The death of Moses, for the Jewish medieval exegete, was a key textual location to struggle with the question of theodicy or of justifying God’s seemingly unjust actions. Moses, as the most perfect human to ever have lived, who “knew God face to face”\(^1\) (Deut. 34:10), was, one might think, the human least deserving of death. Nevertheless, he dies by divine command, immediately before the Israelites enter the land of Israel.\(^2\) As this chapter will show, Jewish medieval Bible commentaries present two alternative solutions to this problem. One solution, favored by Rashi and his school, presents Moses as in fact a sinner and therefore worthy of death. If Moses sinned, then God did not act unjustly in requiring him to die. The other possibility, favored by Spanish exegetes such as Nahmanides and Abravanel, is that Moses did not deserve to die and that therefore there was some injustice in his death. The exegetes who favor this position, although they do not directly question God’s justice, suggest that the death of Moses is inexplicable or at least not explicable through the traditional concepts of reward and punishment. This chapter will show that these two alternatives in the medieval exegetical literature develop out of tensions that already exist in the biblical text and are highlighted by the midrashic literature. They illustrate both different approaches to the problem of theodicy and different strategies for reading the Bible among medieval Jewish exegetes.

**Biblical Variations: Numbers and Deuteronomy**

The Priestly narrative in Numbers 20 and the Deuteronomistic narrative in Deuteronomy 1 and 3 present different approaches to the death of Moses.

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\(^1\) אשר ידעו יהוה פנים אל פנים

\(^2\) In theory, the death of Moses outside the land of Israel presents a double theological problem. In Deuteronomistic theology, being outside the land of Israel is always a punishment. (See, for example, Deut. 4:27-28, Deut. 28:25, and Deut. 29:28.) Further, Moses specifically asks to be allowed to see the land in Deut. 3:25. The permanent exile of Moses from the land is therefore as much of a punishment as his death.
Numbers 20:13 presents a story in which God tells Moses to speak to the rock, Moses strikes the rock, and God tells Moses that for this sin he will not be able to enter the land. The nature of Moses’ sin is left somewhat ambiguous and, as we will see, the commentators come to differing conclusions about the nature of this sin. What is clear, though, is that Moses sinned and that his death outside the Promised Land was a punishment for his sin. This sin is again referred to in Deuteronomy 32:48-52, a Priestly strand added by the Redactor to make the Deuteronomistic narrative conform to the Priestly narrative.

In the early chapters of Deuteronomy, we find a different approach to the death of Moses, however, in which Moses’ sin is not the cause of his death. In Deuteronomy 1:37, 3:26 and 4:21, Moses states that he considers his death to be punishment, not for his own sin, but for the sins of the people, and in particular for the sin of the spies who (in Num. 13-14) gave an evil report of the land. In Deuteronomy 3:33-35, Moses pleads with God for mercy and begs to be allowed to enter the land. In Deuteronomy 3:36, God refuses with the words, “It is enough for you. Do not speak with me any more about this matter,” and does not give any reason for this refusal.

The Bible, then, gives two contrasting explanations of Moses’ death. In one, his death is a punishment for his own sin. In the second, his death is a punishment for someone else’s sin. In the first version, Moses accepts the punishment while in the second, he prays to be spared. In the midrash and in medieval exegesis, we see both narrative traditions taken to their natural conclusions. An earlier midrashic tradition, and the many medieval commentaries that quote it, follows the first approach, in which Moses’ death is a punishment for his sin. A later midrashic tradition develops in even more detail the Deuteronomistic narrative, in which Moses’ death is

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4 The Redactor, or R, compiled the Hebrew Bible into a unified document and added verses to make the various texts conform to each other.


6 Deuteronomy 1:37, “God was also angry with me because of you and said, ‘You, too, will not enter there.’” (גם בי התאנף יהוה בגללכם לאמור גם אתה לא תבוא שם) Deuteronomy 3:26, “God was angry with me for your sake.” (ויתעבר בי יהוה למענכם) Deuteronomy 4:21, “God was angry with me for your words.” (ויהוה התאנף על דבריכם)

7 רב לך אל חטאך דבר אל ידך דברך היה.