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THE SAME STORY ALL OVER AGAIN? THE REBELLION(S) AT MERIBAH

¿LA MISMA HISTORIA OTRA VEZ? LA(S) REBELIÓN(ES) EN MERIBAH

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Resumen: En este artículo se hace una lectura comparativa de las dos “narrativas de Meribá” del Pentateuco, analizando las especificidades de cada una y las distintas pretensiones teológicas que hacen estos dos episodios, uno en Éx 17,1-7, el otro en Núm 20,1-13. Para lograr este objetivo, la crítica narrativa es una herramienta útil, particularmente las categorías de “trama” y “tema”. Una comparación minuciosa entre estos dos episodios milagrosos, en los que Moisés proporciona agua a los israelitas sedientos, de una roca en el desierto, mostrará que las cuestiones teológicas de la presencia de Dios entre su pueblo y la revelación de su santidad son los puntos clave en cada uno de estos episodios.

Palabras clave: Desierto; Meribá; Moisés; Rebelión.

Abstract: In this article, a comparative reading of the two “Meribah narratives” of the Pentateuch is made, analysing the specificities of each one and the different theological claims made by these two episodes, one in Exod 17,1-7, the other in Num 20,1-13. For achieving this goal, narrative criticism is a useful tool, particularly the categories of “plot” and “theme”. A thorough comparison between these two miraculous episodes, in which Moses provides water to the thirsty Israelites from a rock in the wilderness, will show that the theological issues of the presence of God between his people and the unveiling of His holiness are the key points in each of these episodes.

Keywords: Meribah; Moses; Rebellion; Wilderness.

Introduction

Moses and Aaron, who liberated the sons of Israel from their Egyptian bondage, are to die without reaching their goal, the land which “flows with milk and honey”¹. The reason is explained in Num 20,1-13: both leaders are punished and will not be able to enter Canaan, due to their failure at the waters of Meribah. An attentive reader will, however, probably be surprised with this predicament. Moses manages, as he already did in Exod 17,1-7, to produce water from a rock, quenching thus the thirst of a quarrelling people. That the gift of water is accompanied with chastisement is something that puzzled biblical interpreters throughout the ages, left to wonder why the “same” miracle yields so very different outcomes. In this paper, we propose to read these two episodes in a literary (i.e. synchronic) perspective, regarding the plot and theme of both episodes. We argue that these two categories, as presented by Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin², can shed some light into the difficulties of interpretation of the Meribah Pentateuchal narratives³.

¹ A common phrase in the Pentateuch (Exod 3,8.17; 13,5; 33,3; Lev 20,24; Num 13,27; 14,8; 16,13.14; Deut 6,3; 11,9; 26,9.15; 27,3; 31,20), expressing the abundance of gifts in the Promised Land.

² Cf. Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin, *Para ler as narrativas bíblicas* (Prior Velho: Paulinas, 2012). For a complementary perspective, cf. also Jean-Pierre Sonnet, ‘L’analyse narrative des récits bibliques’, in *Manuel d’exégèse de l’Ancien Testament*, ed. Christophe Nihan and Michaela Bauks, MdB 61 (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2008), 47-94; Jean-Louis Ska, ‘I Nostri Padri Ci Hanno Raccontato’: *Introduzione All’analisi Dei Racconti Dell’Antico Testamento*, Collana Biblica (Bologna: EDB, 2012).

³ Notwithstanding the importance of the so-called “diachronic methods”, their use is limited in the present subject, as Brevard S. Childs noted: “There is such a variety in the Old Testament’s use of the Meribah tradition that one can suspect a complex history of tradition lying behind the present narrative. Unfortunately the evidence for tracing this development is no longer available, and one is left with a variety of hypotheses which have little chance of being established or disproved”, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 306. The statement concerns Exod 17,1-7 but it loses none of its validity if applied to Num 20,1-13. For a more recent study about these episodes in a redactional and tradition-critical perspective, cf. Roy E. Garton, *Mirages in the Desert: The Tradition-Historical Developments of the Story of Massah-Meribah*, BZAW 492 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017).

Meribah in the Pentateuch

According to Pierre Buis, there is chronical conflict between Israel and Moses in the Pentateuch⁴. Perhaps the best illustration to this is given in what can be called the Meribah episodes, a place name which already introduces a problem: Meribah (מְרִיבָה) comes from the root רִיב, meaning “to quarrel, strive, dispute”. However, Meribah is sometimes accompanied with Massah (מַסָּה), another place name formed by a verbal root, this time meaning “to put to the test” (נִסָּה). In the Pentateuch, despite some references in Deuteronomy, it is especially in the two narratives of Exod 17,1-7 and Num 20,1-13 that (Massah and) Meribah come to the fore as stories about a miraculous provision of water from a rock in the wilderness⁵. In both texts, the people *quarrel* with Moses over lack of water, who manages to provide it to the people by striking a *rock*. In the Exodus version, this *quarrel* with Moses seems to be equivalent to a *testing* of the LORD: hence the naming Massah and Meribah, i.e., Testing and Quarrel (Exod 17,7)⁶. In the Numbers pericope, however, there is no testing mentioned; instead, the people are branded as rebels by Moses, who, along with Aaron, is ultimately deemed unfaithful, guilty of hindering the manifestation of God’s holiness (Num 20,10-12).

