

NUMBERS 11-14; 20-24

Historical Context

Upon leaving Sinai, the twelve tribes of Israel are organized in marching order. The Lord sets forth the duties of the Levites—particularly of the sons of Aaron. Certain laws and rituals are established, and the people are now ready to continue their journey.

Numbers 11:1-3

As problems begin at the start of their march, the Israelites do not bring their problems to the Lord. This can be deduced by the phrase “the people complained” later followed by “and the Lord heard it.” Therefore, the people’s complaints are not prayers toward heaven. This echoes the story of the ten commandments. In Exodus 20, when the people saw the lightning and thundering at the top of the mountain, they immediately told Moses that only he should speak with God, asking him to keep them out of the discussion (verses 18-19). At that time, they had chosen not to have direct communication with God. Now the people are crying unto Moses when they should have been praying with him. As before, Moses needs to intercede on their behalf.

This story employs several words related to heat, like “kindled,” “fire,” “burnt,” and “consumed.” Yet, the text does not say what was consumed. Note that in the King James Version, the word “them” is included, but the Hebrew equivalent does not appear in the original. The text states that the fire of the Lord burned “among” the Israelites and simply “consumed” in the outskirts of the camp. What was this “fire of the Lord”? During the Israelites’ journey, a pillar of fire had guided the people through the desert (Exodus 14:24; Numbers 14:14). In addition, a constant fire burned at the tabernacle for sacrifices (Leviticus 6:12).

In other words, the fire that both led and purified them appears to be working against them because of their disobedience. This sacrificial fire may have been inspiring true repentance among the people. Notice how merciful the Lord is that although the pillar of fire and the tabernacle were in the center of camp, what is consumed by the fire is on the camp's edges. Perhaps the dross is being left as far as possible from the center of camp.

Moses names the place Taberah, which comes from a root that means "to burn," perhaps a reminder that our actions have either positive or negative outcomes.

Numbers 11:4–9

A concern soon arises regarding appetite. The word in the King James Version translated as "fell a lusting" can be better conveyed as "having a craving." The people crave a food they had eaten while in Egypt. They want "flesh" or "meat," yet we know they had plenty of meat with them to perform their sacrifices. They had left Egypt with "flocks, and herds, even very much cattle" (Exodus 12:38). Red meat was not what they were craving. In the desert, what they request is fish, certainly from the Nile River, and fruits and vegetables. Although manna was a blessing, they have become tired of eating the same thing over and over again—the routine diet is becoming monotonous. Despite their craving for different food, they continue to prepare their food as they had been doing. They go outside, pick up the manna, and make bread with all the tools they had brought with them.

The people of Israel are often remembered as a murmuring group, but their work ethic continued strong even when they murmured. Their complaining is not something to replicate, but their consistency in working and making food for themselves is noteworthy.

Numbers 11:10–15

The people are gradually becoming worse compared to their behavior in verse 1. Before the people had expressed their discontent to Moses and not to the Lord, but here Moses overhears "the people weep." They complain while they eat their freshly baked bread. The Lord is angry again and Moses is displeased because the people neither prayed to the Lord nor approached their prophet.

Moses's demeanor suddenly drops. He becomes overwhelmed. He describes the people's behavior as an affliction, a burden, perhaps even a punishment from the Lord. Unfortunately, serving the people of God does not come without its problems. Leaders can become stressed under pressing circumstances. Imperfection will never escape the mortal realm. In desperation, Moses tells the Lord that he is not the people's

mother (today the expression might be “not their babysitter”). Wanting to fix the problem, Moses says he cannot give the people the food they desire. He simply cannot do this alone. Moses reaches his lowest, deepest depression. He asked to be killed, not seeing any resolution to this series of events. We often think Church leaders are perfect under the mantel of a calling, but we too, like Moses, must learn patience and acknowledge the hardships a leadership role brings.

Numbers 11:16–23

As a response to Moses’s doubts and concerns, the Lord tells Moses he will not carry this burden alone. The Lord instructs Moses to gather seventy elders “whom thou knowest.” This implies that Moses would have already developed a relationship with them in order to know whom to call. Knowing entails a relationship of some sort. Although this relationship with those who leaders call is not always a requirement, it is what the Lord instructed Moses. With the seventy elders, Moses would not be alone, addressing a fear he expressed in verse 14. These tribal leaders will share the burden of leadership with Moses. The Lord says that they will receive a portion of Moses’s “spirit.” This should be understood as Moses’s inspiration, that gift of leadership that he has, and perhaps his authority. Moses would be delegating his priesthood responsibilities. The phrase “the spirit which is upon thee” could also refer to Moses’s leadership qualities. In other words, “Your inspired leadership will be passed on to them.” Hearing those words may have caused Moses to reflect on his recent burst of despair.

