

People on the Move: The Book of Numbers
From Complaints to Apostasy

Lesson #5 for October 31, 2009

Scriptures: Numbers 11-14.

1. This lesson covers the complaints, the spies, the apostasy, and the discouragements which occurred between the time the children of Israel left the foot of Mount Sinai and the time when they were told by God to turn back to wander for 40 years in the wilderness. That period extended for no more than a few weeks. They could have covered the distance in eleven days!
2. Moses gave us a fairly detailed account of the events of their travels. It is interesting to compare those events as they unfold with the account by Moses looking back as recorded in Numbers 33. How do Bible-believing Christians explain the fact that not one of these places mentioned in this series can be positively identified today? Where is the archeological evidence that 2 million people lived for 40 years in that wilderness? Remember that the children of Israel expected to be in the land of Canaan in no more than 11 days from the time that they left Mount Sinai. Why do you think they agreed to stop on the border and send in those spies? Whose idea was that? (Numbers 13:1-33; Deuteronomy 1:19-33) In this context, how do you understand Hebrews 3:16-19? Considering all the clear guidance that God had given and was giving them on a day-by-day basis, why would they stop on the border of the promised land and ask to send in spies? There is a possibility that we are mistaken in where we are looking for the evidence of their journey. Some believe that they were actually further east, wandering around in what is now northeastern Saudi Arabia. The problem is that no one is allowed to enter that area even to look for archeological evidence. There is a sort of underwater land bridge between the Sinai peninsula and Saudi Arabia near the tip of the Sinai peninsula. Some think that is where the "crossing of the Red Sea" took place. There is some evidence suggesting that Semitic people lived west of the Nile. A very recent report has surfaced showing some coins which may actually show a likeness of Joseph on one side. If true, that would be the first such evidence ever found.

(<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1253820674074&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull#>)
3. If God were to write a report about the progress of the Seventh-day Adventist Church over the last 165 years, would it sound anything like the "Numbers" report from Moses regarding the children of Israel? Have there been any complaints? Rebellions? Disappointments? Doubts? Disbeliefs? What about ingratitude?
4. Read Numbers 11:1-3. There are almost no details of what actually happened there. What kind of trouble or adversity were the people facing? Was that just a complaint against the rough traveling conditions? Were there disagreements and fights among the people? How much trouble would be required to cause the Lord to become "angry" and send fire among the people? What does it mean when it says the fire destroyed "one end of the camp"? Did Moses get God to change His mind when he prayed to Him? No explanation is given about what was the cause of that problem or even whether things were truly fixed and repaired. How do those three versus make you feel about God?
5. Read Numbers 11:4-30. Exodus 12:38 tells us that a large number of other people—possibly of mixed heritage or even Egyptians—followed the children of Israel out of Egypt. Those people are sometimes referred to as the "mixed multitude" and sometimes simply called "the rabble." Are they the only ones who desired the meat? Or were they the first ones to complain about the lack of meat? What would you have done if you were God?
6. The Israelites had cows, goats, and sheep with them in large numbers. They certainly must have milked some of them. Furthermore, portions of the sacred offerings given at the sacred tent were to be returned to the people to eat. Surely, they ate some of the animals themselves on special occasions. Was it perhaps only the mixed multitude who were crying for meat, perhaps because they did not have animals which they had brought with them? Read Exodus 16:8-21; Numbers 11:4-9,31-35.
7. What do you think of the reaction of Moses? (Numbers 11:10-15,16-30) How does it compare with the conversation between Moses and God which is recorded in Exodus 32:30-35?
8. Why did Moses ask God to kill him? Have any other prophets ever spoken like that? (Job 3:20-21; 1 Kings 9:4; Jonah 4:3)

