

Why were Moses and Aaron not Allowed to Enter Canaan?

The answer might be surprising

By Martin Schweikert

Just before the people of Israel were finally to enter the Promised Land of Canaan after 40 years and many hardships, God led Moses up a mountain and said to him:

“4 This is the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your seed.’ I have caused you to see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there. 5 So Moses the servant of Yahweh died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of Yahweh.”¹ — Dt 34:4–5

1 The Situation

Moses was the man who led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He parted the Red Sea as they fled and led them through the desert for 40 years towards Canaan. He lived through all the ups and downs with them and once spoke with God face to face (Ex 34:11). This man was not allowed to enter the land?

To understand this, we must look at the account in Nb 20:2–13 in the desert of Zin:

“2 There was no water for the congregation: and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3 The people strove with Moses, and spoke, saying, ‘We wish that we had died when our brothers died before Yahweh! 4 Why have you brought the assembly of Yahweh into this wilderness, that we should die there, we and our animals? 5 Why have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in to this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink.’ 6 Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces: and the glory of Yahweh appeared to them. 7 Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 8 ‘Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock; so you shall give the congregation and their

¹ Unless otherwise stated, Bible verses are quoted from the *World English Bible*. A list of all the Bible translations cited can be found at the end of the article.

livestock drink.’ 9 Moses took the rod from before Yahweh, as he commanded him. 10 Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, ‘Hear now, you rebels; shall we bring you water out of this rock for you?’ 11 Moses lifted up his hand, and struck the rock with his rod twice: and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. 12 Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you didn’t believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.’ 13 These are the waters of Meribah; because the children of Israel strove with Yahweh, and he was sanctified in them.” — Nb 20:2–13

2 The Accusation

God gives Moses and Aaron a task, but they do the wrong thing. God states the punishment for this in v. 12:

“Because you didn’t believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.”

This accusation has two parts. The second part, “You have not sanctified me”, is not entirely trivial, but it is easier to understand than the first part, “you didn’t believe in me”.

2.1 ... You have not sanctified me

The word **לְהַקְדִּישְׁנִי** *l:haq:diyšeni* is Hiphil infinitive construct of the root **קדש** *qdš* (Strong’s no. H6942). Since the Hiphil is the causative stem, the word can be translated as “to make holy”, “to treat as holy”, “to acknowledge as holy” or “to make holiness visible”. The meaning of the whole expression is therefore: “To prove myself holy, to prove myself to be the Holy One, to acknowledge my holiness, to make my holiness visible”.

Almost half of the translations and translation families (including the KJV) opt for the literal rendering “to sanctify / hallow me” – which is acceptable because you can still somehow understand what is meant.

However, the people undoubtedly knew that God is holy even before this event took place. It has never been necessary for a human being to “sanctify” God, or “make” Him holy. Therefore, it is to be welcomed that there are translations which attempt to clarify the meaning, even if they go beyond the original text in doing so.

If Moses and Aaron had done as instructed, God would have been ...

- “acknowledged holy” (NAB, GNT: “holy power”)

- “consecrated (holy)” (ISV, JESP)
- “regarded / esteemed holy” (CJB, TLV, LEB, VIN)
- “proclaimed holy” (JB)
- “treated as holy” (AMP, LSB, NASB, VCE)

Most of the remaining versions find different expressions that emphasise that God’s holiness should have been shown (GW, E2R, NJB, JPST, FBV, CSB, NLT, NET, BRB, CEB, HCSB, NRSV, EEB, ESV).

Some even go a step further, not only stating in neutral terms that God’s holiness should have been shown, but also specifying the aim: God should have been **honoured** (ICB, EXB, NLV, EHV, NIV family, OJB).

2.2 Because You Did Not Believe in Me

הֶעֱמַנְתֶּם *heeman:tem* is the second-person masculine plural Hiphil perfect of the root אִמַּן *’mn* (Strong’s no. H539), meaning “to be firm, reliable or enduring”. The causative stem Hiphil conveys the meaning “to place one’s trust in”, “to regard as reliable”, “to believe in” or “to put one’s trust in”. Therefore, the verb does not primarily describe the act of regarding a statement as true, but rather trust in a person or their reliability.

For the time being, we note the following: The first part of the accusation could be translated as “you did not believe (in) me” or “you did not trust in me”.

Prior to 1853, translations (VIN as the sole exception) render the phrase as “you did not believe me” or something very similar. The same applies to 19 more modern translations, including more recent members of the KJV family (except KJ3 and MEV). The only criticism of this literal translation is that it leaves it up to the reader to work out what it means. Two others (the AMP family and EXB) add something in brackets, shifting the meaning towards “trust in”. Eighteen other translations retain the literal “believe”, but add “in me”: “You did not believe in me” (or something very similar).