The Lord instructs Moses what to tell the people. They are to sanctify themselves before receiving so much food that they will no longer have a reason to crave meat. Nevertheless, the Lord does not tell Moses how this will happen. Moses’s initial response may reflect either a lack of confidence or the honest questions of an inquiring servant. How can the Lord feed so many people for such a long time? The prophet feels the need to remind the Lord how many people will need to be fed. Wanting details, Moses asks whether the food will come from the flocks and herds or from the fish of the sea. Both options seem impracticable. The flocks and herds were designated for sacrifices (and for the priests; see Leviticus 7:7–11), and there was no body of water near enough to provide fish. The Lord reassures the prophet that He will do as promised; Moses will have to wait to see the promise’s fulfillment.

Numbers 11:24–30

Moses sets out to do what he was told. With the command to gather seventy men, he does not have time to think about his recent plea to the Lord. As he and the seventy come near to the tabernacle, a cloud conveying the Lord’s presence descends. In Exodus, Moses’s entering the cloud on the mountain top was equivalent to entering the tabernacle (Exodus 24:15–18; 40:34–35). Due to the sacred nature of this event, the

story does not explain what the Lord said to Moses. What was communicated resulted in Moses's spirit or inspiration being shared among the seventy elders and their sudden unceasing prophesying. This can not only be understood as giving prophecy but also as the act professing or speaking. The Hebrew word translated both as "prophet" and "prophesy" means "to declare or speak forth." These seventy may have been bearing testimony of the experience they had just had at the cloud.

The story then narrates how two individuals, Eldad and Medad, were written or registered as part of the group of seventy but had remained in the camp and had not gone "out unto the tabernacle." Here we must recall that the Levitical tabernacle was at the center of the camp (see Numbers 2:17) and had been finished after a long series of instructions (Exodus 40:33–34). However, another tent of meeting was pitched outside of camp that was not limited to any specific tribe because "every one which sought the Lord went out unto the tabernacle of the congregation, which was without the camp" (Exodus 33:7). Eldad and Medad had not gone "out unto the tabernacle" but had "remained . . . in the camp." Apparently, the other non-Levite elders of the people had met Moses in the other tent, outside of camp.

Eldad and Medad's reason for not joining the group at this other tabernacle should not be construed as negative, considering how they too spoke boldly and with the same spirit. A young man ran and told Moses and Joshua about Eldad and Medad's prophesying, asking Moses to forbid this behavior. Perhaps the young man thought he was protecting Moses, wanting only him to be inspired and speak the words of God. In the New Testament, John said something quite similar: "Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbad him, because he followeth not us" (Mark 9:38). Moses's response to the young man that the Lord would like everyone to speak forth boldly can be compared to the Lord's response in Mark: "Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part" (Mark 9:39–40). Eldad and Medad may not have been with the group who met in the tabernacle, but they were blessed with the Spirit to begin their new calling.

Numbers 11:31–35

According to their seasonal migrations, quails fly over Sinai. They are known to stay low to the ground because they become tired from the long trek.¹ With a group as large as the Israelite camp, the quails most likely came near looking for food. One can picture the scene—flocks of quails surrounding the camps looking for anything to eat. This may be what it meant that the quails "fall by the camp, as it were a day's journey on this side, and as it were a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp." Not knowing how long the birds would stay, the Israelites "spread them all abroad," curing them in the sun, making them into a sort of jerky. Exodus 16:13, a similar quail account, describes an aftermath much different

¹ Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993), 327.

from the one relayed here. In Exodus, the reader had not been told what happened to the quails. Here, in Numbers, the quails make the people sick while they were still eating, causing a “very great plague.” Had they not cooked the poultry completely? The story doesn’t say. The same quail miracle had a positive outcome in Exodus and negative one here.

