



## Mosaic Leadership in Rabbinic Literature

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Rabbinic sources depict Moses's struggle to faithfully pursue God's call, to live into his calling as a leader for the people, as a battle against increasingly bold attempts to weaken his leadership. In a pattern that many parish pastors will find familiar, Dathan and Abiram (Num 16) initially question the wisdom and source of Moses's call to leadership. Moving on from merely questioning his leadership, the notorious pair then refuses to follow him. Later they actively seek to undermine his leadership, humiliate him, and prevent others from believing that God had called Moses as a leader. Finally, they set themselves up as alternative leaders and attempt to seize Moses's role.

The main rabbinic source referenced here is the collection of Midrash Rabbah, particularly Shemot/Exodus and Bmidbar/Numbers Rabbah. These works are cited by name in the writings of Nachmanides, the great Catalan rabbi of the thirteenth century; they can come from no later, though perhaps they come from as early as the ninth or tenth century CE.<sup>1</sup> Numbers Rabbah, particularly, follows Midrash Tanchuma—word for word in several sections—and reflects a tradition

<sup>1</sup> H. L. Strack, and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 309–311.

*Being the leader of the Israelites in their exodus from Egypt and through the wilderness was not an easy thing, and Moses had all he could do to hold the people together. The wandering narratives, and the rabbinic sources that reflect on this, show Moses trusting God and trying to be a patient leader for the sake of God's mission.*

that was recorded (though it continued to undergo recensions) around 400 CE at the latest.<sup>2</sup> The collections are largely sermonic, rather than strictly legal material, and focus on filling in perceived gaps in the biblical text. The stories are meant to illustrate how Moses interacted with the people under his leadership. They were, and are, taught by community leaders, who may face challenges from others to their own leadership—as everyone leading other humans does. It is in this respect that I am most interested in the rabbinic literature on how Moses handled conflicts with detractors—what it teaches us about wise leadership in congregational communities.

Dathan and Abiram being swallowed up into the earth has been used in Christian communities to justify clergy abuse of congregants, even calling for violence against peaceful, dissenting voices. The rabbinic tradition underscores repeatedly that the role of Moses as a human leader was to protect his people from harmful influences, to be sure. But the midrashic collections also highlight how Moses was constantly ready to reconcile with his detractors and welcome them in the community. The rabbinic and biblical accounts underscore that no human expelled Dathan and Abiram from the Israelite camp, much less committed violence against them. Moses, in this rabbinic literature, is a model of a wise, peace-making leader.

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In interpreting Dathan and Abiram as constant challenges to Moses's leadership throughout his life, the rabbis explain why Moses asked God at the burning bush what he should do if the Israelites did not follow him, listen to him, or believe that God had appeared to him (Exod 4:1). The rabbinic tradition holds that even before Moses fled Egypt to dwell in Midian, he had faced off against the men who would be his adversaries for the next several decades.

The rabbinic tradition poses Dathan and Abiram as the cause of Moses slaying the Egyptian. Why would Moses, who had grown up in a slave-holding context, suddenly kill an overseer? Beatings would not have been uncommon, and it is impossible that Moses had not seen this before, even while growing up. The midrash insists that something more nefarious was going on. Exodus Rabbah concludes that the Egyptian taskmasters (Exod 1:11) used to go to the Hebrew foremen (Exod 5:6–21) to wake them up so that the Hebrew foremen, in turn, would wake

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<sup>2</sup> Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 305.

up the Hebrew workers.<sup>3</sup> But when one of the Egyptian taskmasters (literally, “princes of fainting/knockouts”) entered the house of a particular Hebrew foreman, he noticed the sleeping wife of that foreman and decided to return while the man was out working. The Egyptian taskmaster returned and raped the wife of the Hebrew foreman (by having sex with her in the predawn darkness so that she thought he was her husband). Upon returning home from work, the Hebrew foreman noticed that something was wrong, and his wife confided in him what she had realized had happened. When the Egyptian taskmaster returned the next morning, the Hebrew overseer accused the Egyptian of raping his wife. The Egyptian proudly admitted that he had in fact committed the offense, and then attempted to kill the Hebrew foreman so he could take the Hebrew woman as his own.

It was in this situation that Moses found himself. The biblical text says that before Moses laid a hand on anyone, he “looked this way and that, and saw that there was no man” (Exod 2:12). Moses looked around, and did not see the Egyptian as a man because he had used intrigue to rape an unsuspecting woman, the wife of another man. Moses did not see the Hebrew foreman as a man because he was already beaten severely and was close to death.<sup>4</sup> Moses did not see the wailing wife of the Hebrew foreman as a man, because she was an aggrieved woman. Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah add that when Moses looked around, he did not see any other “man” who could right this horrible injustice.<sup>5</sup> Moses alone had the power to step in and prevent serial rape and murder.