2. A closer look to the text

The traditional stance between commentators is to consider that the two episodes refer to a single event⁷, i.e., they are different redactions of the

⁴ Cf. Pierre Buis, ‘Les Conflits Entre Moïse et Israël Dans Exode et Nombres’, *Vetus Testamentum* 28, no. 3 (1978): 257.

⁵ Both Num 20,24 and 27,14 refer to Num 20,1-13. Also relevant texts are Deut 6,16; 9,22; 32,51; 33,8. We are disregarding the occasions where מַסָּה and מְרִיבָה are used as common nouns, meaning “test” (Deut 4,34; 7,19; 29,2; Job 9,23) and “quarrel, conflict” (Gen 13,8; Num 27,14), respectively. Regarding Num 27,14, it appears both as a noun (“in the rebellion of the community” [בְּמִרְיַת הָעֵדָה]) and as a toponym (“these were the waters of Meribah of Kadesh”). Also out of our analysis are the attestations of Meribah of Kadesh in Ezek 47,19 and 48,28, used as reference points for the indication of borders of the land.

⁶ This is also the meaning of the place names rendered by the LXX: Πειρασμός and Λοιδόρησις.

⁷ This corresponds to the way in which the Church Fathers read Exod 17,1-17 and Num 20,1-13: “à quelques exceptions près, les auteurs chrétiens ne font aucune distinction entre les deux narrations; ils ne semblent même pas gênés par la présence de ce doublet”, Gabriella Aragione, ‘Moïse, le peuple d’Israël et la pierre qui les suivait dans le désert:

same event, presented in an older redaction in Exod 17,1-7 and in a more recent one in Num 20,1-13⁸. In fact, they have many elements in common:

- i) The people are crossing a desert and encamp there⁹ (Exod 17,1 // Num 20,1)
- ii) Water is lacking (Exod 17,1 // Num 20,2)
- iii) The people quarrel (verb ריב) with Moses (Exod 17,2-3 // Num 20,3-5)
- iv) The protest has the “we were better off in Egypt” motif, using the verb “to go up” (עלה) in *hiphil* and mentioning death (Exod 17,3 // Num 20,5)
- v) Moses turns to God for help (Exod 17,4 // Num 20,6)
- vi) God gives Moses instructions to solve the problem (Exod 17,5-6 // Num 20,8)
- vii) The use of the staff (מִזְבֵּה) is required (Exod 17,5 // Num 20,8)
- viii) The actions are to be made publicly, “in the eyes” of the attendants (Exod 17,5 // Num 20,8)
- ix) Moses acts and water comes out (Exod 17,6 // Num 20,11)

Remarques sur l'exégèse chrétienne antique de Nb 20,1-13', in *Nombres 20,1-13: Les eaux de Mériba*, ed. Matthieu Arnold, Gilbert Dahan, and Annie Noblesse-Rocher, *Lectio Divina. Études d'histoire de l'exégèse* 14 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2019), 62.

⁸ A good example is Martin Noth's view: “In a unique way the story found in Num 20,1-13 affords a glimpse into the redactor's methodology. Here the redactor has elaborated upon the fundamental P narrative, which in this passage is supposed to prepare for the immediately impending information about the death of Aaron and the death of Moses, *by incorporating here and there elements of that old narrative of corresponding content* which he had already drawn into the context previously in Exod 17, 1b β -7 – omitting merely the introduction in favor of a prefatory P notice. In this way the redactor has shown very clearly how he used *the narrative composed from the old sources* primarily for enriching the P narrative which lay at the center of his interest”, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. Bernhard W. Anderson, Reprint Series 5 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), 15 (our italics). In any case, Meshullam Margalioth complains that “it has almost become a dogma in modern pentateuchal criticism to regard accounts of similar events as duplicates originating from different sources, or tendential overworking of older material”, ‘The Transgression of Moses and Aaron: Num. 20:1-13’, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 74, no. 2 (1983): 200 (n. 14). For an updated *status quaestionis* on the subject, cf. Garton, *Mirages in the Desert*, 9–22.

⁹ Both the “traveling by stages” of Exod 7,1 and the “dwelt” (verb ישב) of Num 20,2 connote a brief residence in this context, cf. Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1- 20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 4A (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 487-488.

- x) An etymological link is established between the quarrel (רייב) and the name of the place (מְרִיבָה) (Exod 17,7 // Num 20,13)

Jacob Milgrom reports that the Jewish medieval exegete known as Bekhor Shor had already considered not just this episode, but the entire “tryptic” of the stories about manna, quails, and water from the rock, to be two versions of the same event¹⁰. According to him, it would make no sense for Moses to doubt God’s capability to provide food in Num 11,22 if he had already done that in a previous occasion. In fact, Ps 78,15-31 refers to the incident of the quails as happening only once. The same reasoning could be made with the water issue in Num 20,10, as it had been beforehand given in Exod 17,6 under similar circumstances. Moreover, both Deut 33,8 and Ps 95,8 read Massah and Meribah in parallel lines, so they should refer to the same incident, due to poetic parallelism. Another indicator would be Deut 9,22: “At Taberah, at Massah, and at Kibroth-hattaavah you provoked the Lord”. The first and the third sites are reported in Num 11,3 and 11,34, whereas the second appears in Exod 17,7, designating the name of the place where the rock was struck. “It again stands to reason, in the words of Bekhor Shor, that «the two are one»”¹¹. But his hypothesis, that Numbers simply retells the same group of events narrated in Exodus, faces some difficulties in the text itself. For one, if the people are tired of manna in Num 11,6, it is because it had already been given to them in Exod 16,14. However, from a literary perspective, as Robert Alter claims, “when we can detect two versions of a single event, it is safe to assume that the writer has effected a montage of sources, and the question we might ask is why he should have done this, in what ways do the two narrative perspectives complement or complicate each other”¹². This means that there is no simple duplication or repetition of stories, as the differences between the two water-from-the-rock narratives illustrate with still greater force. The following can be summarized as follows:

