

**NUMBERS 12-14 MIRIAM'S SIN; SPIES IN CANAAN; ISRAEL REBELS**

In Numbers 12-14 we come to the saddest section of Israel's history—why the first generation did not enter the Promised Land. After receiving the law of God in codified form, the Israelites are poised to enter Canaan--the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. Everyday they see the miracle of the manna and watch the cloud hover by day and the pillar of fire at night. A year ago they had witnessed ten miraculous plagues against the powerful Egyptians that finally broke their will, and then they miraculously crossed the Red Sea.

They had so much going for them, but now, jealousy, political infighting and lack of faith take place, eventually ruining their chance to inherit the land. What started it?

**Events leading to a rebellion by Miriam**

In chapter 11, God had named 70 elders to help Moses carry the burden of governing the people and even gave them access to His holy spirit. Because of this, it seems Miriam and Aaron felt a bit displaced, losing their exclusive executive positions they had with Moses and God before the 70 were named.

So, when Moses did something questionable, Miriam and Aaron thought their younger brother had disqualified himself and disparaged him, in an attempt to retain their former exclusive roles.

"Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman. So they said, 'Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?' And the Lord heard it" (Num. 12:1-2).

Several commentaries have good points about this section. *The JFB Commentary* says, "The occasion of this seditious outbreak on the part of Miriam and Aaron against Moses was *the great change made in the government by the adoption of the seventy rulers* (Num. 11:16)...Their irritating disparagement of his wife...arose from *jealousy* of these relatives, through whose influence the innovation had been first made."

*Barnes Notes* adds, "Miriam, as a prophetess no less than as the sister of Moses and Aaron, took the first rank among the women of Israel and Aaron may be regarded as the ecclesiastical head of the whole nation. But instead of being grateful for these high dignities they challenged the special vocation of Moses and the exclusive authority which God

had assigned to him. Miriam was the instigator, from the fact that her name stands conspicuously first, and that the punishment fell on her alone. She probably considered herself as supplanted, and that too by a foreigner. Aaron was misled this time by the urgency of his sister, as once before he did in Ex. 32 by that of the people."

**Moses' marries an Ethiopian**

What about issue of the Ethiopian woman? We are not sure who Miriam was referring to in this case. It is quite improbable that she was thinking of Zipporah, Moses' Midianite wife of some 40 years (Ex. 2:21-22) who had grown children from him.

*The Kile and Delitzsch OT Commentary* says, "It would be quite different if, a short time before, probably after the death of Zipporah, he had contracted a second marriage with a Cushite woman, who either sprang from the Cushites dwelling in Arabia, or from the foreigners who had come out of Egypt along with the Israelites. This marriage would not have been wrong in itself, as God had merely forbidden the Israelites to marry the daughters of Canaan (Ex. 34:16)." Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, says this wife was an Ethiopian princess.

God does not mention any problem with Moses' marriage with an Ethiopian, showing there wasn't a racial or religious issue involved, but instead focuses on Miriam's and Aaron's damaging attitude of jealousy. God inspires to be written, "(Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.)...Then the Lord...called Aaron and Miriam. And they both went forward. Then he said, 'Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision: I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses: *He is faithful in all My house*. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark saying; and he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?' So the anger of the Lord was aroused against them, and He departed. And when the cloud departed from above the tabernacle, suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow. Then Aaron turned toward Miriam, and there she was, a leper. So Aaron said to Moses, 'Oh, my lord! Please do not lay this sin on us, in

which we have done foolishly and in which we have sinned...So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, "Please heal her, O God, I pray!" (12:3-13).

God listens to Moses and forgives Miriam, but has her ostracized for 7 days so she can see the gravity of her wrong attitude and that she never attacks her brother again. Too bad we still see today this propensity of leaders to be so jealous of others.

After this, the Israelites traveled to the border of Canaan. God instructs them to pick one leader from each tribe to go spy the land.

### **Hebron – a historical linchpin**

So the twelve spied the land for 40 days, from south to north and saw how rich and fertile it was. "And they went up through the South and came to **Hebron**; Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the descendants of Anak, were there (giants). (Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt)" (13:22).

This passing comment about Hebron and Zoan is actually one of the chronological linchpins in the Bible. "Tanis-Zoan...a stele set up there during the reign of Pharaoh Horemheb commemorates the 400th anniversary of that cult [to Seth], in about 1330 BC. The Hyksos built their capital, Avaris, at the same spot (1725–1575 BC). Rameses II also had his capital here, naming it Per-Rameses" (*Archaeological Encyclopedia*).

So the Bible tells us Hebron, where Abraham lived, was first just a village called Quiriat Arba and later, Mamre (Gen. 23:2, 19). When it became a city it was then named Hebron, some time after Abraham's death. This is evidence of the historical accuracy of the account and a knowledge of both Egyptian and Canaanite geography—precisely what you would expect of people having lived in Canaan and then in Egypt.