The rabbis argue that the Holy Spirit even revealed to Moses sections of Leviticus prior to Sinai in order to instruct Moses what to do.<sup>6</sup> God informed Moses that anyone who kills a man shall be put to death (Lev 24:17) and that adulterers who sleep with the wives of other men should be put to death (Lev 20:10).<sup>7</sup> Moses, guided by the Holy Spirit, by a pre-revelation of Leviticus, a sense of the injustice at the situation that went far beyond the ordinary occurrence of masters beating enslaved people, and by the conviction that he was the only person around to immediately put an end to this evil, killed the Egyptian rapist and attempted-murderer and hid his body in the sand. Moses, in the rabbinic literature, cautioned the man, “You are compared to sand, and just as sand when taken from one place to another emits no sound, so must this thing be hidden between you [and me], that nothing be heard of it.”<sup>8</sup> However, the Hebrew foreman was not quiet.

The next day, Moses found two Hebrews fighting and said to the one who was wrong, “Why are you striking your friend (רֵעִי)?” (Exod 2:13). The Hebrew man asked who had made Moses their leader and whether Moses was going to kill him

<sup>3</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:28.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:29.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:29.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:28.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Exodus Rabbah 1:28.

<sup>8</sup> H. Freedman, and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 3, *Exodus* (London: Soncino, 1939), 37. Translating Exodus Rabbah 1:29.

as he had killed the Egyptian. Immediately, Pharaoh heard of the matter and sought to kill Moses (Exod 2:15).

The rabbis connect all of these events. The Hebrew foreman whose life Moses had saved the previous day was now the man in the wrong beating his close friend. The Hebrew foreman had decided to divorce his wife after she had been raped by the Egyptian, but his friend was interceding on her behalf, counseling the foreman to stay with her and not subject her to another hardship, namely divorce. It is easy to imagine that words became heated in a discussion of sexual purity and permissibility of spousal relations after rape and that the two men came to blows. Moses separated them, but the attacker lashed out at him, revealing how Moses had saved his life by killing an Egyptian the previous day.

Not being content to frighten Moses, but actually wanting to have his rescuer killed, the wicked Hebrew foreman then informed Pharaoh directly.<sup>9</sup> In seeking a pair of treacherous friends who have unexplained antipathy to Moses in the biblical text, the rabbis landed on the brothers Dathan and Abiram, who participate in a major rebellion against Moses in Numbers 16. They said that Dathan had been the foreman who had been almost beaten to death and whose wife was raped.<sup>10</sup> He then fought the next day with his brother, Abiram. The two men so resented Moses for interfering in their altercation that they would resist and seek to overthrow his leadership for the rest of their lives. The rabbis retrojected the two brothers' hatred of Moses's leadership all the way back into Egypt, and they became ongoing foils for Moses's efforts to lead God's people.<sup>11</sup>

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In this first interaction with Dathan and Abiram, Moses, though not yet invited to lead God's people, still displayed characteristics that he would later be praised for. Moses displayed a profound sensitivity to injustice. When the Egyptian taskmaster was beating Dathan, Moses discerned not only the dehumanizing ["he did not see a man"] injustice before his eyes but also the pattern of evil that had led to that act. Moses, according to the rabbis, also listened for the voice and guidance of the Lord before acting. In their great esteem for Moses, the rabbis supposed that he received scripture in Egypt even before he received scripture at Sinai! After Moses's killing of the Egyptian, which the rabbis held was justified by scripture, Moses then shrewdly linked the hiding of the Egyptian's body to the posture of silence that he expected from the man whom he had saved. When Dathan and Abiram informed Pharaoh about Moses's extrajudicial killing of the

<sup>9</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:31.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:29.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:31.

Egyptian, Moses had the presence of mind to reason that there was no sense sticking around in a situation in which people were so ungrateful that those saved from death would condemn their savior the next day.

It is a common joke that troublesome congregations have a secret “back-to-Egypt committee” that meets regularly to try to undermine the work of the pastor. The original back-to-Egypt committee was Dathan and Abiram, as they complained that Moses had brought them “*up out of* a land flowing with milk and honey” to kill the people in the wilderness (Num 16:13; emphasis added). The two brothers applied the promise of the Holy Land as a land flowing with milk and honey (Exod 3:8; 3:17, 13:5) to the land of their enslavement. The rabbis understood Dathan and Abiram as infatuated with Egypt, even before they left, and the community knew this about them.