- i) The wilderness is either different or spelled differently: Sin (Exod 17,1) and Zin¹³ (Num 20,1)

¹⁰ Cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPSTC 4 (Philadelphia – New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 449.

¹¹ Milgrom, 449.

¹² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 181.

¹³ Although both the LXX and the Vulgate fail to distinguish these two places (Σιν and Sin in Exod 17,1 and Num 20,1), the wilderness of Zin is located at the Negev, in the south of Canaan’s borders, wherein Kadesh-Barnea is situated, cf. David R. Seely, ‘Zin, Wilderness Of’, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, VI:1095-1096 (Doubleday, 1992). The wilder-

- ii) The place of encampment is different: Rephidim (Exod 17,1) and Kadesh (Num 20,1)
- iii) The vocabulary used to designate the Israelites differs: Exodus prefers “people” (עַם) and does not use “assembly” (קְהָל), which in contrast is common in Numbers¹⁴
- iv) Neither Aaron nor the tent of meeting are mentioned in the Exodus episode
- v) Moses responds to the people in Exod 17,2, but he does no such thing in the Numbers counterpart
- vi) Moses cries to God in Exod 17,4, whereas in Num 20,6 he (along with Aaron) prostrates himself in silence
- vii) Moses is ordered to strike the rock (צִיָּר) with his staff in the presence of the elders in Exod 17,6, whereas in Num 20,8 he is to speak to the rock (עָלָה)¹⁵ before the assembly, while holding his staff
- viii) The information that Moses complied with God’s orders is given in a short summary in Exod 17,6, whereas in Num 20,9-11 every action of Moses is described, only the first of which is said to be executed according to God’s orders (v. 8)
- ix) The place is given the name of Massah and Meribah in Exod 17,7, but only the latter is mentioned in Num 20,13, where, in fact, the “testing” motif is altogether absent
- x) There is no punishment whatsoever in Exod 17,7; in stark contrast, Moses and Aaron are denied the possibility of leading the people into the Promised Land in Num 20,12

The sheer number of differences between both narratives makes already clear that they are not simple doublets. Even if they would eventually refer to a single historical event, it is unequivocal that the narratives do not tell the same story, because neither the place of the action, the characters, the development of the story, nor the outcome are identical. It is also to be noted that in Exod 17,7 the place is named Meribah (and Massah), following the usual

ness of Sin, however, is to be located between the Sea of Reeds and Mount Sinai, cf. Idem, ‘Sin, Wilderness Of’, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, VI:47 (Doubleday, 1992).

¹⁴ The complete attestation in Exod 17,1-7 is: 7x “people” (vv. 1.2.3[2x].4.5.6); 2x “sons of Israel” (vv. 1.7); 1x “community” (v. 1). Num 20,1-13 has: 3x “sons of Israel” (vv. 1.12.13); 5x “community” (vv. 1.2.8[2x].11); 2x “people” (vv. 1.3); 4x “assembly” (vv. 4.6.10.12).

¹⁵ The LXX and the Vulgate again fail to make this distinction, rendering both Hebrew substantives with the same word (πέτρα / *petra*).

process of naming particular locations, by using the verb קרא (e.g., Gen 31,47; Exod 17,15): “and he called (קרא) the name of the place Massah and Meribah”. In Num 20,13, however, no naming occurs, rather an identification of the place with Meribah (“these are the waters of Meribah”), suggesting that it was already a known location¹⁶. In other words, it underlines the fact that the reader of the Numbers episode is expected to have already read Exod 17,1-7, and therefore, that he should be particularly sensitive to the differences between the two storylines. These differences, as Timothy R. Ashley comments, “although not disproving that the author of Numbers simply reshaped Exod 17 for a different purpose, are sufficient to show that he wished his readers to consider this a separate incident”¹⁷. This is also what the itinerary notes in Num 33 claim: there is lack of water at Rephidim (v. 14) and it is only later that the people encamp at Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin (v. 36), certainly alluding to Exod 17,1-7 and Num 20,1-13, respectively. Therefore, despite the many similarities, Exod 17,1-7 and Num 20,1-13 are presented as two different stories altogether¹⁸. Being particularly similar in the posing of the problem, the reader of Num 20,1-13 is somehow conditioned to expect a similar outcome to Exod 17,1-7, only to discover that the story evolves in a different way.

The plots of Meribah

According to Aristotle’s classic definition in his *Poetics*, plot (μῦθος) is the composition or the ordered arrangement of the incidents¹⁹. To better

¹⁶ Cf. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 166.

¹⁷ Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 379.

