

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

* * * ISRAEL'S WILDERNESS WANDERINGS * * *

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Soli Deo Gloria!

OVERVIEW OF NUMBERS 13-14. Numbers 13-14, which record the failure of Israel at Kadesh-barnea, are in many ways the climax of the Book of Numbers. In these chapters, Moses' generation of the nation of Israel is offered possession of the Promised Land, but they refuse to enter because of fear of the giants. The Book of Hebrews provides a theological commentary on this event in Hebrews 3:7-4:8 and characterizes the sin of these Israelites as "unbelief" (Heb3:19; 4:6); in Deuteronomy 9:23, it is called "rebellion". As a result, the offer of the Promised Land was rescinded from Moses' generation, which was condemned to die in the wilderness, and it would be re-offered to Joshua's generation (cf. Act7:45). This is the historical pattern of Israel failing at their first opportunity, but succeeding at their second, so eloquently recounted by Stephen before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7.

CHAPTER 13

SELECTION OF THE SPIES

- [1] While the Numbers account makes it seem as if it was the LORD's plan to send spies into the land of Canaan, Deuteronomy 1:19-23 makes it clear that this was the peoples' request, with which Moses agreed.
- [2] The LORD's intention was for the entire nation to immediately enter and possess the land of Canaan (cf. Deut1:21).
- [4] Note on the Tribes of Israel. In the Bible, all lists of the tribes of Israel are given as twelve in number. However, there were actually thirteen tribes, since both of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, received a full inheritance from Jacob (cf. Gen48:8-22); in effect, Joseph received the double portion of inheritance that Reuben forfeited (cf. Gen48:22; 1Chron5:1-2). Thus, different lists of the tribes omit a different tribe, though the total is always twelve. In the list of Numbers 13:4-15, the tribe of Levi is omitted (likely because the Levites were exempted from going to war; cf. Num1:2-3,47-53).
- [3] Perhaps, after the people demanded spies to be sent in (Deut1:22), it was the LORD who prescribed that twelve men be selected, one from each of the twelve tribes.
- [6] "Caleb" would prove to be a good spy and an outstanding man of faith (cf. Deut1:36; Josh14:14). In Hebrew, "Caleb" means *dog*.
- [8] "Hoshea" is better known as Joshua (cf. Num11:28; v16). In Hebrew, "Hoshea" means *he saves*.
- [11] Here an important pattern is established. In a list of the twelve tribes, when one of Joseph's sons is explicitly mentioned (i.e.,

"Ephraim"; v8), "Joseph" should be understood implicitly to mean the other son (in this case, "Manasseh"; Cp., Rev7:6,8).

- [16] "Hoshea" (i.e., Joshua), which means *he saves*, was changed by Moses to "Jehoshua", which means *JEHOVAH saves*.

SENDING OF THE SPIES

- [17] Moses sent the spies (Deut1:23).
- [18] The purpose in sending the spies was not to collect information for the LORD. It was a test of faith for the Israelites (Cp., 1Pet1:5-7). Their refusal to enter the land was characterized as "rebellion" (Deut9:23), but it was also called "unbelief" (Heb3:19; 4:6,11).
- [19] The spies treated the mission into the land of Canaan as one of military reconnaissance, which would prove disastrous. The believer is called to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2Cor5:7).
- [20] The spies were charged to "be ye of good courage", just as Joshua would be (Cp., Josh1:6). Jewish tradition is that the Israelite's refusal to enter the Land occurred on **Tisha B'Av** (i.e., the 9th of Av, which in 2025 occurred on August 3). In Israel, the grape harvest takes place between August and October, which is consistent with the spies entering the Land at "the time of the first ripe grapes".
- [21] The spies journeyed through the Land from south to north.
- [22] "Hebron" had been formerly known as Kirjath-arba (i.e., the city of Arba; Gen23:2), which was the place where Abraham purchased the Cave of Machpelah as a burial site for Sarah (Gen23:9); it is known today as the Cave of the Patriarchs as in it were buried Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah¹ (cf. Gen23:19; 25:4; 49:31).