Moses originally asked Pharaoh only for three days for the Israelites to celebrate a festival to their God, and then they would return to Egypt (Exod 5:3). In his interactions with Pharaoh, Moses continued to use the language of a temporary journey to celebrate special worship (Exod 8:1, 8, 20, 26-27; 12:31). When Moses started speaking of a permanent exodus, the noted informers Dathan and Abiram, who had already betrayed him to Pharaoh, were simply not told about the change of plans. Because they thought that the exodus event was only for a short foray into the wilderness and then a return to Egypt, they apparently decided not to come.

The biblical text assumes that at least a few Israelites did not leave Egypt with Moses. After Pharaoh has let the main contingent of Israelites depart, Exodus 14:3 says literally, “Pharaoh will say *to the Israelites* [לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל], ‘They are confused . . .’” Early traditions interpreted this passage to say that Pharaoh was reassuring those Israelites who had chosen to stay in Egypt that they had made the right decision. So complete was the identification of the reluctant Israelites who stayed in Egypt with Dathan and Abiram that in his second-century CE translation of the Torah and Prophets into Aramaic, Rabbi Yonatan ben Uzziel translated the verse as “And Pharaoh said to Dathan and Abiram, sons of Israel, who remained in Egypt [יְמַר] וְיִמְרָא לְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל דְּמִשְׁתַּיִרוּן בְּמִצְרַיִם [פְּרַעָה לְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל], ‘the people are confused. . . .’”<sup>12</sup> Dathan and Abiram, realizing they had been left behind when the Israelites left Egypt for good, were furious. They rebelled against Israel and joined Pharaoh’s army at the Sea of Reeds.<sup>13</sup> But then they defected back to the Israelites when they saw the Sea of Reeds split.<sup>14</sup>

Moses’s leadership of Dathan and Abiram after he returned to Egypt with his prophetic mission seems to have consisted of leaving the men alone, while ensuring that they were not privy to future plans for the congregation of Israelites. Dathan and Abiram were left to choose to not participate in community efforts that they did not feel were as important or attractive as staying in the land of Egypt. Moses ensured that his naysayers, after already betraying him personally, did not have

<sup>12</sup> Targum Yonatan to Exodus 14:3

<sup>13</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:29. See also Psalm 106:7.

<sup>14</sup> Exodus Rabbah 23:2.

sufficient information to betray and endanger the whole community. The shrewd wisdom of Moses's information "siloing" was born out when, upon finding that they had been left behind, Dathan and Abiram revealed their total lack of commitment to the thriving of the Israelites by joining Pharaoh's army and seeking to destroy their fellows. However, when they waived upon seeing God's splitting of the sea, they were again included in the Israelite community.

After rejoining the Israelites from whom they had earlier defected to the Egyptian army, Dathan and Abiram started to look for opportunities to undermine Moses's leadership publicly among the Israelites. Like many congregants whose response to intractable conflict is to challenge pastors rather than simply leave peacefully, Dathan and Abiram changed tactics and focused on destroying Moses's ability to lead the people. Rabbinic literature is clear that Dathan and Abiram were not simply people who had philosophical disagreements with Moses. They had a deep antipathy toward him personally that ran so deep that they resorted to false witness against the Divine in order to hurt Moses. When God gave the Israelites manna (Exod 16:13–15), the devious pair saw twin opportunities to demonstrate that Moses could not be trusted to lead the people.

In their first attempt to use manna to demonstrate Moses's incompetence, Dathan and Abiram sought to show that Moses did not understand the material he was describing to the people. Moses told the Israelites that they should consume the manna they had gathered and not leave any over until morning (Exod 16:19). The rabbis say that this is exactly what Dathan and Abiram did.<sup>15</sup>

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Apparently, the brothers were so committed to undermining Moses's prestige in the eyes of the community that they skipped eating in order to have manna to leave overnight because, no matter how much the Israelites gathered, miraculously it was the right amount for them to eat (Exod 16:18). Dathan and Abiram went hungry in order to show their fellow Israelites not only that the miracle of provision of *quantum satis* had not applied to them, but that there had been no negative repercussions for disobeying Moses (and God). They attempted to seize some measure of power and self-sufficiency in creating their own manna reserve. But God's intervention in the matter was to reverse natural phenomena in order to confirm Moses's faithful reproduction of God's instructions to the people.