¹⁸ In this regard, Jean-Pierre Sonnet comments: “Les deux épisodes où l’on voit Moïse frapper le rocher [...] mettent en jeu une série de variantes, dont le sens s’éclaire séquentiellement (sur l’axe de la combinaison), en étant situés l’un avant et l’autre après l’événement des «paroles» du Sinaï. Ainsi en est-il pour l’ordre divin : En Ex 17,6, Dieu dit à Moïse «Tu frapperas le rocher» ; en Nb 20,8, il dit à Moïse et Aaron : «Vous parlerez au rocher» ; Moïse frappe néanmoins, et à deux reprises (v. 11), préférant rééditer le geste qui a déjà fait ses preuves plutôt qu’affiner son écoute prophétique. Lues de près, les répétitions bibliques manifestent que, lorsqu’elle est conduite par Dieu, l’histoire, toute traversée qu’elle soit d’analogies, ne se répète pas”, ‘L’analyse narrative des récits bibliques’, in *Manuel d’exégèse de l’Ancien Testament*, ed. Christophe Nihan and Michaela Bauks, MdB 61 (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2008), 88.

¹⁹ “λέγω γὰρ μῦθον τοῦτον τὴν σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων”, Aristotelis, *De Arte Poetica Liber*, ed. R. Kassel, OCT (Oxonii, 1965), 1450a, 4-5.

understand the progression of the action and how the scenes are interrelated, the different stages of the plot should be identified. Five are to be considered, following the proposal of *quinary scheme* as proposed by Marguerat and Bourquin²⁰: an *exposition*, where the initial situation, with its circumstances and characters, is established; a *complication*, where a crisis appears, introducing narrative tension, and the action unfolds; a *transforming action*, trying to eliminate the perturbation previously introduced; a *resolution*, which describes the effects of the transforming action; and finally an *epilogue*, where the new state of the affairs is exposed. Applying this to the two episodes, the result is as follows:

Table 1. *Stages of both plots*

	Exod 17,1-7	Num 20,1-13
<i>Exposition</i>	Arrival at Rephidim, in the wilderness of Sin (v. 1a)	Arrival at Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin (v. 1)
<i>Complication</i>	There is no water, and the people quarrel (רִיב) with Moses (vv. 1b-3)	There is no water, and the people quarrel (רִיב) with Moses (vv. 2-5)
<i>Transforming action</i>	Moses cries to God, who gives him instructions that he accurately complies with (vv. 4-6a)	Moses and Aaron go into the tent of meeting, silently prostrate before God, who gives instructions that Moses does not fully comply with (vv. 6-11b)
<i>Resolution</i>	Water comes out of the rock, the people and its cattle drink from it (not expressed, implied in the end of v. 6)	Water comes out of the rock, the people and their cattle drink from it (v. 11c-d); God castigates Moses and Aaron due to their lack of faith (v. 12)
<i>Epilogue</i>	The place is named Massah and Meribah, because there the people tested (נִסָּה) God and quarrelled (רִיב) with him, questioning his presence in their midst (v. 7)	The place is identified with Meribah, because there the people quarrelled (רִיב) with God and he showed his holiness (v. 13)

Exposition: in both cases, the initial circumstances are given, establishing the characters (“the whole community of the sons of Israel”) and the

²⁰ Cf. Marguerat and Bourquin, *Para ler as narrativas bíblicas*, 67-75. About the applicability of this scheme to any single plot, the authors warn that “identificar uma estrutura-tipo, que possa funcionar como um modelo generativo, não implica que todas as narrativas de todos os tempos possam ser reduzidas a esse esquema. Se a narração fosse um processo de clonagem narrativa, ela não produziria nada além de um imenso tédio. A infinita variedade das narrativas está aí para provar o contrário!”, Marguerat and Bourquin, 71.

place of the action, Rephidim, in the wilderness of Sin (Exod 17,1), and Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin (Num 20,1). The differences are the following: in Exodus the movements of the Israelites are said to be according to God's commands, whereas in Numbers Miriam's death and burial is mentioned, along with the date of the people's arrival, in the first month of an unspecified year.

Complication: A crisis appears because something is missing: there is no water to drink (Exod 17,1b; Num 20,2a). As a consequence of this²¹, conflict arises. In his own proposal of plot analysis, Jean-Louis Ska distinguishes, at this stage, between an *inciting moment*, where the problem is first mentioned, and the *complication* properly said, where the conflict develops²². The inciting moment in the Exodus episode is the quarrel of the people with Moses (v. 2a-b), which develops into the complication: Moses responds to the accusations, asking for the reason of their quarrel with him, which also puts God to the test (v. 2c-d). Then v. 3 states that the people are indeed thirsty and murmur against Moses, complaining about the senselessness of leaving Egypt, only to die of thirst in the desert. Curiously, the Israelites start by protesting not just against Moses, since the imperative in v. 2c (תִּגְדְּלוּ) is plural: the only logical possibilities are Aaron and God. The former is possible, but the context makes God the most probable referent, as Aaron is not even mentioned in the episode. Rather than a repetition of the same, v. 3 introduces a progression in the quarrel, increasing the tension of the conflict²³.