*The Expositor's Commentary* mentions: "The first city the spies came to in the land of Canaan was Hebron. The parenthetical comment about the building of the city seven years before Zoan in Egypt may have been prompted by their amazement at the size and fortification of the city that was so closely associated with the lives of their ancestors four centuries before this time. In the stories of the ancestors of their people, Hebron had not been a great city but a dwelling and trading place for shepherds and herdsmen. What is strange in the

spies' interest in the city of Hebron is what they do not mention. This was the burial place of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah. Why would they not have said, 'Here we have arrived at the place where our fathers and mothers are buried. Where they lie, soon we shall live'?"

"Instead of looking to the patriarchs and the promises, the spies noticed sizes of buildings and statures of persons. Moreover, they ignored the clear timetable of God as recorded in Genesis 15. They were in the land at the time of promise. Yet they averted their glance from the tombs of the fathers, and they neglected the promise of God; they were too preoccupied with the sandal sizes of three huge men who lived in Hebron...The Anakites were men of great stature; their physical size became a rallying point for the fear of the people. In a later day of faith, Caleb was to drive these giants from their city. Would that he had been given his chance forty years earlier!"

The Bible continues, "Then they came to the Valley of Eshcol, and there cut down a branch with one cluster of grapes; they carried it between two of them on a pole. They also brought some of the pomegranates and figs" (Num. 13:23).

Why was the Promised Land so fertile? It had temperate weather due to the Mediterranean Sea, two rainy seasons, the Jordan River, many forests, rivers coming down the mountains, the plains of Sharon and Esdraelon, Lake Galilee and wonderful soil. It truly was the land of milk and honey, symbolic for the abundant fauna and flora.

When the spies finished scouting the land, they came before the people, and ten of them were quite negative, while two were very positive.

The ten said, "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with mild and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South, the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan." Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we."

And they gave the children of Israel *a bad report*...saying, 'The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants [Nephilim in Hebrew as in Gen. 6:4] and we are as grasshoppers in our own sight' (Num. 13:27-33).

### **Losing faith in God—failing 10 times**

Instead of having faith in God's promises, the great majority of Israelites totally lost heart and sided with the bad report of the ten spies. This led to an outright rebellion against God and Moses. "And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, 'If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt? So they said to one another, 'Let us select a leader and return to Egypt.' Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel. But Joshua...and Caleb...tore up their clothes [in grief]."

Then Joshua and Caleb gave the good report which nobody heeded: "The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us...Only do not rebel against the Lord, nor fear the people, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them.' And all the congregation said to *stone them* with stones."

So two of them had true faith—Joshua (from Ephraim) and Caleb (from Judah). It is interesting that Joshua's real name was Hoshea, meaning "May the Eternal save" and because of his faith was changed to Joshua—"The Eternal Saves." Again, God saw Joshua's true character and turned it from a probability of being saved to a certainty. In Greek, the name Joshua is Jesus, so Jesus was named after this noteworthy Israelite ancestor. Caleb's name means "bold" or "courageous" and he truly was.

The Bible continues, "Now the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of meeting before all the children of Israel...and said to Moses: 'How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have

performed among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.' And Moses said to the Lord, 'Then the Egyptians will hear it, for by Your might You brought these people up from among them...and say 'Because the Lord was not able to bring this people to the land which He swore to give them, therefore He killed them in the wilderness...The Lord is longsuffering and abundant in mercy...Then the Lord said, 'I have pardoned, according to your word; but...because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now *these ten times*, and have not heeded My voice, they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers...But my servant Caleb, because he has a *different spirit* in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it.'" What were the 10 times the Israelites tested God in that one year? Here are ten events.

1. Ex. 15:24 Rebellion by the waters of Marah.
2. Ex. 16:2 Rebellion due to lack of food.
3. Ex. 17:2 Rebellion due to lack of water.
4. Ex. 32 The golden calf incident.
5. Num. 11:1 Rebellion at Taberah.
6. Num. 11:4 Rebellion wanting meat.
7. Num. 11:33 Rebellion of ungratefulness.
8. Num. 12:1 Rebellion by Miriam and Aaron.
9. Num. 14:2 Rebellion due to spies bad report.
10. Num. 14:10 Rebellion to stone God's servants.

God tells them they will have to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, according to the 40 days the spies were in the land. Unfortunately, when the Israelites heard this catastrophic news of not inheriting Canaan, they tried to do it by themselves, without God's help. In the first skirmish with the Amalekites, they are soundly defeated and come back discouraged. So begins their journeys for another 39 years due to their lack of faith and rebellious nature.