Numbers 12:1–9

Aaron and Miriam find themselves in a disagreement with Moses because of his Ethiopian (or Cushite) wife. We had not read about her before. In Exodus, Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of the priest of Midian (Exodus 2:16, 21). Midian is east of the Sinai Peninsula in Western Asia, and Ethiopia is in Africa along the southern part of the Nile River. These locations are very far from each other. Some believe Zipporah and the Ethiopian wife are the same person, but they are most likely different individuals. For untold reasons, Aaron and Miriam do not agree with Moses’s decision to marry her. However, their response was written clearly: they believed they had the right to speak against Moses because in the past the Lord had also spoken through them. The question is whether a past spiritual experience or leadership role justifies one to speak against the Lord’s anointed and his marriage preferences. Fortunately, Moses is humble and does not respond to his siblings.

As Moses remains silent, the Lord steps in on his behalf. The Lord calls Moses, Aaron, and Miriam into the tabernacle and descends as a cloud to the door, asking Moses’s siblings to meet Him there. In what follows, the Lord makes a distinction between the role of someone who prophesies (as the seventy men in chapter 11 or perhaps Miriam and Aaron) and *the* prophet (as Moses, who was chosen to lead the people). This distinction is often missed.

Acknowledging Miriam and Aaron’s prior experience and inspiration, the Lord states that an inspired individual does receive personal revelation, described here as visions or dreams. In other words, the inspiration that Aaron and Miriam had experienced was in fact real and valid. In the often-misunderstood verse 7, the Lord is saying that Moses is not that kind of prophet. He is more than that. By saying that Moses is “faithful in all mine house,” the Lord may be acknowledging Moses’s marriage to the Ethiopian woman. Moses is the kind of prophet that receives much more than visions and dreams. The Lord speaks with Moses “mouth to mouth, even apparently [or clearly], and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold.” In other words, the communication between Moses and the Lord is direct.

Miriam and Aaron should not have spoken against the Lord’s anointed, despite their role as people who prophesy. Notwithstanding, the Lord invites them to be better, for at that moment He is speaking to them clearly from the tabernacle door. Said differently, in this rebuke, Miriam and Aaron speak directly with the Lord “even [clearly], and not in dark speeches.”

Numbers 12:10–16

As the Lord departs, Miriam notices that she has some sort of skin disease (most likely not today's leprosy, or Hansen's disease). In verse 1, Miriam had been the first of the two siblings mentioned and may have been leading this action against Moses's leadership. Despite the difficulties of interpreting this story, the punishment was not as severe as can be interpreted. When Moses was being prepared to return to Egypt, he developed this same skin disease and was shown that it could be healed (see Exodus 4:6–7). Therefore, though Miriam and Aaron didn't know it, Moses knew Miriam could be healed. This, however, forces them to work as a team. Aaron calls out to Moses, voicing his remorse and showing his meekness. Moses, without any hint of reproach, asks the Lord to heal his sister. The siblings are now working and communicating with God together.

All actions have consequences, and Miriam will have to remain outside of the camp for the prescribed seven days (Leviticus 13:4; 14:3; Numbers 12:14–15). Especially because Miriam and Aaron are leaders, their behavior most likely has negatively influenced others. The people were sentenced to be punished together. The group punishment was that everyone would have to wait those seven days for Miriam to be restored to the group. Yet this "punishment" may rather have been a time of instruction. Miriam is specifically told to be "shut out from the camp." If this means that she was to remain outside of the camp, then she may have spent seven days with the Lord in the other tabernacle, the tent of meeting where the seventy had received Moses's spirit (see note on Numbers 11:24–30). At times, injuries and sickness slow us down and enable us to receive instruction from the Lord. When it was time, "Miriam was brought in again" and God's people continue their journey.

Numbers 13:1–16

This chapter begins with the Lord sending what the King James Version calls spies to explore the land the Israelites would enter. This was a reconnaissance mission. The term used to identify these men is not "spies" but "rulers." In the King James Version, "rulers" simply means these men were leaders among their respective tribes. Although any mission may demand that an assigned group of individuals be sent to gather information and return to report, here the Lord asks that a group of leaders find out for themselves what the land is like. Leaders would return with the experience to lead their people into the promised land. These leaders are called "heads of the children of Israel." The Lord is teaching them that as His people, everyone can and should participate to bring about His plans. This is the second group that has been delegated a responsibility.

Numbers 13:17–20

Moses takes the earlier commands that the Lord had given and makes them into a plan. Needing to see as much of the land as possible, he tells the men to climb up the mountain on the south side. The people in

Canaan would most likely have been north of the mountain. The mountain itself would keep them out of sight from anyone north of the mountain. From the top, they would have a greater view of the area. In order to see the strength of the people, they would have to see the cities and determine whether they were fortified or only had tents. If Moses had asked the men to sneak into every town, this reconnaissance mission would take time. Viewing the landscape from a mountain provided a greater panoramic view. It may be that having received visions of eternity from a mountain top (Moses 1:1, 27–28), Moses learned that at the top of the mountain the men would see the layout of many cities.