Finally, 30 translations opt for a phrase like “you did not trust (in) me (enough)”, including the VIN from 1599 mentioned earlier, the NIV family and the NET.

Two translations go beyond the original text and offer an interpretation:

- JB: “you did not believe that I could proclaim my holiness in the eyes of the sons of Israel”
- TFT: “You did not believe that I could demonstrate my power to the Israeli people *and give them water without your striking the rock.*” (The text in italics indicates that the section marked in this way has been added.)

In doing so, these translations get straight to the heart of what the less specific – because more literal – translations merely hint at.

This would be entirely understandable if the expression were used in a context in which someone were accused of not trusting God's ability to do something. However, it would be completely nonsensical to assume that Moses and Aaron did not believe God could bring water out of a rock here. It would be doubly nonsensical to assume this, as God had previously done exactly that in an identical situation (Ex 17:1–7).

However, the expression in v. 12 appears in a very specific context: it is immediately followed by **לְהַקְדִּישְׁנִי** *l:haq:diyš-eniy*, which we have already examined above.

The infinitive with **לְ** *l:* serves to specify the nature of the consequence of the lack of trust.

The internal perspective of “you did not trust me” is contrasted with the external perspective of “by doing so, you did not sanctify me in the sight of the people”.

The people could not see the inner perspective. However, they could see what Moses and Aaron were doing. They did not put God, who had actually performed the miracle, in the foreground, but rather themselves as the agents.

In summary, an accurate rendition of the entire sentence would be as follows:

“You have not shown the trust in me that would have been necessary to sanctify me before the Israelites.”

Here, one could replace “to sanctify me” with one of the phrases listed at the end of the previous section.

Let us note as observation (A): Through their behaviour, Moses and Aaron did not give God what was due to Him.

3 The Transgression

But what was the nature of Moses' and Aaron's transgression? Although it is mentioned in the text, it is easy to overlook.

God's command was:

“**Take the rod**, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron your brother, and **speak to the rock before their eyes**, that it give forth its water; and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock; so you shall give the congregation and their livestock drink.” — Nb 20:8

There is a special significance to Moses' staff.² God simply refers to it here as “the staff”, so Moses and Aaron certainly knew which staff He was talking about. It is called “the staff of God” in Ex 4:20 and in Ex 17:9. It was evidently kept in the Sanctuary³

² Not to be confused with Aaron's rod, which also plays a major role in his story.

³ However, not like Aaron's rod in the Ark of the Covenant (Heb 9:4).

– although this is not mentioned anywhere, Nb 20:9 states: “And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, just as He had commanded him.”

This staff accompanied Moses from the moment of his calling, when it temporarily turned into a serpent (Ex 4:1–5). Moses’ staff also played a part in some of the miracles that God performed:

- He struck the Nile with it, so that its waters turned to blood (Ex 7:19–20, a plague upon Egypt)
- He caused hail and fire to rain down upon the earth (Ex 9:23–24, a plague on Egypt as well)
- He sent a swarm of locusts sweeping across the land (Ex 10:13–14, yet another plague upon Egypt)
- The last mention of Moses’ staff up to that point is in Ex 17:9–13, where Israel is fighting against Amalek. As long as Moses kept his hands raised, Israel prevailed.

However, the most interesting reference to Moses’ staff can be found in Ex 17:1–6. The situation there was exactly the same as in Nb 20: the people were rebelling because there was no water. There, God gives Moses the following instruction:

“5 Yahweh said to Moses, Walk on before the people, and take the elders of Israel with you, and **take the rod in your hand with which you struck the Nile**, and go. 6 Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb. **You shall strike the rock**, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink. Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.” — Ex 17:5–6

Moses is instructed to strike the rock with his staff to make water flow from it. He carries out this task, strikes the rock and water flows, saving the people.

3.1 Struck instead of spoken

The instruction in Lv 20 is different: Moses is instructed to take the staff, presumably as a sign of divine authority, but this time he is told not to strike the rock with it, but to speak to it instead. However, he does not do this; rather, he strikes the rock with the staff, just as he did last time.

There is no doubt that Moses acted wrongly in doing so; instead of **speaking** to the rock, he **struck** it. This was a clear disregard for God’s command.