In the Numbers counterpart, the people assemble against their leaders, Moses and Aaron (v. 2b), and this develops into a quarrel between the people and Moses (vv. 3-5). Again, the distinction between inciting moment and complication is useful, for it allows to isolate the inciting moment in v. 2 – the lack of water and its consequence, the confrontation of the people's

²¹ To be noted that the connection is paratactic, i.e., there is no explicit subordination in the Hebrew text. As Jean-Pierre Sonnet observed, “spina dorsale della narrazione nella Bibbia ebraica, la sequenza dei verbi *wayyiqtol* determina, in ogni articolazione dell'episodio, un gioco di inferenze, che si esprime nella traduzione del *waw*, «e», posto come prefisso ai verbi: «allora», «tuttavia», «è per questo che», ecc. [...] La lettura degli episodi biblici costituisce in questo senso un caso esemplare del processo di inferenze congetturali, guidato dal testo e al tempo stesso straordinariamente aperto”, *L'alleanza della lettura: Questioni di poetica narrativa nella Bibbia ebraica*, Lectio. La Scrittura cresce con chi la legge 1 (Milano – Roma: San Paolo – Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011), 347–48.

²² Cf. Ska, *I Nostri Padri Ci Hanno Raccontato*, 48–49.

²³ Cf. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, trans. Sierd Woudstra, vol. Volume II: Chapters 7:14-19:25, HCOT (Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1996), 362.

leaders – and the unfolding of the complication in the subsequent quarrel. Contrary to what one would expect by the precedent verse, v. 3 focuses the discussion on Moses, as only he is the target of the people's quarrel, although they had assembled just before against both Moses and Aaron (v. 2b). And to Moses alone the protest is made, in three sentences: a first (v. 3c) recalling the brothers that perished in the aftermath of the Korah rebellion (the same verb גרע is used in Num 17,27-28); a second about Moses bringing them to the desert to die, along with their cattle (v. 4); and a third about Moses taking them up (verb עלה in *hiphil*, as in Exod 17,3) from Egypt to that barren place (v. 5). An inverted chronological progression is evident in the questioning, as William H. Propp identified: "There is artistry here; the people's complaint moves backward through time – would we had died with Korah, why are we in this desert, why did you bring us out of Egypt at all – while the description of the lack of water grows ever more graphic – no water for the people (v. 2), none for the cattle (v. 4), none even for the vegetation (v. 5) – finishing with «there was no water to drink», echoing «there was no water for the community» (v. 2)"²⁴.

Transforming action: According to Marguerat and Bourquin, "the transforming dynamics can consist in a single discrete action or in a long process of change"²⁵. In this case, we argue for the latter option, as the encounter with God initiates a process which will lead the narrative into its conclusion, subdivided in three stages: Moses turns to God for help (Exod 17,6; Num 20,6, here accompanied by Aaron), God gives detailed instructions (Exod 17,5-6d; Num 20,7-8), and these instructions are executed (Exod 17,6e; Num 20,9-11b). Regarding the third stage, the Exodus episode laconically states that "Moses did so (וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן מֹשֶׁה)" in the presence of the elders²⁶ and the giving of water to the people and the livestock is omitted, whereas in Numbers the execution and the result is narrated in detail.

It is in this stage of the plot that the *turning point* of the narrative can be found. It is "the moment when the protagonist is decisively con-

²⁴ William H. Propp, 'The Rod of Aaron and the Sin of Moses', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (1988): 21 (n. 15).

²⁵ Marguerat and Bourquin, *Para ler as narrativas bíblicas*, 68.

²⁶ Levine claims that the elders (זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, vv. 5-6) have the function of providing legitimacy to Moses' actions, whereas in Num 20,6 it is the glory of God (כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה) that has that function, cf. *Numbers 1-20*, 484. However, the formal parallel to the elders in the Numbers narrative is not God's glory, which is mentioned in the encounter of the leaders with God, but the community itself, for the actions are to be executed "before their eyes" (לְעֵינֵיהֶם, v. 8c).

fronted with God's intervention"²⁷. In these episodes, God's commands (Exod 17,5-6a; Num 20,8) are the effective turning point, because it is the compliance (or non-compliance) with his instructions that will dictate the outcome of the narrative.

Resolution: The resolution is the solution of the initial problem, hence it being inversely symmetrical to the complication. In this case, it is the gift of water (Num 20,11c-d; only implicit in Exod 17,6e) that solves the problem of thirst; but another major difference between the two episodes arises here, because Num 20,12 adds something unparalleled with the Exodus account: God's declaration that Moses and Aaron did not show trust in him and, because of that, they will not be able to lead the people into the Promised Land.

Epilogue: The new state of affairs in both narratives concerns their location. In Exod 17,7, the place is called Massah and Meribah, due to the quarrel (reference to Meribah) and testing (reference to Massah) that occurred there. Moreover, the testing motif is made explicit in the questioning "is the LORD in our midst or not?". In the Numbers episode the locale is known as "waters of Meribah" due to the rebellion against God, through which God showed his holiness (Num 20,13). This outcome is unexpected, for the narrative previously mentioned a quarrel between the people and Moses (v. 3), not with God. The way in which God is shown holy is also involved in some obscurity: is it by the miraculous gift of water (the outcome of v. 11), by the punishment of the leaders (the outcome of v. 12), or both?