The rabbis reasoned that the Israelites would not have been surprised if the leftover manna had spoiled quickly and then become infested by bugs. They would have had experience with food spoiling in Egypt. Rather, the biblical text says that

<sup>15</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:29 and Rashi Exodus 2:13: "שני אנשים עברים - דתן ואבירם. הם שהותירו" / "Two Hebrew men . . . —[these were] Dathan and Abiram, it was they who left over the manna."

the leftover manna became infested *first*, and only then spoiled (Exod 16:20), as a miraculous sign to all those who might have believed Dathan and Abiram's assertion that they did not need to follow Moses's leading or rely on God for their daily bread.<sup>16</sup>

Seeing that their initial plan to show that Moses could not be trusted had failed, Dathan and Abiram moved on to trying to undermine Moses's teaching about gathering on the Sabbath. Moses had become so angry with Dathan and Abiram and their attempt to leave over manna to the next day that he forgot to tell the rest of the Israelites the other part of God's instructions concerning the weekly collection of manna—that they were to collect a double portion on the sixth day in order to have some left over for Shabbat, because none would fall that day (Exod 16:5). Moses had simply commanded the Israelites to gather manna according to the people in their tent and not to leave any over (Exod 16:19).

Moses's forgetfulness in his anger prompted great concern in the Israelite camp when the people gathered their usual amount. But this time, instead of having an omer per person, they miraculously had two! The leaders of the people came to tell Moses that they were concerned that the Israelites had somehow over-gathered and were in danger of having manna left over to the next day (Exod 16:22). Moses then remembered what God had told him to tell the people. Moses eased their fears and told them that on the sixth day, it was permissible to have a double portion of manna. They should cook it ahead of the Sabbath, and it would not spoil or produce bugs (notice the natural order). On the Sabbath, there would be no manna for them to gather (Exod 16:23–25).

When Dathan and Abiram heard that manna would last overnight without spoiling, they devised a plan to show that Moses had been wrong and the Sabbath would not be different than any other day. They took their double portion from Friday and at night spread it on the ground so that the Israelites would think that Moses had been wrong and that manna came on the Sabbath as well. Leaving aside the pitiful inadequacy of Dathan's and Abiram's two omers to do anything for the entire Israelite community, even a tiny amount of manna on the ground on the morning of the Sabbath would prove that Moses had been wrong.

The next morning when they awoke, Dathan and Abiram made a public spectacle of going out to the fields to gather the manna (that they had placed the night before). However, they did not even find the manna they had placed (Exod 16:27).<sup>17</sup> God was so angry at this attempted deceit that sought to undermine not just Moses's but also God's words, that the people were ordered not just to not harvest manna, but also to not even leave their tents, to prevent other attempts at deception (Exod 16:29).

By this point, Moses saw clearly that Dathan and Abiram were not going away. On the contrary, they remained in the camp with the sole goal of attempting

<sup>16</sup> Exodus Rabbah 25:10.

<sup>17</sup> God sent birds to come and eat the manna that had been put to evil purpose. Abraham Isaac Sperling, *Reasons for Jewish Customs and Traditions* (Taamei haMinhagim), trans. Abraham Matts (New York: Bloch, 1968), 531.

to shame Moses and undermine his prophetic leadership. They did this by attempting to show the people that they did not need to rely on Moses (or God) and could instead build up food security on their own. Even while God inverted the natural order of food spoiling to support Moses's position, Moses's temper flared such that he forgot to tell the Israelites about Sabbath preparations of manna. This anger and inattention to detail are the first chinks in the armor of Moses's leadership, and would eventually keep him out of the promised land.<sup>18</sup>

When the Israelite leaders came to Moses, worried they might be like Dathan and Abiram and have some of their double portion left over the next day, Moses turned his oversight into a teaching moment. Moses began his response by commanding them to “see / רִאּוּ” that God had, through intervention in the material world and a doubling of their collected manna, given them the Sabbath (Exod 16:29). Moses called to mind, in the eyes of all the people, that God was acting in the community. While Dathan and Abiram were attempting to undermine what God was doing through Moses among the community, Moses insisted that the people should see for themselves God's actions in their midst. Dathan and Abiram had appealed to counterfeit signs to show that Moses did not understand manna. Moses appealed to the signs that all the community could witness, that God was providing substance for the community in the form of manna, and leadership for the community in the person of Moses. Unable to undermine Moses's leadership, eventually Dathan and Abiram would attempt to seize leadership for themselves.