But was this misconduct really that serious? Was it the reason why Moses was not permitted to enter Canaan later on? Many would answer yes, putting forward a typological argument based on 1 Co 10:1–4:

“1 Now I would not have you ignorant, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; 2 and were all baptized into

Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 3 and all ate the same spiritual food; 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of a spiritual rock that followed them, **and the rock was Christ.**”

It is then argued that the first striking of the rock in Ex 17 symbolises the suffering and death of Christ. From this perspective, the second striking of the rock in Nb 20 is so reprehensible that it justifies the subsequent punishment of Moses.

However, God could hardly have punished Moses for symbolism of which he could not possibly have had any knowledge.

On the other hand, however one understands the typology and symbolism in 1 Co 10, the verses certainly have nothing to do with our passages in Ex 17 and Nb 20. Admittedly, Christ is identified with a rock, but this rock **followed** the people (1 Co 10:4). In Ex 17 and Nb 20, however, we are dealing with two different rocks. Neither of these rocks followed the people; rather, in each case, the people came to these rocks. These are two fundamentally different things that cannot be reconciled.

Finally, it should be noted that Moses is not specifically rebuked for the transgression of “striking instead of speaking”, either in the context of Nb 20 or anywhere else in Scripture. While one could argue that “the judgement in Nb 20:12 is criticism enough” – however, that is a completely different matter in the following explanation.

3.2 Rashly Spoken

Ps 106:32–33 provides a concise summary of the events in Nb 20. Amidst a long list of the people’s transgressions, it says:

“32 They angered him also at the waters of Meribah, so that Moses was troubled for their sakes; 33 because they were rebellious against his spirit, he spoke rashly with his lips.”

וַיִּבְטֵא *way:vatte* is the 3rd person masculine singular Piel narrative form of the root בָּטָא *vṭ’*. The verb occurs only twice more in the entire Old Testament, namely in Lv 5:4:

“Or if anyone swears **rashly with his lips** to do evil, or to do good, whatever it is that a man might **utter rashly** with an oath, and it is hidden from him; when he knows of it, then he shall be guilty of one of these.”

The noun מִבְטָא *miv:ṭa*, which is derived from the same root, also occurs only twice, namely in Nb 30:6–9:

“6 If she is married to a husband, while her vows are on her, or the **rash utterance** of her lips, with which she has bound her soul, 7 and her husband hear it, and hold his peace at her in the day that he hears it; then her vows shall stand, and her bonds with which she has bound her soul shall stand. 8 But if her husband disallow her in the day that he hears it, then he shall

make void her vow which is on her, and the **rash utterance** of her lips, with which she has bound her soul: and Yahweh will forgive her. 9 But the vow of a widow, or of her who is divorced, even everything with which she has bound her soul, shall stand against her.”

In these contexts, the point is that someone makes a rash oath or vow without due consideration. The same meaning can be assumed in Ps 106:33.

Most translations (31 in total, including the NIV family) render it as “he spoke rashly”, followed by 25 translations (including the vast majority of members of the KJV family), which opt for “he spoke unadvisedly”. It is also worth noting that 11 translations use “he spoke without thinking” or “he spoke without stopping to think”, and three use “he spoke foolishly” or similar. Whilst these go beyond the original text, they capture the meaning quite well.

Let us make the following observation (B): **The transgression consisted in the fact that Moses spoke rashly.**

4 The Solution

Bearing this in mind, let us return to Nb 20.

The few words spoken by Moses can be found in v. 10:

“Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, ‘Hear now, you rebels; shall we bring you water out of this rock for you?’”

In the heat of the moment, Moses angrily addresses the people with “Hear now, you rebels!”, which is actually quite mild given the circumstances – no one would condemn Moses for this outburst. The real offence lies in the second sentence: “Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?”, to quote the literal translation.

At first glance, it is not necessarily obvious why this question is offensive. Some commentators suggest interpreting this sentence as a statement rather than a question: “We will bring water out of this rock for you!” However, this is unacceptable, as what Moses says is formally undoubtedly a question. In English, a question is recognised in spoken language by the intonation and in written language by a question mark at the end. In Spanish, a question begins with an inverted question mark so that it is clear that what follows is a question. In Hebrew, similarly, a question begins with הֲ *ha*, and here we find a הֲ *ha* at the beginning of the sentence. The Septuagint also translates the sentence as a question, with a semicolon (the Greek question mark) at the end.

So, this is undoubtedly a question. But what kind of question? Is Moses expecting an answer from the people? Does he want to discuss the matter with them? No – in his anger, Moses asks the question and acts on it immediately, without waiting for an answer.

A question that does not expect an answer but already contains one is called a “rhetorical question”. Examples include, “Who would do such a thing of their own free will?” – the implied answer being “Nobody!” Or, “How could I forget that?” with the implied answer, “I couldn’t possibly forget that!”