The Aristotelian concepts of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* are normally used to classify the type of plot: the former is the passage from one state of things to its opposite state and the latter is the passage from ignorance to knowledge²⁸. If the plot then consists in the solving of a problem, a *peripeteia* occurs and it can be said a *resolution plot*. If, however, the plot is about gaining a certain knowledge, it is called a *revelation plot*, precisely due to the *anagnorisis*²⁹. Many examples of each of these types of plots can be found in biblical narratives, but Jean-Pierre Sonnet observes that in the Bible both phenomena are often combined³⁰, which is an indication

²⁷ Marguerat and Bourquin, *Para ler as narrativas biblicas*, 74.

²⁸ "ἔστι δὲ περιπέτεια μὲν ἢ εἰς τὸ ἐναντίον τῶν πραττομένων μεταβολή [...] ἀναγνώρισις δέ... ἐξ ἀγνοίας εἰς γνῶσιν μεταβολή", Aristotelis, *De Arte Poetica Liber*, 1452a, 22-23.29-31.

²⁹ There is an unfortunate duplication of the same noun "resolution" to designate two different things: one is a *step* of the plot, the other a *kind* of plot. Therefore, one should be mindful of the fact that both a resolution plot and a revelation plot have a resolution (as the fourth step of the plot division).

³⁰ Cf. Sonnet, 'L'analyse narrative des récits bibliques', 63.

of literary artistry, as asserted by Aristotle himself: “an anagnorisis is most beautiful when it occurs together with a peripeteia”³¹.

Even though the plot of Exod 17,1-7 looks a simple resolution plot – there is a problem, lack of water, and the problem is solved by the providing of water³² – the resolution stage is somewhat baffling. In fact, the narrator does not even mention the actual pouring out of water, limiting himself to the statement of absolute compliance on the part of Moses of the instructions given by God. As such, there is an emphasis on the miraculous efficacy of God’s word, which answers the people’s interrogation of v. 7b: God is truly in the midst of the Israelites. In this way, the plot can also be considered a revelation plot, for it shows to the reader that God always provides for his people, because he remains with them, even in their times of need.

This kind of intermingling of plots is also identifiable in Num 20,1-13, for here the solving of the lack of water problem is in some way secondary to the theme of the manifestation of the holiness of God, that is partially obstructed by the lack of faith of Moses and Aaron, but nonetheless revealed at the waters of Meribah (v. 13). It can be said that the episode has not only a plot of resolution (the problem of water is solved), but also a plot of revelation, in the sense that the reader acquires an essential piece of information: that neither Moses nor Aaron will be able to guide the people into the Promised Land. Indeed, Marguerat and Bourquin go so far as to suggest that this entanglement of two kinds of plot could eventually explain why does Moses strike the rock twice: thus the adverb “twice” (כִּשְׁנַיִם, v. 11) would be a *narrative sign* of the existence of both peripeteia and anagnorisis³³. This kind of reading, however, finds little support in the text itself³⁴.

³¹ “καλλίστη δὲ ἀναγνώρισις, ὅταν ἅμα περιπετεία γένηται”, Aristotelis, *De Arte Poetica Liber*, 1452a, 32.

³² Cf. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 308: “The whole point of the story turns on the gracious and surprising provision of God who provided water for his people when none was available”.

³³ Cf. Marguerat and Bourquin, *Para ler as narrativas bíblicas*, 258.

³⁴ In fact, it bears resemblance with some patristic typological readings, like the following: “What does it mean that the rock was not struck once but twice with the staff? The rock was struck a second time because two trees were lifted up for the gibbet of the cross: the one stretched out Christ’s sacred hands, the other spread out his sinless body from head to foot”, Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon* 103.3, in Joseph T. Lienhard, ed., *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, ACCS, Old Testament III (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 239.

4. The themes of Meribah

As the previous analysis of plot already suggested, we argue that the main theme³⁵ of Exod 17,1-7 and Num 20,1-13 is not to be found in the “simple miracle” of giving water to a thirsty people. Rather, regarding Exod 17,1-7, we should conclude, along with Cornelis Houtman, that “the tenor of the pericope is: YHWH is near to his people, preserves their life, even in the wilderness, the abode of death. The focus of the passage is YHWH’S nearness, not the symbolism of the water”³⁶. In this way, Massah and Meribah anticipates what John I. Durham calls “the terrible doubt of Exod 32”³⁷, i.e., is God really present with his people in the wilderness? Did he not abandon them?

Regarding the testing motif in Exod 17, it should be noted that in the antecedent episodes of the waters of Marah and the gift of manna, God puts his people to the test, in a context of obedience to his law (cf. Exod 15,25; 16,4). According to Nathan MacDonald, both these episodes concern “not a testing of whether they have presently obeyed the law, but an intimate probing in order to ensure future obedience (...) In contrast, Exodus 17’s «to test God» is to be disobedient”³⁸. And so, the reversing of the testing motif in Exod 17, along with the mentioning of Horeb in v. 6, suggests that the acknowledgement of the presence of God among his people is an anticipation of sorts of the theophany in the Sinai. Which, in turn, has a great symbolic value, because the gift of water that gives life comes from the same source as the gift of the law, i.e., God himself³⁹.

³⁵ By “theme” we assume here Alter’s definition of “an idea which is part of the value-system of the narrative – it may be moral, moral-psychological, legal, political, historiographical, theological – [that] is made evident in some recurring pattern”, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 95.

³⁶ Houtman, *Exodus, II*, Volume II: Chapters 7:14-19:25:368.

³⁷ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 231.

