

IN THE WILDERNESS

Forty Years

Numbers 14-36

INTRODUCTION

After spending a year encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai, the cloud over the Tabernacle was lifted up, and the people set out in stages on a journey that led them into the Wilderness of Paran, which is located below the Promised Land. They encamped at a well-known oasis called *Kadesh*.

Moses chose twelve spies, one from each tribe, and sent them into Canaan to gather information about the land, the cities, the people, their armies, and their defenses. After spying out the land for forty days, the spies return to the Israelite camp, bringing with them some of the fruit from the land.

Ten of the spies give a negative report. “The people who dwell in that land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large” (Num 13:27-28). They recommended a return to Egypt.

Two of the spies, Joshua, and Caleb, give a positive report: “Let us go up at once and occupy it; for we are well able to overcome it” (Num 13:3). They recommended immediate conquest, for God will provide the victory.

The ten spies then increased the negativity of their report. They said: “The land... is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people are of great stature... and compared to them we were like grasshoppers.” Hearing this, the people raised a loud cry. The people wept and began to murmur against Moses and Aaron. They threatened to replace Moses with another ruler. “Let us select a ruler and return to Egypt” (Num 14:3). Moses and Aaron respond by falling to the ground, face down, in helplessness.

Caleb and Joshua tore their garments in grief, and said to the people: “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.” But the congregation did not listen. They were prepared to stone them to death.

STUDY AND REFLECTION

The Revolt and the Consequences (Numbers 14:10-45)

At that very moment, when the people were prepared to stone Moses and Aaron, and also Joshua and Caleb, suddenly the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel (14:10). And the Lord said to Moses: “How long will this people despise Me? And How long will they not believe in Me, in spite of all the signs, which I have wrought 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” (14:12).

But Moses interceded on behalf the people and appealed to God’s mercy and loving-kindness. He prayed: “Let the power of the Lord be great... Pardon the iniquity of this

people, I pray Thee, according to the greatness of Your steadfast love, and according as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now” (14:17-19).

The Lord listened to the prayer of Moses. He pardoned the sins of the people, but there was a consequence to their rebellion. He Lord says the following to Moses:

“I have pardoned, according to your word; but truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, none of the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put Me to the proof these ten times and have not hearkened to My voice, shall see the land which I swore to give to their fathers; and none of those who despised Me shall see it...”

(14:20-23). “But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised” (14:31).

God pardoned the sins of Israel, but the consequence for their disobedience and lack of faith is this: all the adults who left Egypt will die out in the wilderness; and a whole new generation will arise in the wilderness, which has little or no remembrance of Egypt. Only after forty years, will they enter the Promised Land.

Now, the Lord commanded that the people of Israel turn away from the Promised Land and head south, away from the Canaanites and the Amalekites who dwelt there. He said to Moses: “Now, since the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea” (14:25).

When Moses told the people everything that God has said, they mourned greatly. But again, instead of accepting God’s word and judgment in humility and obedience, they decided to take matters into their own hands. “They presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country” on their own (14:44). And so, their armies departed from the camp and headed north into the hill country of Canaan, to take the land without Moses and without the Ark of the Covenant, in other words – without God. Following their own counsel, they were defeated in battle.

Korah’s Rebellion and Aftermath (Numbers 16)

Now Moses and Aaron are faced with another challenge. Three dissatisfied men, Korah, Dathan and Abiram, organize an all-out rebellion against the priesthood of Aaron and the leadership of Moses. They are joined by 250 leaders, men that are well-known; and they have gained the support of many people.

Korah was a Levite, a member of the Kohathite group, responsible for transporting the Ark of the Covenant and other furnishings (see 3:27-32; 4:1-20). It seems that he was dissatisfied with his “diaconal” role and wanted to serve as a priest. Why should only Aaron and his sons serve as priests? Why should the priesthood be limited to their family line? Korah wants to gain the priesthood for himself and for others.