Rhetorical questions are not uncommon in the Bible. Some of the better-known examples are:

- Gn 18:14: “Is anything too hard for Yahweh? At the set time I will return to you, when the season comes round, and Sarah will have a son.” – implied answer: “No, nothing is impossible for Him!”
- Ex 14:11: “They said to Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you treated us this way, to bring us forth out of Egypt?” – implied answer: “Of course there were tombs in Egypt!”
- Jb 38:4: God asks Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if you have understanding.” – implied answer: “Nowhere – Job wasn’t there.”
- Is 40:13: “Who has directed the Spirit of Yahweh, or has taught him as his counselor?” – implied answer: “Nobody!”
- Is 40:18: “To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to him?” – implied answer: “No one!”
- Mt 6:27: “Which of you, by being anxious, can add one moment to his lifespan?” – implied answer: “Nobody!”
- Rm 8:31: “What then shall we say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” – implied answer: “Nobody!”

When rendering the rhetorical question posed by Moses in Nb 20:10, translations generally fall into one of two main categories:⁴

One or other variant of “Must we bring you water out of this rock?” is chosen in 37 translations, including the oldest Bibles, the KJV family (with the exception of the MEV), and the NIV family. However, no form of compulsion can be derived from either the meaning of the word or the grammar – this is purely a matter of interpretation.

A somewhat smaller number of translations (namely 29) stick to a literal rendering and opt for one or other variant of “Shall we bring forth water to you out of this rock?”, including the ASV and the RSV.

The difference is not big – in the case of “Must we bring you water out of this rock?”, the implied answer to the rhetorical question is “It seems we really must do that!”, whereas in the case of “Shall we bring forth water to you out of this rock?”, the implied answer is more like “Of course we will!”, “Watch how we will do it!”, or “You will see that we will do it!”.

⁴ There are also a handful of other choices, but they do not contribute anything significant to our understanding.

Four translations (ARA, CEV, E2R and LAMSA) do not render the sentence as a question at all, but as an explicit statement, e.g. E2R: “I will cause water to flow from this rock.”

Let us recall observation (A) from 2.2 *Because You Did Not Believe in Me*:

Through their behaviour, Moses and Aaron did not give God what was due to Him.

The problem suddenly becomes clear now: it is the “we” in “Must / shall **we** bring you water out of this rock?” By this “we”, Moses places himself and Aaron at the centre of attention. In doing so, he takes credit for the miracle that God is about to perform.

This is an insult to God, and in that respect the severity of the punishment that God imposed on Moses and Aaron in Nb 20:12 is justified.

5 List of Bible Translations Cited

AMP	<i>Amplified Bible</i>
ARA	<i>Peshitta Holy Bible Translated</i>
ASV	<i>American Standard Version</i>
BRB	<i>Berean Reader's Bible</i>
CEB	<i>Common English Bible</i>
CEV	<i>Contemporary English Version</i>
CJB	<i>Stern Complete Jewish Bible</i>
CSB	<i>Christian Standard Bible</i>
E2R	<i>Easy-to-Read Version</i>
EEB	<i>EasyEnglish Bible</i>
EHV	<i>Evangelical Heritage Version</i>
ESV	<i>English Standard Version</i>
EXB	<i>Expanded Bible</i>
FBV	<i>Free Bible Version</i>
GNT	<i>Good News Translation</i>
GW	<i>GOD'S WORD Translation</i>
HCSB	<i>Holman Christian Standard Bible</i>
ICB	<i>International Children's Bible</i>
ISV	<i>International Standard Version</i>
JB	<i>Jerusalem Bible</i>
JESP	<i>Julia Evelina Smith Parker</i>
JPST	<i>JPS Tanakh</i>
KJ3	<i>King James 3 - The Literal Translation</i>
KJV	<i>King James Version</i>
LAMSA	<i>Lamsa Bible</i>
LEB	<i>Lexham English Bible</i>

5 List of Bible Translations Cited

LSB	<i>Legacy Standard Bible</i>
MEV	<i>Modern English Version</i>
NAB	<i>New American Bible</i>
NASB	<i>New American Standard Bible</i>
NET	<i>New English Translation</i>
NIV	<i>New International Version</i>
NJB	<i>New Jerusalem Bible</i>
NLT	<i>New Living Translation</i>
NLV	<i>New Life Version</i>
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
OJB	<i>Orthodox Jewish Bible</i>
RSV	<i>Revised Standard Version</i>
TFT	<i>Translation for translators</i>
TLV	<i>Tree of Life</i>
VCE	<i>The Voice</i>
VIN	<i>Venerably Illuminating Narrative</i>