³⁸ Nathan MacDonald, ‘Anticipations of Horeb: Exodus 17 as Inner-Biblical Commentary’, in *Studies on the Text and Versions of the Hebrew Bible in Honour of Robert Gordon*, ed. Diana Lipton and Geoffrey Khan, VTSup 149 (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2012), 12.

³⁹ Cf. Michelangelo Priotto, *Esodo: Nuova Versione, Introduzione e Commento*, I Libri Biblici. Primo Testamento 2 (Milano: Paoline, 2014), 320. This author also states that the mentioning of water at the Horeb in Exod 32,20, in which Moses dissolves the golden calf, confirms that the theological intent of that episode “evidenzia come il dono dell’acqua proviene dalla medesima sorgente del dono della Legge, cioè da quel Dio che accompagna incessantemente il suo popolo”.

Regarding Num 20,1-13, on the other hand, the main issue is the sanctification of God: by committing a sin, i.e., an act against God, Moses and Aaron, the ones who are supposed to lead the people into the Promised Land, fail in sanctifying God before the Israelites, and for that, both are penalized. Indeed, for Ashley, notwithstanding the hindrance of the two leaders, God does manifest his holiness giving water to his thirsty people *and by punishing* the leaders, showing thus the importance of obeying his commandments⁴⁰. And according to Horst Seebass, it is the punishment that constitutes the climax of the episode⁴¹, something similar to what was already expressed in Rashi's commentary, who argued that the sanctification of God was not caused by the gift of water, but rather by the exemplary death of Moses and Aaron as an act of judgement⁴². The seemingly divine intolerance is to be understood in the context of what Olivier Artus calls "the hierarchy of holiness", which is in the foreground of the entire section Num 11–21⁴³.

In fact, as Buis argues⁴⁴, if the main theme were the lack of water, as one could spontaneously think, then v. 11 would be a natural conclusion, with the sprouting of "abundant water". But v. 12 – the punishment for the leaders – forces the reader to search for a different logic. It can be found in the quarrel motif of v. 3. The root ריב, which conveys a general sense of judicial litigation, here, as well as in Exod 17,2, designates a unilateral quarrel from one of the parties in conflict⁴⁵: the people accuse Moses of having failed to provide water. And so, Buis introduces the concept of "litigation scheme", composed by the following elements:

⁴⁰ Cf. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 385–86.

⁴¹ "Diese [Wassergabe Gottes in der Wüste] bildet aber nicht den Höhepunkt, sondern ist dessen Vorbereitung. Am Höhepunkt steht eine Sanktion an Mose und Aaron", Horst Seebass, *Numeri 10,11–22,1*, BKAT, IV/2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002), 270.

⁴² Cf. Rashi di Troyes, *Commento ai Numeri*, trans. Luigi Cattani, 'Ascolta Israele!'. Commenti alle Scritture delle tradizioni ebraica e cristiana 10 (Genova: Marietti, 2006), 182: "Quando infatti il Santo, benedetto egli sia, esegue il giudizio sui suoi consacrati, egli si fa temere e santificare dalle creature".

⁴³ Cf. Olivier Artus, 'La faute de Moïse et d'Aaron en Nombres 20,1-13: Une question de sainteté', in *Nombres 20,1-13: Les eaux de Mériba*, ed. Matthieu Arnold, Gilbert Dahan, and Annie Noblesse-Rocher, *Lectio Divina. Études d'histoire de l'exégèse* 14 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2019), 33: "La finale de Nb 20,1-13 (...) précise l'enjeu théologique: la sainteté. La sanctification de la communauté et de tous ses membres passe par une obéissance sans faille au projet divin, dans ses dimensions culturelle et militaire. Toute désobéissance est incompatible avec la sainteté".

⁴⁴ Cf. Pierre Buis, 'Qadesh, Un Lieu Maudit?', *Vetus Testamentum* 24, no. 3 (1974): 270.

⁴⁵ Cf. Pietro Bovati, *Ristabilire La Giustizia: Procedure, Vocabolario, Orientamenti*, AnBib 110 (Rome: PIB, 1986), 21.

- i) Initial exposition of the situation, presenting a dangerous situation for the people
- ii) Initial summary: the people gather against Moses (who, in the priestly tradition narratives, has the company of Aaron)
- iii) Complaints of the people in rhetorical questions, that include declaring themselves in danger of death
- iv) Moses consults God and submits his case
- v) God speaks to Moses, announcing a miracle that will eliminate the danger for the people, or a punishment (or both)
- vi) The execution of the miracle, or of the punishment, is told

This author argues that the litigation scheme can be identified in virtually all of the wilderness rebellion texts, being Num 14,1-38 and 20,1-13 its best representatives⁴⁶. Although it does not fit perfectly even in the latter text – Buis in fact, admits that a counterargument from Moses should come right after the accusations from the people – this schematisation gives nevertheless a hint into the existence of different narrative logics in this episode. Therefore, a major difference is established with its Exodus counterpart, which remains in the “positive” logic of the miracle. In contrast, the gift of water that ends yet another rebellion in the desert in Num 20,1-13 interacts with the revelation of God’s holiness through the punishment of Moses and Aaron⁴⁷. Actually, the punishment is another point of contact between the rebellion of the people in Num 14 and that of its leaders in Num 20, for as the people did not trust in God (לֹא־יֶאֱמִינוּ בִי, 14,11) and were thereby condemned to die in the wilderness (14,23), so must Moses and Aaron, who also failed in trusting God (לֹא־הִאֲמַנְתֶּם בִּי, 20,12)⁴⁸.