9. Following the advice of Jethro his father-in-law, Moses had already appointed a number of assistants. God apparently thought it was a good idea. (Exodus 18:13-27; Deuteronomy 1:9-18) There were captains over thousands, over hundreds, over fifties, and over tens. What additional function were the seventy new men supposed to fill? Was that a good idea? Did Moses have any less of the Spirit of God when a portion was “taken from him” and placed on the 70 elders? What is implied when it says they prophesied? Were they singing? Were they predicting the future? Did they have extra wisdom or insight? Later, in the days of David, the temple singers were called “prophets.”
10. Where did all the quail come from? Notice that this was the second time the Lord had sent quail, approximately one year apart. There are known migrations of such quail from Europe to Africa which occur annually in huge numbers. But, is it possible that those quail could be piled up on the ground more than 3 feet deep? Numbers 11:32 says that the Israelites gathered no less than 10 homers each. That is the equivalent of one ton! Is it possible that there is some mistake in the numbers?
11. Try to imagine killing, then feathering and drying that many quail! So many people died from eating contaminated meat that the place was later named *Kibroth Hattaavah* or “graves of craving”! What do you think of God’s response to their request at that time? Was God responsible for those deaths? Wouldn’t it have been healthier if God had sent only a few quail at a time which they could prepare and eat without delay and therefore, without getting sick? Or, was God taking advantage of a natural phenomenon—the migration of the quail—to meet what was actually a very unreasonable request? There had been a quail migration approximately one year earlier that they had taken advantage of also. (Exodus 16:13)
12. What do you think the angels thought as they watched that whole sequence? Were any of them asking, “God, why are you wasting your time on those people?” What did they think when Eve tried the fruit from that one forbidden tree? Does God sound a little obsessive-compulsive in some of those verses? Did Moses lose his patience?

What if you were an adviser to Satan? Satan believed that he had almost destroyed God’s followers after all those years in Egyptian slavery. He figured a few more years and they would permanently have lost contact with God. Then suddenly, Moses and God showed up; and there were plagues and an exodus; and he lost most of what he thought he had gained. What would you advise him to do next? Satan knew about the prophecies of a coming Messiah. He had to do everything he could to prevent that from happening.

13. We have noted that God demonstrated His leadership to the children of Israel in very tangible and concrete ways. He then demonstrated His displeasure in very concrete ways as well. Was the reaction of Moses unreasonable? From a human standpoint? Had Moses ever gotten frustrated by the sheep out in the wilderness? Is it possible that Moses was just recognizing his human inability to lead those people?
14. How do you feel about the developing friendship between God and Moses in these experiences? Do you wish your experience with God were more like that of Moses? Are you familiar with any similar stories in modern church history? Has God sponsored any new religious movement or movements in the last 200 years?
15. We have already seen how quickly the children of Israel and even Aaron reverted to the worship of the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai. (Exodus 32:1-6) After seeing the mess himself, Moses went back to speak to God and spoke the words recorded in Exodus 32:31-35. Later, when Moses heard the people crying out for meat to eat, how did he react? (Numbers 11:4) How did God feel about that response? What did Moses have to say about it? (Numbers 11:10-15) Was that a suggested solution? (Numbers 11:21-23) Were those men chosen in direct response to God’s direction? Or, were they chosen in response to Moses’ weakness?
16. The Lord permitted Moses to choose for himself the most faithful and efficient men to share the responsibility with him. Their influence would assist in holding in check the violence of the people, and quelling insurrection; yet serious evils would eventually result from their promotion. They would never have been chosen had Moses manifested faith corresponding to the evidences he had witnessed of God’s power and goodness. But he had magnified his own burdens and services, almost losing sight of the fact that he was only the instrument by which God had wrought. He was not excusable in indulging, in the slightest degree, the spirit of murmuring that was the

curse of Israel. Had he relied fully upon God, the Lord would have guided him continually and would have given him strength for every emergency.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 380.2

