

NUMBERS:

From Sinai to Kadesh

Numbers 10-11 – Lesson 30

Wednesday, January 13, 2021

The Israelites have heard much from both God and Moses since reaching Sinai. Instructions, rules, and exhortations have been abundant. But now is the time to break camp and move on. Sinai is no more God's geographical goal for his people than would be the Mount of Transfiguration for Peter, James, and John. It should, however, nerve God's people for the future by giving them a deeper exposure of God.

From Marching to Murmuring (10:11-12:16)

The scene in 10:11-36 is dramatic, pulsating. Flags are flying. God's presence is distinctly manifest. Conquest is on everyone's mind. It may come as a bit of a surprise that Moses ask his father-in-law, Hobab, to accompany them (vv. 29-32 especially v. 31), as they leave Sinai, since, says Moses to his Midianite father-in-law, "*You know where we should camp in the desert, and you can be our eyes.*" So, who is to guide Israel: the divine presence in the fire cloud (9:15-23), or Hobab, or both? If it is both, then the passage illustrates the importance in biblical thought of both God's work and human work as vital parts in the advancement of God's will. For a parallel, one thinks of Joshua sending out the spies to scout out Jericho in Joshua 2 right after God has unilaterally guaranteed victory to Joshua ("*No one shall be able to stand up against you*") on Joshua 1. If Hobab did agree to go after his first refusal (Num. 10:30), and that is not at all certain, then no subsequent text highlights any contribution of his. In the narratives that follow there is honor for Yahweh, but none for Moses' father-in-law.

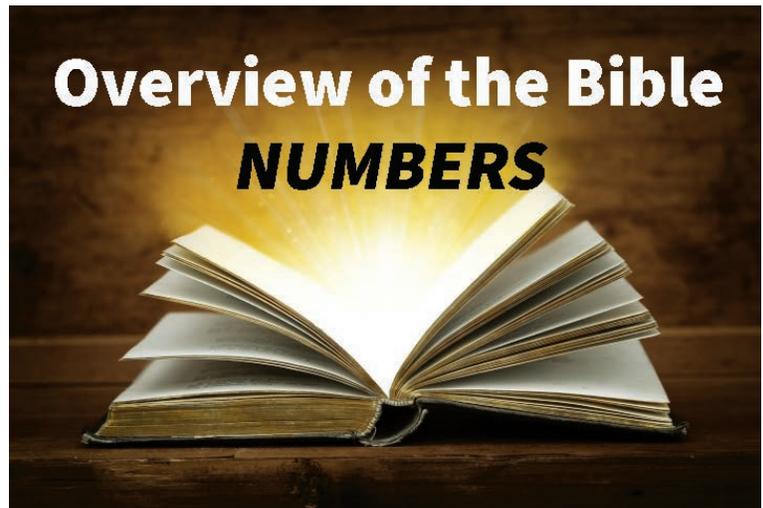
The reader is hardly prepared for the rude shock, then, that comes in chs. 11 and 12. Far from a mood of optimism and gallantry, there is instead the ugly spectacle of divisiveness, complaints, depression and bewilderment, with divine judgment as the appropriate response.

Three different scenes are presented in this debacle. First, there is a general complaining about "*misfortunes/hardships.*" The Hebrew form used for "*complained*" may suggest that this is not an isolated instance, but rather a pattern of behavior. God responds with a consuming fire on the fringes of the camp. Only the intercessory prayer of Moses terminates the punishment (11:1-3). Second, not satisfied with a one-dish menu-manna the people cry to God for diverse food (11:4-34). Third, Miriam challenges both the sagacity of Moses in the choice of a wife and the credibility of his unique relationship to God (12).

The immediate purpose of these events is to contrast the God who is present in his camp to bless (chs. 1-10) with God who is present in his camp to judge whenever a group or an individual attempts to shatter the harmony of the community (chs. 11-12). Thus, a fire consumes (11:1); a plague breaks out (11:33); an accuser becomes leprous (12:10).

The role of Moses in each of the three incidents is interesting. In the first he is successful intercessor. He raises no questions, offers no rebukes. In the second, however, the craving of the '*rabble*' for meat is another matter. If "*Moses prayed*" in 11:2, he is "*displeased/troubled*" in 11:10. Moses assumes that the people's complaining and memories of the food in Egypt are an indictment against him. He is distraught and wants no more responsibility for this ungrateful, unresponsive congregation. Even death is preferable to further ministry (v. 15). Murmuring is contagious. Moses is lowering himself to the level of his congregation, adopting it mentality.