The theme of holiness, sustains Thomas W. Mann, is furthermore connected to the theme of death in Num 16–20⁴⁹. This connection is perceptible in the foreboding of the deaths of Moses and Aaron in Num 20,13 and, in a

⁴⁶ Cf Buis, ‘Qadesh, Un Lieu Maudit?’, 270–71.

⁴⁷ Cf. Buis, 276–77.

⁴⁸ Interestingly, God’s sentence in Num 14,21-35 had explicitly excluded only Caleb and Joshua (and not Moses and Aaron) from dying outside the Promised Land, because they had put God to the test multiple times (v. 22: וַיִּבְטְאוּ אֹתִי וְהָ עָשָׂר פְּעָמִים וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ בְקוֹלִי: “they tested me these ten times and did not listen to my voice”). One can wonder whether the two leaders should be made innocent of this accusation.

⁴⁹ Cf. Thomas W. Mann, ‘Holiness and Death in the Redaction of Numbers 16:1–20:13’, in *Love & Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope*, ed. Robert M. Good and John H. Marks (Guilford: Four Quarters, 1987), 181–90.

more explicit fashion, by the death of Miriam in v. 1, that, unimportant or out of context as it may seem, has a very precise function, claims Buis: the announcing of the death of Aaron later in the chapter⁵⁰. This can be grasped by the chiasm around Kadesh that constitutes Num 20:

Table 2. *Structure of Num 20*

A	vv. 1-13	Arrival in Kadesh (v. 1)	Death of Miriam (v. 1)
B	vv. 14-21	[still in Kadesh]	Correspondence with the king of Edom
A'	vv. 22-29	Departure from Kadesh (v. 22)	Death of Aaron (v. 28)

The connection A-A' is clearly established in v. 24: “let Aaron be gathered to his people (...) because you [both] have rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah”. It can therefore be said that the rebellion – attributed to the people in v. 10 and to its leaders in v. 24 – causes the issue of sanctification of God to come to the fore.

Conclusion

Historical criticism studies generally sustain that Num 20,1-13 is a priestly version of the Yahwist (JE) narrative of Exod 17,1-7, or a post-priestly reformulation or revision of it, designed to clarify why were Moses and Aaron banned from entering the Promised Land⁵¹. In this paper, a different approach is made to these episodes, by means of a synchronic analysis of their plots and themes. Thus, despite their many similarities, it has been

⁵⁰ Cf. Buis, ‘Qadesh, Un Lieu Maudit?’, 275–76. For the connection between the theme of death in Num 17–20 and the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, cf. Adriane Leveen, “‘Lo We Perish’: A Reading of Numbers 17:27–20:29”, in *Torah and the Book of Numbers*, ed. Christian Frevel, Thomas Pola, and Aaron Schart, FAT II 62 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 248–72.

⁵¹ Cf. Garton, *Mirages in the Desert*, 150–53. More specifically, concerning the Numbers episode: “At its latest level, this story provides a structural key in the priestly source for excluding Moses and Aaron from entry into the Promised Land (cf. Num 20,22-29; 27,12-23). Moses and Aaron are included with the rebels as people condemned to death before the entry into the land. The story thus provides an interpretative tool for explaining a major feature in the development of the Pentateuchal narrative. As a part of the larger murmuring tradition, it contributes to the picture of Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness”, Rolf P. Knierim and George W. Coats, *Numbers*, FOTL 4 (Grand Rapids – Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 229.

shown that they express different perspectives of the Israelites' wilderness wanderings. Differently put, even if "they tell very much the same story, Exod 17,1-7 and Num 20,1-13 articulate it in remarkably distinct ways"⁵². In particular, the reader of Numbers is expected to have read Exodus and therefore, the second Meribah episode does not constitute a mere repetition of a previous event. In fact, both narratives reinforce each other, as Sonnet observes: "precisely because of their specular structure, the dramatic effectiveness of each of the stories receives a surplus of intensity"⁵³.

A close reading of the plots and themes of the narratives also shows that they do not simply tell a story about God's miraculous help to his thirsty people, but they also provide the reader some precious information, not only about the people's frequent rebelliousness throughout the wilderness wanderings, but also concerning God's identity. Namely, that God does remain with his people in times of need, even if they consider him to be absent (as Exod 17,7 makes clear), and that God shows himself to be holy also by his justice; which is to say that his punishment of Moses and Aaron is not a capricious decision, in that it contributes to the manifestation of God's sanctity, which is not hindered neither by the leaders' lack of faith in him – shown by their failure in complying precisely with his orders (affirmed in Num 20,12) – nor by the people's rebellion (as stated in Num 20,13). If, as Artus proposes, all disobedience is incompatible with God's holiness in the book of Numbers⁵⁴, then this pericope underlines that the entry into the Promised Land is not a human conquest, but rather a gift from God: the sanction belittles the role and importance of the leaders; the keeping of the promise is guaranteed by the displaying of God's holiness.

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⁵² Garton, *Mirages in the Desert*, 146.

⁵³ Sonnet, *L'alleanza della lettura*, 125.

⁵⁴ Artus, 'La faute de Moïse et d'Aaron', 33–35.

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