Dathan and Abiram were members of the tribe of Reuben. Reuben was the first-born son of Jacob. So, the tribe of Reuben had a natural claim to leadership over Israel. But they were denied this leadership, because Reuben had sinned against his father and lost his birthright (Gen 35:32; 49:3-4). Dathan and Abiram object to the fact that Moses, a

Levite, has made himself “prince” or leader over the people. They want to form their own civil leadership and authority.

This dual revolt required the direct intervention of God.

So, Moses said the following to Korah and his company: “In the morning the Lord will show who is holy... Do this: take censers and put fire in them and put incense upon them before the Lord tomorrow, and the man whom the Lord chooses shall be the holy one” (16:5-7). Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram, but they refused to participate.

The next morning, Korah, the 250 leaders, and Aaron took censers, put fire in them and place incense upon them. They came before the Tent of Meeting and stood with Moses and Aaron. Suddenly, the glory of the Lord appeared before all that people who had assembled (16:19).

The Lord gave instructions for all the people to move away from the dwellings of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. When this was done, the earth opened and swallowed up Korah, Dathan and Abiram, together with their entire households and all that belonged to them. “And fire came from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense” (16:35).

The rebellion, however, was not finished. The next morning, all the people of Israel continued to murmur and grumble against Moses and Aaron. They were not impressed and blamed Moses and Aaron for what had happened. They assemble before the Tent of Meeting and said to Moses and Aaron: “You have killed the people of the Lord” (16:41) and they were ready to stone them to death!

In response to their continued rebellion, God sent a deadly plague upon them, which began to spread rapidly. It is the priesthood of Aaron and his intercession that atoned for their sins and stopped the plague. Moses said to Aaron: “Take your censer, and put fire in it from the altar, put incense on it, and carry it quickly to the assembly of people, and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone from the Lord, the plague has begun.”

So, Aaron took the censer with incense and ran into the midst of the people and stood in between the dead and the living; and the plague stopped.

Aaron’s Rod Blossoms (Numbers 17)

The following day, the priesthood of Aaron was confirmed in a supernatural way. Every tribal leader brought a rod (or staff) with his name upon it. Aaron wrote his name upon the rod for the tribe of Levi. Moses then placed the rods in the Tent of Meeting. The following day Moses went into the Tent of Meeting and found that “the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds, and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds” (17:8). This was a sign that the priesthood had been indeed restricted to Aaron’s family alone.

Moses brought out all the rods to the people, and each tribal leader took his rod. Then the Lord said to Moses: “Put back the rod of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their murmurings against Me” (17:11).

So, Moses did as the Lord commanded him to do. He placed Aaron's rod into the Ark of the Covenant where the stone tablets of the covenant were kept, and the jar of manna that remained incorrupt. It was to serve as a lasting reminder of the priesthood that God had established.

The Waters of Meribah (Numbers 20:1-13)

After many years had passed, the people of Israel came into the wilderness of Zin (also known as *Kadesh*). Miriam died there and was buried. By this time, the whole generation of people that had left Egypt as adults had died out, except for a few individuals, such as Moses, Aaron, Eleazar, Joshua and Caleb. The new generation had little or no knowledge about life in Egypt; yet, they complained, just like their parents, and failed to trust in God and His Providence. For Moses and Aaron, it seemed like no spiritual progress has been made.

While encamped in the wilderness of Zin, the people of Israel began to grumble again about the lack of water. Again, they assembled themselves together in rebellion against Moses and Aaron. And the people said to Moses:

“Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink” (20:1-13).

Then Moses and Aaron went to the door of the Tent of Meeting and fell to the ground on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them. Then the Lord said to Moses:

“Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water; so you shall bring water out of the rock for them; so you shall give drink to the congregation and their cattle” (20:8).

So, Moses and Aaron gathered the people together before the rock. And Moses said to the people: “Hear now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” And instead of telling the rock to yield water, as God had commanded, Moses lifted upon his hand and struck the rock with his rod *twice*. The first time this miracle happened (during the journey from Egypt to Sinai), God told Moses to strike the rock *once* (see Ex 17:6). Now, instead of telling the rock to bring forth water, he struck it *twice*. (It is possible that nothing happened when he struck it the first time).