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In the biblical text, Dathan and Abiram are only described as participating in one action contrary to Moses's leadership of the Israelite community. According to rabbinic tradition, it is this most serious rebellion that sheds light on all their prior perfidious behavior: Dathan and Abiram joined Korah's rebellion against Moses, though it is unclear what they, as Reubenites, sought to gain in what was otherwise an intra-Levite dispute about who could function as priests.<sup>19</sup> How Dathan's and Abiram's households and families were swallowed up by the earth seems to be the main biblical emphasis and is remembered in the biblical text in Deuteronomy 11:5 and Psalm 106:17.

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<sup>18</sup> See Num 20.

<sup>19</sup> See Num 16:6–10.



argued that it was Moses, rather than God, who made Moses leader of the people.<sup>20</sup> Dathan and Abiram refused to even speak with Moses. Once again, Moses's temper flared and he grew angry at having his attempt at peace rebuffed (Num 16:15).

But then the Bible notes that Moses came to Dathan and Abiram (Num 16:25), and Midrash Tanhuma recognizes Moses's approach as one final attempt to make peace with the restive and rebellious people. It is worth quoting the midrash at length:

Moses said: Since they did not want to come [to me], I will go to them; perhaps they will be ashamed and repent, as it says: "And Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram" (Num 16:25). When they saw him, they began to curse and blaspheme as it says "and Dathan and Abiram came-out stationing */ntsb/* [themselves]" (Num 16:27). Do people come out sitting or kneeling or falling? [rabbinic sarcasm]. This teaches that they came out cursing and blaspheming, as it says here "coming-out" and "stationing" */ytsb/* and with Goliath the Philistine it says "coming-out" and "stationing" */ntsb/* as it says "and the champion came-out . . . and the Philistine stepped forward at dawn and evening and stationed [himself] */ytsb/* for forty days" (I Sam 17:4, 16.) Just as [Goliath's] going out and stationing */ntsb/* involved cursing and blaspheming (1 Sam 17:8–10), so here (in Num 16:27) going out and stationing */ntsb/* involves cursing and blaspheming . . .<sup>21</sup>

Noting that everyone who comes out of a tent does so standing, rather than crawling, the rabbis see an intentional philological connection between the verbs describing Dathan's and Abiram's actions at their tents, and Goliath's taunting of God and the Israelite army. The rabbis further note that Dathan's and Abiram's cursing follows Moses's coming to them. They present Moses here earning the title of the most humble man (Num 12:3) as he walked to the tents of these two men who had been a constant thorn in his side and who had sought to question, ignore, undermine, and seize his leadership since his (relative) youth in Egypt. Moses showed them how humble he was willing to be in coming to his detractors after they refused to come to him, hoping to embarrass them into peace. This is not the example of a dictator seizing power for himself, but of a community organizer seeking to reach out to those who have attacked him personally and repeatedly. His last-ditch bid for reconciliation did not work, and God caused Dathan and Abiram to be swallowed up by the earth shortly after their final attack on Moses's leadership.

<sup>20</sup> Dathan and Abiram refuse Moses's first invitation to talk and sort out their differences in Numbers 16:12–14. Korah claims that Moses wrongly elevates himself over the people, and therefore excludes others from their proper leadership role in Numbers 16:1–3. Note that verse 2 specifies the object of their rebellion: "against Moses."

<sup>21</sup> Midrash Tanhuma: Korah, Simun 3.

In interacting with Dathan and Abiram throughout his life, Moses demonstrated wise, insightful, and peaceful leadership. He recognized the danger of ingratitude and perpetually antagonistic persons. Moses left noted, habitual troublemakers out of visioning and leadership planning (but still allowed them to return to the community after having collaborated against it). When conflicts arose, Moses appealed to the community to publicly call to mind what God had done in their midst to counter those who would deceive and misrepresent the congregation's experience. Last of all, Moses, even after being insulted and shunned by Dathan and Abiram, was humble and took steps to seek reconciliation, even while limiting the potential negative impact of conflicting people on the larger congregation.

The weakness of Moses is the weakness of many of us—anger. The Midrash Rabbah collection does not see anger as the driving factor in the killing of the Egyptian. However, Dathan and Abiram's attempted manipulation of the miracle of manna caused the great leader not only to become angry, but also to neglect a key detail of regulations concerning God's provision for the people—foreshadowing the reason for Moses's exclusion from the promised land. But even as Moses's anger climaxed quickly, it also subsided quickly, at least in the view of Numbers Rabbah. Even after Dathan and Abiram refused to answer his summons, Moses visited his nemeses in one final attempt at peacemaking. Moses's pattern of letting the grumblers grumble while protecting the congregation from their negative influence, yet always being ready to reconcile, is a valuable model for Christian leaders in our own communities. ⊕

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