Moses, great leader that he was, invites the men to be of “good courage” while keeping their recent pleas in mind. In Numbers 11:5, the people had plead for the fruits and vegetables of Egypt: “the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick.” The first thing Moses asks these leaders to bring back for their people is the “fruit of the land . . . the firstripe grapes.” During the wanderings in the desert, this would not have been possible. Being as close as they now are to populated areas, Moses immediately thought of the people’s requests. Leaders should always be aware of their people’s needs and wants. This shows that the leader is listening.

Numbers 13:21–24

These men, hand-picked by Moses, did not follow what Moses had asked of them. They do make their way from the south, but they do not appear to have gone up the mountain as instructed previously. This decision brought them into the neighborhoods of the children of Anak. This proves to be a grave mistake. Later, in verse 33, the men will complain about this exact experience and their fear-driven interaction with the children of Anak. This would have been avoided had they spied out those cities from the mountain top. Their motive for disobedience may have come from their desire to fulfill Moses’s last request to bring back fruit. They apparently had gone to satisfy their stomachs. Accordingly, these men went directly to the grapes, which brought them in contact with the children of Anak. They completely ignored Moses’s instructions to scope out the land, cities, and strongholds.

Numbers 13:25–29

As throughout the Bible, “forty” simply means a completed space of time, not necessarily an exact number. As a reflection of the spies’ actions in Canaan, the report of those Moses sent begins by mentioning the fruit, which may have been their motivation for the reconnaissance mission. Their full report is possibly skewed. They report on surrounding areas, but they had only traveled to Hebron. Their report mentions walled cities, yet they had only entered one city. In fact, their report on Canaan was only a report on Hebron fashioned as a report on all the land. Although their report does mention more people, the

information is very general, describing the people as either in the south, in the mountains, or by the sea. Notice how they only describe the cities of the children of Anak, not the cities of the Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, or Canaanites “by the sea.” The Lord and Moses had desired these leaders to see as much of Canaan as they could. They had not been obedient.

Numbers 13:30–33

Caleb’s response is almost an effort to set on track how the report was supposed to be. Caleb encouraged the people to overtake the land, attempting to inspire confidence. He was, however, outnumbered. Before he can continue, the other men cut him off and contradict what he has just said. The disobedient spies once again offer a report on Hebron, where they had encountered the sons of Anak.

Numbers 14:1–5

Because of the influence that these leaders/spies had, “all the congregation” begins to weep and murmur before both Moses and Aaron. Aaron had wanted to be recognized more as a leader in chapter 12, and now he has the opportunity. Before, Aaron had spoken against Moses. Now the people were speaking against him and Moses.

In verse 2 of the King James Version, the word “God” appears twice in the people’s complaint, but it does not appear in the original language. God is not in the picture in their dilemma. Their struggles in the desert have made them desire death over continuing the journey. When the men’s fears begin to settle, they imagine the worst—that is, being killed by the “sword” or seeing their wives and children become prey to some wild beast. Not only had they believed the false report of the ten spies but they also added the possibility of encountering animals that would eat their children. There was no mention of children-eating animals prior to this complaint.

In rejecting Moses’s leadership, the people decide to mimic the prophet. In Numbers 13, the Lord had commanded Moses to choose elders, “heads of the children of Israel.” The term translated as “captain” in the King James Version is the same Hebrew word for “head” in chapter 13. Whereas Moses had been instructed by the Lord to choose rulers, the people have taken it upon themselves to choose one person to be their head, their captain. Aaron, now experiencing for himself what it means to be the target of apostasy, falls on his face (or prostrates himself) alongside his brother Moses, whom he once spoke against (see Numbers 12). The act of falling on one’s face does not have a negative connotation here.²

² Compare Genesis 17:3, 17; Leviticus 9:24.

Numbers 14:6–10

In contrast to Moses and Aaron’s reaction of falling on their faces (see the previous note), Joshua and Caleb’s rending of their clothes is clearly negative. On one hand, we see Moses and Aaron seeking wisdom from the Lord. On the other, Caleb and Joshua are trying to take matters into their own hands. Their reaction to the report given by the other spies highlights Moses’s meekness. In Numbers 12, when Miriam and Aaron had spoken against their leader-prophet and brother, Moses stayed silent as the Lord spoke to his siblings. In these passages, Joshua and Caleb do not remain quiet but confront the other men.