Nevertheless, the miracle took place after the second strike. Water came forth abundantly from the rock, and the people drank, as also their cattle.

But the Lord was not pleased with the fact that Moses struck the rock with his rod instead of telling it to give water. It is possible that Moses and Aaron failed to trust God and to believe that their *spoken word alone*, would be enough to bring about the miracle. The Lord then said to Moses and Aaron: “Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.”

The place was then named *Meribah*, which means “contention” or “rebellion.” This was the place, the *waters of Meribah*, where the people of Israel contended with the Lord, and He showed Himself holy among them.

New Testament Connection: According to St. Paul, the rock which miraculously gave water, was a prefigure of Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he writes: “Our fathers... all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:1-4).

The first miracle, where Moses struck the rock and water came forth, this miracle prefigured Jesus on the cross, who was struck with a lance, and water and blood poured forth from his open side, symbols of Baptism and the Eucharist, a new “spiritual drink,” outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The second miracle, where Moses was supposed to use only his *spoken word* to make water flow abundantly, this miracle was meant to prefigure the *Resurrection of Christ*. By His divine command, Jesus, the Word of God, will rise from the dead and go forth from the tomb alive, as a new “spiritual drink,” His Most Precious and Live-giving Blood, which we receive in Holy Communion. On Easter morning, during Resurrection Matins, we sing the following:

“Come, let us partake of a new drink, not one miraculously drawn from the barren rock, but from the Fountain of incorruption, springing up from the tomb of Christ. In Him is our firm foundation of strength” (*Irmos*, Ode 3).

The Death of Aaron at Mount Hor (Numbers 20:22-29)

From the wilderness of Zin, the people of Israel journeyed to *Mount Hor*, located on the border of the land of Edom, halfway between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba (Red Sea).

While encamped there, the Lord spoke to Moses and said: “Take Aaron and Eleazar his son, and bring them up to Mount Hor; and strip Aaron of his garments, and put them upon Eleazar, his son; and Aaron shall be gathered to his people, and shall die there” (20:25-26). Moses did as the Lord commanded.

They went up Mount Hor in the sight of the people. And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on his son; and Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. When Moses came down the mountain with Eleazar vested as the new high priest, the people knew that Aaron had died. “All the house of Israel wept for Aaron thirty days” (20:29).

The Fiery Serpents (Numbers 21)

Since the king of Edom would not allow the Israelites to go east and to pass through his land (20:14-21), and the Canaanite king of Arad prevented them from going north (21:1-3), the Israelites journeyed south, towards the Red Sea (Gulf of Aqaba), to go around the land of Edom.

Along the way, the people became impatient. They spoke out against God and Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt in die in the wilderness? For there is

no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food” (21:5), referring to the manna which God was providing for them. So, the Lord God allowed them to enter an area in the wilderness where there were many poisonous snakes, “fiery serpents” (21:6), which bit the people, and many died.

And the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord, that He take away the serpents from us” (21:7). So, Moses prayed for the people, and the Lord said to him: “Make a serpent, and set it on a pole (signal pole); and everyone one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live” (21:8). So, Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole; and if anyone was bitten by a serpent, he looked at the bronze serpent and was saved from the poisonous bite.

New Testament Connection: Jesus Himself referred to this event as being a prefigure of Himself being lifted-up on the cross. He said: “As Moses lifted upon the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:14).

In the garden of Eden, the serpent bit Adam and Eve, and the poison – sin and rebellion – eventually caused them to die. Death was the final consequence of sin.

Jesus, the innocent Lamb of God, took the curse of sin upon Himself, and paid the price for our redemption by dying on the cross. Anyone who looks upon Him with faith, Christ crucified and risen, is healed from the poison of sin, and saved from death. In baptism, we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our sins have been forgiven, and we were granted the gift of eternal life.

