



The Bible Challenge

A daily guide to reading the Bible in a year

Numbers

*Rebellion and its
Consequences*

(Chapters 11-25)

Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat!"⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.⁶ But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.

—Numbers 11:4-6

Structure¹⁸

Part I: The Death of the Old Generation

- I. Obedient Beginnings: Preparation for the March of the Holy People of God in the Wilderness (1-10)
- II. An Abrupt Slide into Rebellion: The Death of the First Wilderness Generation Begins (11-20)
- III. Hitting Bottom: The End of the First Generation –Signs of Hope in the Midst of Death (21-25)

Part II: The Rise of a New Generation on the Edge of the Promised Land (26-36)

Grumbling and Complaining (Numbers 11)

In Numbers 1-10, the people of Israel did everything that the Lord commanded through Moses. They were faithful to organize, make the appropriate sacrifices and offerings to the Lord. They were ready to set foot into the wilderness and march to the Promised Land. Chapter 11 marks the beginnings of rebellion. Even before they got to the threshold of the Promised Land they grumbled and complained "in the hearing of the Lord" concerning their misfortunes and the food which they were being provided.

YHWH's anger at the complaining and grumbling is described as a kindled fire that eventually "blazed hotly" against the Israelites. Likewise, Moses is displeased and burdened by leading a rebellious people:

¹¹ Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹² Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,' to the land that you swore to give their fathers? (11:11-12)

¹⁸ Olson, Dennis T., Numbers (John Knox Press: Knoxville, TN 1996)



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In many ways the Israelites were acting like a giant baby that was not getting its way. For Moses the child was at this point too big for him to carry. Moses was burdened even to the point of begging the Lord for his death: "If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness." (11:15)

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

-Matthew 6:31-34

Exodus – Before Sinai¹⁹

Numbers –After Sinai

Miriam's song of praise—15:20-21

Miriam and Aaron rebel—12

Complaint about water, bitter water made sweet, the LORD heals—15:22-26

Unspecified complaint—angry fire of the LORD kills—11:1-3

Manna/quail—16

Manna/quail—11:4-15,31-35

Water from the rock—17:1-7

Water from the rock—20:1-13

Leaders appointed to ease Moses burdens—18

Leaders appointed to ease Moses burdens—11:16-30

Israel attacks Amalek and is victorious—17:8-16

Israel attacks Amalek and is defeated—14:39-45

They had grumbled and complained as they journeyed "three days" (Ex. 15:22) from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. What has changed in the relationship now that they are "three days" (Num. 10:33) out from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land?

Before Sinai, Israel is like a newly adopted child that does not yet know the rules of the household. God the Divine Parent, bent over backwards to satisfy legitimate needs of an Israel imminently out of Egypt. But by the time we reach Numbers, the people of Israel know their responsibilities in the law and commandments. Israel must take responsibility and is answerable for its relationship to God.²⁰

¹⁹ Olson, p. 62.

²⁰ Olsen, Numbers, p. 63.



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For Moses struggles with his own adequacy in leading, God anoints 70 men with some of the “Spirit that is on Moses”. Even then Moses doubts the word of the Lord for provision. God rebukes, “Is the Lord’s hand too short? Now you will see whether my word will come true for you or not!” (11:23)

Indeed, as the Lord prophesied the Israelites had meat “coming out their nostrils” and a great plague struck down those who craved the meat—and the place where they were buried was called The Grave of Craving.

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’

--Luke 8:9-10

“The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height.³³ And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

—Numbers 13:32-33

Spreading Rebellion: Inner Circle (12)

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of his Cushite wife. This unnamed wife is likely Zipporah, the Midianite. Habakkuk 3:7 sets Cush and Midian in parallel: “I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.” While the text is not explicit what the nature of their complaint against Moses’ wife, it could have been because of her dark skin, for Miriam’s curse is to become as “leprous like snow.”

Clearly the scene serves to reinforce the authority of the LORD’s “servant Moses” as one whom the Lord speaks “mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD” versus the prophet whom the LORD speaks in visions and dreams. (12:6-9)

The Decisive Rebellion: Spy Mission (13-14)

While the other rebellions brought consequences and even the sentence of death to the Israelites, the rebellion of the Israelites against entering the promised land results in the entire first generation of the exodus to die in the wilderness.

The Majority Report

The spies return from the Land of Promise with a “yes, but” Yes the land “flows with milk and honey” as the Lord promised, but “the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large.” As the report progressed, they majority made a “bad report” by mythologizing the land and its inhabitants.



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The Minority Report

Two of the spies, offered a different interpretation of the situation—Caleb and Joshua. “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” And,

“The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey.⁹ Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.” –Numbers (14:7-9)

The reaction of people is fierce, they not only reject the minority report and encouragement to trust the LORD, but they pick up stones to dispatch Joshua and Caleb. The Israelite rejection of faithful leadership, however also extends to grumbling against Moses and Aaron:

“Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!³ Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?”⁴ And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” –Numbers 14:2-4

On the threshold of a tremendous gift and blessing from the Lord, the Israelites have rejected the gift and their redemption from the cruel bondage of Egypt. Is the fear of an unknown blessing so great as to prefer bondage? Would they have God reverse the Exodus?

The Intercession of Moses (14:13-19)

The two great rebellions described in the Pentateuch are the golden calf episode and this one. In both cases, YHWH threatens to reduce Israel down to Moses and start over. But Moses, intercedes appealing to God’s international reputation, his promises, and his character.

“I will make you a nation greater and mightier than they.” --Numbers 14:12



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Moses' intercession again prevails on the grace of God. YHWH's judgment would fit the desires of the Israelites: they would die in the wilderness rather than by the sword, their children would be the ones to enter the land. The entire generation who experienced the Exodus from Egypt (save Joshua and Caleb) would not enter the promised land.

As the book of Numbers progresses to Chapter 25, there are glimmers of hope and normalcy as laws are again given through Moses (chapter 15). But, the rebellions intensify as well with the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. In a dramatic showdown at the tent of meeting (16) over leadership, Korah and his followers are swallowed up by the Lord and taken directly to Sheol, the place of the dead.

The arrogance of the people over leadership eventually strike Moses and Aaron themselves. Numbers 20:

¹⁰ Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" ¹¹ And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. ¹² And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them."

*"I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not
near: a star shall come
out of Jacob, and a
scepter shall rise out of
Israel; it shall crush the
forehead of Moab
and break down all the
sons of Sheth.*

*¹⁸ Edom shall be
dispossessed; Seir also,
his enemies, shall be
dispossessed.*

Israel is doing valiantly.

*¹⁹ And one from Jacob
shall exercise dominion
and destroy the
survivors of cities!"*

Balaam's 4th Oracle
--Numbers 24:17-19

Moses and Aaron would be sentenced to die in the wilderness with the first generation. The way would be consistently barred to them by the border tribes of the Land such as Edom (20:14-21). "Israel turned away from them." (20:20-21) There are signs of hope with victories over Arad (21:1-3), King Sihon and King Og (21:10-35) The final rebellion comes in chapter 25 with the idolatry to Baal in the plains of Moab. In spite of the failings of the 1st generation, the oracles of the prophet Balaam cast a glorious vision of Israel's grand future! (Chapters 22-24)