God's response to Moses (vv.16-23) is one of both respite and rebuke. Respite is provided in that Moses no



longer needs to function alone. God will provide him with seventy elders who will share the burden of leadership. It is as if Moses has more than enough "*Spirit*" to share. His own portion of Spirit is not thereby reduced, any more than one candle loses any of its flame when it lights another candle. But it is also a word of rebuke. If Moses wants to leave, that is allowed, but first let him choose any seventy of the congregation. God will then put on them "*the Spirit*" that he has put on Moses. Moses is not indispensable, but the presence of God's Spirit is. Only the gift of God, the divine Spirit can explain Moses' abilities.

God did honor the people's urge for seasoned dishes. Unlike in Exodus 16, however, there is a price to be paid. At the very moment the people are enjoying these succulent morsels, a plague is unleashed (v. 33). God acquiesces, but he does not acquit. The Hebrew word for the "*wind*" that brought the quail (v. 31) that eventually led to the severe plague is the same as the Hebrew word for the "*Spirit*" that came upon then seventy elders and moved them to prophesy (v. 25): ruah. Numbers 11:4-34 powerfully illustrates the potential; for either blessing bordering on ecstasy or catastrophe bordering on obliteration when the divine ruah is active.

The third incident is in ch. 12. If in ch. 11 Moses was indirectly challenged, here the attack is frontal. In 11:1-3 God heard the complaining (see v. 1) (and told it to Moses?); in 11:4-34 Moses heard the complaining (see v.10) and told it to God. In both 11:1-3 and 11:4-34 God is the one under attack; in 12:1-16 Moses is the one under attack. The first innuendo is leveled against the propriety of Moses' choice of a spouse. He has married a "Cushite" woman (12:1). The charge seems to come more from Miriam, than from, as 12:1 says, literally, "And she spoke, Miriam, and Aaron, against Moses." The verb is third-person, feminine, singular, not plural.

On the other hand, Num. 12:1 may simply be saying that Moses' wife was from the tribe of Cushan, an area parallel to that of Midian in Hab. 3:7: "I saw the tent of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish." This would accord perfectly with Ex. 2:21-Moses married Zipporah, a Midianite-rather than forcing the assumption that the reference in Numbers 12 is to a second marriage for Moses.

Interestingly, Aaron can ask mercy only from Moses (vv.11-12). It is Moses who again intercedes (v. 13). Thus, we are brought back to the Moses of 11:1-3, a Moses whose prayers result in the mitigation, but not the cancellation, of the divine sentence. There is no word for remonstrance against either Miriam or Aaron. He adopts a policy of silence toward his detractors. By contrast, Miriam appears but once in Numbers after ch.12, and that only to die (20:1b).

Not only is Moses' relationship to a unique wife questioned, but so is his unique relationship to God: "*Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses?*" (12:2). Is he the only vehicle of revelation? Does he have a monopoly on God's pronouncements? God's answer is simple: yes (see vv. 6-8).

Chapter 11 of Numbers, casts Moses in a different light than does ch. 12. In ch. 11 the emphasis is on a ministry that Moses shares with others. God will put the same Spirit on seventy elders that he has put on Moses. It is a divine source on which Moses has no monopoly. By contrast ch. 12 focuses on the uniqueness of Moses' ministry (see vv. 6-8). God speaks only with Moses face to face. Moses is unique not only in his ministry but also in his character: he is very "*Humble*" (v. 3). This is the only time that this word appears in the Hebrew Bible in the singular. Elsewhere, in the plural, it refers to the '*afflicted*' who cry out to God. A key to Moses' successful leadership, as with any of God's leader servants, is to have both a ministry gladly shared with others and a ministry for which God has uniquely gifted him and set him apart. And although Scripture teaches the priesthood of all believers, it does not teach the "*prophethood*" of all believers.

The commonality of theme for the two chapters is evident. In each narrative there is a main program: God is giving to Israel the Promise Land of Canaan. Then there is a counterprogram, instigated by the people against the march, by the rabble against the flood, by Moses against his role, by Miriam and Aaron against Moses. Finally, there is a counter-counterprogram from God, the purpose of which is to restore unity. The instigators are punished. God's will is one people, one food, and one leader.

Work Cited

Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook On The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 322-326.