Aaron finds himself on the other side of the equation. He was a living witness that the Lord can direct a wayward disciple through personal revelation (see Numbers 12:5–8). Joshua and Caleb may not have learned that lesson yet, and they attempt to handle the situation themselves. They testify of truth, saying the land is good, the Lord will give it to them, and it is “a land which floweth with milk and honey.” They tell the people to “rebel not,” stating that the Canaanites are no match for God’s army. Angered by their words, the people pick up stones to cast at their leaders. At that very moment, the Lord’s glory appears in a cloud, similar to when an angel appears before the older sons of Lehi while they were threatening Nephi (1 Nephi 3:28–29).

Numbers 14:11–12

The Lord’s speaking to Moses implies a dialogue, God responding to something Moses has said. Therefore, Moses’s falling on his face in Numbers 14:5 can be seen as an act of prayer, expressing concern to the Lord; meanwhile Joshua and Caleb alone attempted to convince the people to take over the land of Canaan.

The Lord responds in a similar way to how He had done with Miriam in Numbers 12. Miriam too had provoked the Lord to anger: she lacked belief in her prophet-brother despite the signs he had manifested. While Joshua and Caleb were focused on their positive report, the Lord taught his prophet about the consequences of negative behavior.

Numbers 14:13–19

This interaction with the Lord allows Moses to think through different scenarios. This is precisely what the Lord had told Aaron and Miriam that He does with His prophet. The Lord responds to Moses “as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Exodus 33:11), “even [clearly], and not in dark speeches” (Numbers 12:8). Moses uses this type of revelation to tell the Lord why He can’t kill the people: “For they have heard that thou Lord art among this people, that thou Lord art seen face to face.” Toward the end of his speech, Moses is able to articulate what he desires. He beseeches the Lord to do as He has always planned—that is, lead

the people to the promised land. Calling on the Lord's longsuffering mercy (echoing Exodus 34:6), Moses asks for forgiveness on Israel's behalf as their intercessor.

Numbers 14:20–25

The Lord responds as expected, although pardoning the people's sin does not come without consequences. In Exodus 34:7, the Lord says He is a forgiving God, "keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation." The Lord had sent ten plagues or miracles to free the children of Israel from Egypt. Now, ten times they have not listened to the Lord's voice. Their children will be the generations cursed by not entering the land with their parents.

According to the Talmud Bavli *Arakhim* (15b), an ancient Jewish commentary, these ten moments of rebellion may have been (1) at the Red Sea, (2) in Marah, (3) in the wilderness of Sin, (4 and 5) twice at Kadesh, (6) at Rephidim, (7) at Sinai, (8) at Taberah, (9) at Kibroth-hattaavah, and (10) in this present moment.³ This interaction with the Lord demonstrates the principle that the greater the knowledge, the greater the punishment for disobedience. The Lord testifies that the Israelites had "seen my glory, and my miracles." This testimony should have been the other way around—the Israelites should have been testifying that they had seen God's glory. As a result, they would not "see" the land, an almost eye for an eye punishment (see Exodus 21:24). They had seen the miracle of being taken out of bondage and sustained in the wilderness; now due to their lack of faith, they would not see the promised land.

Caleb's faith and obedient spirit would permit him to enter the land. He had followed the Lord fully and entirely, and his generations ("seed") would possess the land. Caleb had truly loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, and might (see Deuteronomy 6:5).

Numbers 14:26–35

The Lord repeats His decision with changes to the details. The message here is similar to the one in the four visions of Moroni that Joseph Smith received (Joseph Smith—History 1:30–49). The Lord clarifies that this judgment is just: "As ye have spoken in mine ears, so will I do to you" (Numbers 14:28). This was not a whimsical act of God to keep the Israelites in the desert; it was the direct result of their decision not to enter the land at that moment and the fulfillment of their own words (see verse 2). Being left as a carcass in the wilderness is what happens if they stay stagnant, stubborn, and hardheaded.

³ See Exodus 14:11–12; 15:23; 16:2; 16:20, 27; 17:2; 32; Numbers 11:1, 4–34; 13–14.