"Arba" means *four*. Its reputation came from the four giants that dwelt there, "Anak" and his three sons "Ahiman", "Sheshai", and "Talmi" (who were slain by the tribe of Judah; Judg1:10). "Machpelah" means *double* (or *couples*), and the Jews came to regard it as the place where four couples were buried (by adding Adam and Eve to the three patriarchs). Note that the last patriarch to be buried there was Jacob (i.e., Israel), and that the names of the five previous persons buried there are an acrostic that forms the name Israel in Hebrew (ישראל).

י	(I) = Isaac
ש	(S) = Sarah
ר	(R) = Rebekah
א	(A) = Abraham
ל	(L) = Leah

¹ Rachel was buried in Bethlehem (Gen35:19).

"Zoan in Egypt" was the city of Rameses, which had been built by the Israelites during their bondage (cf. Exod1:11).

- [23] The picture is of abundant agricultural production.
- [24] "Eschol" means *cluster*. The grapes in particular made an impression on the spies and the Israelites.
- [25] Note, "forty days" often represents testing/trial (Cp., Matt4:2).
- [26] The place of the testing (i.e., would Israel trust the LORD and enter the Promised Land), and subsequent rebellion, was "Kadesh". Note that the journey from Mount Sinai to Kadesh-barnea was "eleven days" (Deut1:2). "Kadesh-barnea" means *holy field of wandering*.
- [27] Note the use of "surely", commonly used with in conjunction with the promises of God (Cp., Gen2:17; 18:18; Isa55:3). The spies found the land of Canaan to be all that God had promised (cf. Exod3:17; 13:5; 33:3).
- [28] The spies found the people in the Land to dwell in "walled" cities, and the "children of Anak" were giants (cf. v33). From a human perspective, to dispossess the Canaanites from their land would be a formidable task for a large army, well-trained, and properly equipped (which the Israelites were decidedly not).
- [29] In addition to the indigenous Hamitic peoples of Canaan (e.g., Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Jebusites; Gen15:20-21), the "Amalekites" (descendants of Esau and perpetual enemies of the Israelites; cf. Gen36:12; Exod17:8) had encroached into "the south of the land".
- [30] In spite of the human perspective, "Caleb" (and Joshua; cf. Num14:6-8) had the confidence inspired by faith in the God who had proven Himself to be faithful to them. Namely, this is the same generation of Israelites which had witnessed the LORD deliver them from bondage to the Egyptians with all manner of supernatural signs, followed by the destruction of the entire army of Egypt at the Red Sea (cf. Exod14:13).
- [31] The ten "evil" (v32) spies believed the Canaanites to be "stronger" than the Israelites, which was true; but they were not stronger than the God of Israel! Note that the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was not characterized as a battle between the Egyptians and the Israelites, but between the gods of Egypt and the God of Israel (cf. Exod12:12). The ten evil spies acted from human perspective, whereas Caleb and Joshua acted from divine perspective.
- [32] The Holy Spirit characterizes the "report" of the ten spies as "evil"; the same Hebrew word is translated as "slander" in Numbers 14:36. Their facts were correct (though apparently exaggerated; not "all" the inhabitants of Canaan were giants), but their conclusion was a "slander" against God (i.e., that God was not able to deliver the Canaanites into the hands of the Israelites). See Amos 2:9 for commentary on the Amorites being "men of great stature".

How ironic that the Israelites were afraid of the Canaanites, whereas in reality it was the Canaanites who were terrified of the Israelites, or rather, their God (cf. Josh2:9-11).

- [33] Here, "giants" is the Hebrew word *nephilim*, the same as in Genesis 6:4, which were the offspring of the "sons of God" (i.e., angels; cf. Job1:6: 2:1; 38:7) procreating with the "daughters of men" (Gen6:2). Thus, a second angelic incursion took place after the Flood. Whereas before the Flood the incursion was worldwide in scope, after the Flood it was concentrated in the land of Canaan. The diabolical purpose was the same in both incursions (i.e., an attempt to so corrupt the human gene pool as to make impossible the coming of Messiah as Redeemer; Gen3:15; Heb2:14-16), the attack could be more narrowly focused geographically after the Flood due to the additional revelation that had been given (cf. Gen15:18-21).