

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

* * * ISRAEL'S WILDERNESS WANDERINGS * * *

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Soli Deo Gloria!

CHAPTER 20

THE FAILURE OF MOSES (AND AARON) AT MERIBAH

The disobedience of Moses and Aaron at the second occasion of bringing water from a rock catastrophically broke a type of the 1st/2nd comings of Christ. Although the LORD graciously provided the needed water, God judged both Moses and Aaron, condemning them to death in the wilderness; neither were allowed to enter the Promised Land (cf. Num20:28-29; Deut34:4-7).

- [1] The "first month" refers to the first month of the Israelites' 40th year in the wilderness, since Aaron's death is recorded as occurring in the "fifth month" of the same year (Cp., Num20:29; 33:38). Their wilderness wanderings had almost come to an end, and the nation has arrived again at "Kadesh" (the very place they had begun their wanderings 38 years before; cf. Num13:26). Virtually all of Moses' generation is now dead, and those present represent the next generation that Joshua would soon lead into Canaan. Miriam died here, on the border of the Promised Land, but as with all women in the Bible her age at death is not recorded. Thus, Miriam, Aaron, and Moses all died in the fortieth year in the wilderness.
- [2] This is the second (recorded) occasion on which the Israelites had "no water", once before the wilderness wanderings began (cf. Exod17:1-7) and once at their very end. As will become evident, these two similar events are types of the 1st/2nd comings of Christ.
- [3] After 40 years of daily supernatural provision by the LORD, the reaction of the Israelites is nothing short of an utter lack of faith. The new generation is not spiritually superior to the old one.
- [4] Their complaint on this second occasion is exactly the same as on the first (Cp., Exod17:3).
- [5] Moses had not led the Israelites to this "evil place"; they had been led there by the pillar of cloud (i.e., the presence of the LORD; Exod40:38). They complain of no "figs", "vines", or "pomegranates", yet (ironically) the land of Canaan had been rich in all of these (cf. Num13:23).
- [6] Moses was unique as a prophet, since the LORD spoke to him "face to face" (Exod33:11; Deut34:10).
- [7] The LORD's commands to "Moses" (v8) are clear and very specific. Sincerity counts for nothing when one violates the LORD's clear commands (Cp., 1Sam15:22).

- [8] Moses and Aaron (note, "ye"; on the first occasion it had been only Moses; cf. Exod17:6) were commanded to "speak" to the "rock" in the presence of all "the congregation". The "rock" was a type of Christ (cf. 1Cor10:4). At His 1st coming, Christ was "smitten" (Cp., Exod17:6; Isa53:4). At His second coming, Christ will "speak" the word of God, with which He will "smite" the nations (Rev19:15).
- [9] Note that the "rod" Moses was instructed to take (v8) was the rod "before the LORD"; thus, this was not Moses' rod, but Aaron's rod that had "budded" (cf. Num17:8,10), whereas on the first occasion Moses' rod had been used (Exod17:5). Moses' rod was an instrument of judgment (cf. Exod17:5), whereas Aaron's rod that had budded was a symbol of resurrection (cf. Dan12:1-2); this symbolism is consistent with the typology of the 1st/2nd comings of Christ.
- [10] By asking, "must we fetch you water out of this rock", Moses seemingly put himself and Aaron in the place of God, which was blasphemy and carried the death penalty (cf. Lev24:16). In Psalm 106:32-33 (which is a theological commentary on the history of Israel at Mt. Sinai and in the wilderness), Moses is said to have been provoked to rebel and "spoke unadvisedly" (which was a sin that invoked the death penalty for a prophet; cf. Deut18:20); apparently even Moses was held to this standard by God.
- [11] Rather than speaking to the rock as commanded, Moses "smote the rock twice". In disobeying the specific command of the LORD, Moses destroyed the intended type of the 2nd coming. Despite Moses' disobedience, the LORD graciously provided the needed water. The "water" was a type of the Holy Spirit, whose sending required the death of Christ as a prerequisite (cf. Jn7:37-39; 16:7; Joel2:28). Moses' (and Aaron's) sin was a public disregard for the clear word of God (v8).
- [12] Their act of disobedience resulted in Moses and Aaron being condemned to die in the wilderness (cf. Num20:24,28-29; Deut34:4-7); they forfeited their privilege of entering the Promised Land. Note that spiritual leaders are held to a higher standard, and their failure comes with greater consequences (cf. Jas3:1).
- Note on Calvinism. The failure of Moses at the end of his life, for which God judged him with physical death, is inconsistent with Calvinism's doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Moses did not persevere in faith and good works (cf. "ye believed me not"; v12), yet Moses was commended for his exemplary faith in Hebrews 11:24-29. Clearly, Moses is saved today, despite not having persevered to the end.
- [13] "Meribah" means *strife*. The location of this second occasion was not geographically the same as the first, but both places were given the same name since the underlying "strife" was the same on both occasions (Cp., Exod17:7).