

Moshe's Epitaph Signs and Wonders

Introduction

None Like Moshe?

The concluding verses of the Torah eulogize Moshe, highlighting his dual role as both prophet and miracle worker:

(י) וְלֹא קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּ ה' פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים. (יא) לְכֹל הָאֵתוֹת וְהַמוֹפְתִים אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחוּ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְפָרְעֹה וּלְכֹל עַבְדָּיו וּלְכֹל אֶרְצוֹ. (יב) וּלְכֹל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וּלְכֹל הַמוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

(10) And no prophet arose in Israel like Moshe, whom Hashem knew face to face. (11) For all the signs and the wonders which Hashem sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Paroh and to all his servants and to all his land. (12) And for all the mighty hand and for all the great awe that Moshe did before the eyes of all of Israel.

Seemingly, according to these accolades, no other prophet compares to Moshe, not only in his prophetic prowess, but also in all of the signs and wonders he wrought. What, though, was so singular about the miracles performed by Moshe? Did not other prophets execute similar feats, and did not some achieve what might even be

considered to be more remarkable miracles, such as Yehoshua commanding the sun to stand still, or Eliyahu and Elisha reviving the dead. What, then, makes Moshe so exceptional?

Sentence Fragments

Attempts to interpret or translate verses 11-12 encounter some awkwardness and difficulty. While the individual words of these verses are readily comprehensible, their sentence structure leaves the reader hanging. How should the "ל" at the beginning of the verses -

לְכֹל... וּלְכֹל... וּלְכֹל

be rendered, and why does the subject of these verses appear to be missing? Do these two verses continue verse 10, with the character of the signs and wonders somehow being a manifestation of Moshe's intimate "face to face" relationship with the Divine? Conversely, is Moshe's prophetic proficiency defined purely by his ability to bring miracles?

Plethora of Phrases

In the final two verses which speak of Moshe's miraculous deeds, four different terms are employed:

הָאֵתוֹת, הַמוֹפְתִים, הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה,
הַמוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל

Does each term allude to a distinct event or merely to a different aspect

of the same event? While the Torah explicitly connects the two phrases of verse 11 to the happenings in Egypt, it is unclear to what period(s) the latter two terms in verse 12 refer. Do they also speak of the process leading up to the Exodus, or do they allude to additional miracles performed by Moshe only later on in the wilderness?

D'varim vs. Bamidbar

D'varim 34 is not the first time that the Torah speaks of Moshe's exceptional nature. Hashem, in His reprimand of Miryam and Aharon in Bamidbar 12, also elaborates on this very same matter:

(ו) וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעוּ נָא דְבַרֵי אִם יִהְיֶה נְבִיאָכֶם
ה' בְּמִרְאָה אֱלֹוֹ אֶתְוַדַּע בְּחִלּוֹם אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ. (ז)
לֹא כֵן עֲבַדֵי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא. (ח)
פֶּה אֶל פֶּה אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בְּחִידָת
וּתְמִינָת ה' יֵבִיט וּמִדּוּעַ לֹא יֵרָאֶתם לְדַבֵּר
בְּעַבְדֵי בְּמֹשֶׁה.

(6) And he said, "Hear my words: if your prophet, Hashem, I will appear to him by a vision and I will speak to him in a dream. (7) My servant, Moshe is not so, he is faithful in all my house. (8) Mouth to mouth I speak to him, by an appearance and not in riddles, and the form of Hashem he will see; and why were you not afraid to speak against my servant, Moshe.

Interestingly, though, the Bamidbar verses focus exclusively on Moshe's prophetic powers and make no mention at all of the countless

miracles he had produced. Do our verses in D'varim 34 come to supplement the Bamidbar description, or are they merely a restatement of the same theme in different form?

Overview

Commentators struggle to pinpoint the unique aspect of Moshe's miracle-making and to determine what exactly the Torah means when it states that Moshe will never be surpassed by any other prophet. Their positions are influenced by both their interpretations of other Biblical miracles and their understandings of the relationship between prophetic proficiency and signs and wonders.

On one end of the spectrum, Shadal claims that Moshe's miracles were much more critical to his unique status than his prophetic powers, and that his wonders were extraordinary by virtue of their sheer quantity. On the opposite end, S'eforno maintains that the verses speak only of Moshe's prophetic prowess, and that the miraculous events were merely the settings in which Moshe's powers were revealed.

Other commentators chart middle grounds and emphasize both facets. Rambam asserts that Moshe's uniqueness was reflected through both his prophetic abilities as well as his wondrous feats, the latter being distinguished by the vast audiences

upon which he impacted. Abarbanel proposes a different relationship between the two aspects, suggesting that it was Moshe's unique prophetic capacity and direct hotline to Hashem which enabled him to work wonders without the need for preparatory prayer.

Ed. note: What follows are selected passages of a larger presentation...

Moshe's miracles were unparalleled due to their sheer numbers, duration, and area which they affected.

...

Although Yehoshua performed miracles such as splitting the Jordan and making the sun stand still which were on par with Moshe, he did not perform nearly as many wonders as his predecessor. In addition, none of Yehoshua's feats lasted longer than a few hours.

Ralbag adds that Yehoshua did not really make the sun stop (which would indeed have been a greater miracle than those brought by Moshe), but that he only miraculously sped up the battle, thereby creating an illusion that time stood still.

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According to both Ramban and Ralbag, a MOFEIT is a miracle which involves a change in the natural order, and is distinct from an OT. They differ, though, in their interpretations of an OT, with

Ramban asserting that it is a miracle which a prophet announces in advance, and Ralbag maintaining that it is a wonder intended to persuade the nation to believe in something.

HAYAD HACHAZAKA... HAMORA HAGADOL... – Ramban maintains that, in contrast to the earlier terms, these do not refer to the plagues of Egypt. Instead, HAYAD HACHAZAKA refers to the miracle of the splitting of the sea ... while HAMORA HAGADOL refers to the revelation at Sinai whose purpose was to instill fear of Hashem in the nation.

...

Moshe's wonders were unique because they were viewed by a wider audience. While most prophets performed miracles for individuals or a small portion of the nation, Moshe's were known to all of the Children of Israel as well as the surrounding nations.

...

Rambam points to the king of Israel's request that Geichazi tell him of Elisha's miracles as proof that most of them were not known to the nation at large and affected only several individuals. Ramban and Abarbanel question this assumption as well, pointing to the drought brought by Eliyahu which affected the entire nation and was known also to neighboring nations. Here, too, Rambam belittles the prophets'

miracles suggesting that the boys who they "brought back to life" had never really died, but were merely extremely sick and in need of resuscitation but not of resurrection.

...

In contrast to other prophets, Moshe could bring miracles without needing to first pray. Moshe's face to face connection enabled a direct hotline to Hashem and instantaneous implementation.

...

Does a prophet need to make miracles? Abarbanel asserts that a prophet should not be judged by the miracles he performs since these are brought out of necessity and have nothing to do with the stature of the prophet. Abarbanel, nonetheless, attempts to prove how Moshe's wonders were greater than others, but does so by linking them to his prophetic abilities.