent in delivering Israel and to glorify YHWH as Israel's sole deliverer. Further Recognitions include naming the waters Meribah and the wider literary structure of Num. 13-20. Moses’ rebellion is structurally equivalent to Israel’s rebellion against the spies’ report in Num. 14 and accordingly attracts the same penalty. This alternative reading finds additional support in a structuralist account of Exod. 2:11-15. This discloses a range of structural correspondences between the two texts. In summary, my structuralist reading of Num. 20:2-13 runs counter to the standard approaches offered by classical, medieval and modern scholars, especially those that regard Moses’ offence as unfathomable and the penalty as disproportionate. Moses’ actions in Num. 20 strike not only at the rock but at the heart of his calling before YHWH and Israel.

\(^ {156} \) Propp, Exodus, 165.