On the Plains of Moab (Numbers 20:22-29)

The Israelites continued their journey. Having bypassed Edom, they conquered the Amorites, who would not allow them to pass through their land. They also conquered Bashan, and finally encamped on the plains of Moab, on the east side of the river Jordan, across from the city of Jericho.

Balak, the king of Moab, and his people were overcome with fear of the people of Israel. So, king Balak sent messengers to Balaam, a pagan priest and diviner who lived in Mesopotamia, to come and put a curse upon Israel.

When the messengers arrived, Balaam refused to go with them. In a dream, God said to him: “You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed” (22:12).

King Balak send messengers a second time, this time, many more in number. In a dream God said to Balaam: “Rise, go with them; but only what I bid you, that shall you do” (21:20)... “only the word which I bid you, that shall you speak” (21:35). So, Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey, and he went with the messengers to Moab.

When Balaam arrived, King Balak took him to several mountains and high places, from where the people of Israel could be seen from a distance. After offering sacrifices at each location, Balaam receives four oracles from the Lord.

First, Israel is not a nation like other nations. They are blessed by God.

Second, God is with Israel; He brought them out of Egypt, and no curses or magic enchantments can be made against them.

Third, Israel will prosper and multiply, and become a powerful kingdom. Those who bless them will be blessed, and those who curse them will be cursed.

Fourth, “a star shall come forth out of Jacob, a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (24:17). It shall be victorious over Moab, Edom, Amalek, and others. The prophecy would be fulfilled during the time of King David, and spiritually, with the coming of the promised Messiah, the Christ, and the kingdom of God.

No sorcery or divination can be worked against Israel because God is with them. Despite Israel’s unfaithfulness, God will remain faithful to His covenant promises. So, Balaam and Balak return to their homes.

The Apostasy of Israel (Numbers 25)

While living on the plains of Moab, the people of Israel fell into idolatry and apostasy. They began to worship *Baal of Peor*, the god of the Moabites and the Midianites, associated with a shrine located at a place called *Peor*. Men of Israel are lured by Midianite women to participate in sexual rites associated with the worship of Baal of Peor. The men of Israel commit both spiritual and physical adultery. These sins were committed even within the camp of Israel. In punishment, a plague broke out; and it was stopped only by Aaron’s son, Phinehas.

Israel Prepares to Enter the Land (Numbers 26-36)

Immediately after the plague, Moses, and the high priest Eleazar, took another census of the people of Israel. They discovered that none of the men of the first generation have remained (Num 26). What this means is that the second generation was fully responsible for the sin of idolatry, the worship of Baal of Peor, and apostasy from God (Num 25). What the *Golden Calf* was to the first generation, the *Baal of Peor* was to second generation. Both events involved idolatry combined with sexual immorality (Ex 32:6; Num 25:1,8).

After the census, the Lord said to Moses: “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him; cause him to stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey” (27:18-20). And so Moses did as the Lord commanded him; he took Joshua and caused him to stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation, and he laid his hands upon him, and commissioned him as the Lord had directed.

Finally, Moses gave instructions on how the land is to be divided among the twelve tribes of Israel once the land of Canaan is conquered. No land was assigned to the Levites because they were set aside (consecrated) to fulfil a priestly role. Instead, each tribe was to give the Levites four cities to dwell in, along with land around each city. The Levites would have a total of 48 cities to dwell in. Six of the cities were to be designated

as “cities of refuge,” where those accused of any crimes can dwell unharmed, before they stand trial.

This concludes the book of Numbers.

The last and final book of the Pentateuch, the book of Deuteronomy, is the “farewell address” of Moses to the people of Israel, before he passes away on Mount Nebo.

We will now begin reading the final book of the Pentateuch, the Book of Deuteronomy, which means “second law.” The Book of Deuteronomy serves as a final *Renewal of the Covenant*, prior to Israel’s entry into the land of Canaan.

Prepared by Father Peter Babej