17. Read Numbers 11:20. How was that experience described? In what sense were the children of Israel rejecting the Lord? Do we ever murmur in that way today? Do we ever complain because of the delay in the second coming? Were there any of the children of Israel who were satisfied with manna and did not gather quail and did not get ill?
18. Interesting surveys have been taken asking Christians when they think Jesus will come back. In general, the attitude seems to be, "I would like Jesus to return about five years after I die!" What does that tell us about the selfishness or unselfishness of our personal attitudes?
19. Are we ever guilty of ingratitude? (Philippians 2:14,15; Luke 17:11-17)
20. Read Numbers 12:1-8. Almost one year before this event took place, Jethro had brought Moses' wife and children to him at the foot of Mount Sinai. Every indication that we have suggests that Jethro was a Midianite. The Midianites, although mostly falling into pagan worship patterns, were descendants of Abraham through his second wife, Keturah. (Genesis 25:1-6) Jethro faithfully worshiped the true God.
21. Although we do not know exactly what triggered the issue at that point, Miriam and Aaron began to accuse Moses of accepting advice from other sources in preference to them. Did that have something to do with him accepting Jethro's advice earlier? (Exodus 18:13-26) Or, was there some new factor that caused that conflict? We really do not know. What do you think of God's handling of that problem? Try to imagine how you would feel if you were Miriam or Aaron and God said, "You three, step out in front of the sanctuary!" Then Miriam and Aaron were asked to step forward. God then delivered His speech. The gender of the Hebrew verb in Numbers 12:1 suggests that Miriam was the one who started that accusation, especially against Zipporah. Had she become jealous of Zipporah? Was she trying to slander Zipporah because of her skin color or her background? What do you think Miriam and Aaron were trying to accomplish through those accusations?
22. How do you understand the words in Numbers 12:3? Remember that Moses wrote them! Was he bragging? Do human governments or human counsels choose humble people to be their leaders? Do you think humble men were respected in the days of Moses?
23. Read again Numbers 12:6-8. In what sense did God speak to Moses "face to face"? (Numbers 12:8, *GNB*) What does it mean when He said He speaks "clearly and not in riddles"? (Numbers 12:8, *GNB*) Had Moses seen God's form? (Exodus 34:11) **What is suggested by Numbers 12:9? God became angry, and what did He do? He departed. When God gets "angry," He simply backs off and lets us experience the consequences of our own foolish behavior.**
24. What do you think happened to Miriam on that occasion? How do you think she and Aaron felt as they looked down at her skin?
25. Read John 16:25-27. Was God trying to speak plainly to His disciples at that point just before His crucifixion? Should that experience be compared with the riddles that God talked about in Numbers 12? What was it that Jesus was trying to say plainly to His disciples? How do you understand John 16:26? **After all the rituals and ceremonies, the sacrifices, the priests, etc. in the Old Testament, was Jesus really trying to say that He will not speak on our behalf before the Father? Why not? Was God trying to confuse us there?**
26. Zipporah was not a Cushite. There was an area probably north or east of Midian known as Cushan. (Habakkuk 3:7) Miriam may have been accusing Zipporah of coming from there. It is also true that people from the area of Ethiopia and possibly Sudan had moved into the Midianite territory and somewhat intermingled with the Midianites. It is even possible that Jethro had married into a family of darker-skinned people. That does not excuse Miriam's actions in any way.
27. Finally, the children of Israel reached the border of the land of Canaan. Surely, excitement must have been everywhere! What happened next? How do you understand Numbers 13:1-3 when compared with Deuteronomy 1:19-23? Was God in favor of sending the spies into the land? Did they consult God on that occasion? If not, how do we explain Numbers 13:1? When God had given them clear instructions about how they were to conquer the land, why did they sit on the border for 40 days waiting for the spies to return? Were any of the people becoming impatient during those 40 days? What kind of men were chosen to be spies to go into the land? Had they been trained in any way? Could they speak the

language of the Canaanites?

28. Read Numbers 13:25-33. The report those spies brought back was not consistent with itself. If the land did not produce enough food to feed the people who lived there, how could there be giants living there? And how could you explain that gargantuan bunch of grapes they brought back! Why would the Israelites accept the report of the ten spies?
29. After all the experiences the children of Israel had had up to that point, how could they possibly doubt that God would be able to take care of them? Satan was in full control.
30. Does that kind of attitude ever appear in Seventh-day Adventist churches in our day? Were the children of Israel afraid of “doing battle”? Were they afraid that they might suffer? What were they afraid of?
31. Read Numbers 14:1-4. What do you think caused the children of Israel to arrive at such an incredible conclusion? Why were the children of Israel so ready to accept the report of the false spies and so reluctant to believe Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua? How was Satan involved in that affair? How do you understand Caleb’s argument in Numbers 14:9? What was he implying when he said, “The Lord is with us and has defeated the gods who protected them; so don’t be afraid.” Who do you think was responsible for encouraging the children of Israel to stone Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua?
32. What can we learn from the conversation between Moses and God as recorded in Numbers 14:11-25? Is that the first time Moses and God had had such a conversation? (See Exodus 32:10)
33. How would you have felt receiving a report that you were to turn back into the wilderness and wander around until you died?
34. What do you think happened to the 10 lying spies? (Numbers 14:36-38) Read Numbers 14:39-45 and Deuteronomy 1:41-46. What caused that incredible reversal in the minds of the people? The people of Canaan had been terrified of the children of Israel because of the reports they had received from Egypt and Sinai. After the children of Israel were defeated in that mistaken attempt to enter the land, the Canaanites began to question the power of *Yahweh* and the reports that they had received.
35. Have Seventh-day Adventists been through experiences like that? For example, what happened in 1888?
36. The Devil realized that if the children of Israel successfully entered the land of Canaan and became established there following God’s directions, it would be very difficult to defeat them. So, he and his angels did everything they could to cause trouble. We see the results!
37. As the Devil looks forward to the second coming of Jesus Christ, he realizes that God’s true people here on this earth are his mortal enemies. He will do everything possible to confuse, discourage, even kill them. If we were to face such times in the future, would we survive?

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