In biblical terms, twenty years old was equivalent to an adult age. At twenty, everyone had to pay the sanctuary tax (Leviticus 27:1–4). At age twenty, men were eligible to go to war (see Numbers 1:3). Therefore, the adults are found guilty while the children and teenagers are left to lead the next generation. Caleb and Joshua are the exceptions. Their spouses are not mentioned. The Israelites' children would not be left as prey to the animals (Numbers 14:3). They are innocent and are to be kept safe but would not escape the memory or residual effects of the sins of their parents.

Numbers 14:36–39

The men who had murmured against the Lord by giving a false, faithless report died by a plague. However, this is the first time the word for “plague” has appeared in the book of Numbers in Hebrew. The words translated as “plague” in Numbers 8:18 and 11:33 in the King James Version are two completely different terms. The word in Numbers 14:27 is the same word used in Exodus 9:14 for the plagues the Lord sent upon Egypt for the pharaoh's disbelief. Although the nature of this plague is not described, its meaning in Hebrew echoes the narrative of the pharaoh's hardened heart. Perhaps this was a plague caused by hardened hearts.

Numbers 14:40–45

The people attempt to rectify the sin of the spies by going “up into the top of the mountain.” In Numbers 13:17, Moses had commanded the tribal leaders to go up into the mountain to spy out the land. They acknowledge their sin; nevertheless, it is too late. Moses informs them that they have transgressed and that their plan will not prosper, the Lord will not be with them. Nevertheless, they are insistent.

Being killed because of faithlessness is only part of the problem. The Amalekites, descendants of Esau living in the south (see Genesis 36:12), teamed up with the Canaanites (a term describing the region's populace more than an ethnic group) and defeated the Israelites. The Israelites, who should have been united, were not. Their foes, on the other hand, were united and defeated them in battle.

The name Hormah not only is the name of the area but is also related to the idea of being devoted, meaning devoted for destruction (see Judges 1:17).

Numbers 20:1

Miriam must have been a great leader in the camp of Israel. In Exodus 15:20–21, she had prophetically led the women in song and dance to receive the soldiers who had come back from battle. In Numbers 12:2, she told Moses that the Lord had spoken through her also.

Numbers 20:2–6

In the desert, water would continually be a problem. In a similar episode in Exodus 17:1–7, Moses acted almost alone. Here, his brother, Aaron, is by his side. Their experience together in Numbers 12–14 and the loss of their sister must have drawn them together.

In desperation, the people wish they had died along with their lost kin. There is a parallel here with Moses and Aaron, who had lost their sister. In what follows, we see the disobedient among the people lacking a drive to continue. Everyone is affected by grief differently. Although there are many factors in the people's complaints, their longing to be with their recently diseased family members may have sprung from true sorrow and mourning.

Although the cattle is also suffering from dehydration, water is not the only problem. As before, the people want what the desert cannot provide—that is, fruits and vegetables: seeds, figs, vines, and pomegranates. This is ironic because earlier they had learned that the promised land had all of this, yet they refused to enter it (see Numbers 13). Many times, what we need or want is within reach but our fear keeps us from stretching out our arms and getting a hold of it.

As obedient leaders, Moses and Aaron approach the Lord by distancing themselves from the problem. They come closer to the Lord at the entrance of the tabernacle—in other words, before the first veil (see Exodus 40:12–13).

Numbers 20:7–11

Although both Moses and Aaron have come to the door of the tabernacle, the Lord only speaks to Moses. Perhaps, as officiator, Aaron was only there to bring Moses to the veil. Here at the entrance of the tabernacle, the prophet is commanded to take the rod “from before the Lord.” This is Aaron's rod with which the Lord had shown the children of Israel that Aaron and the tribe of Levi had been chosen to serve in the tabernacle (see Numbers 17:6–8). In order to take “the rod from before the Lord, as he [the Lord] commanded him,” Moses must have entered into the most holy place after speaking with the Lord. This event conveys how Moses's priesthood surpasses Aaron's. Aaron and his priesthood line were only allowed to enter behind the veil once a year.⁴ Moses did not have this restriction.

Through the veil, the Lord had instructed Moses to take the rod, gather the people, and speak to the rock to produce water, in that order. Moses, on the other hand, takes the rod, gathers the people, speaks to the people, and then strikes the rock. Even though Moses didn't strictly obey the Lord, water bursts out from

⁴ See Leviticus 16:2, 34; Hebrews 9:7.

the rock, hydrating both the people and the animals who the people had been concerned about (Numbers 20:4). If Moses had spoken to the rock, it would have obediently produced water, showing that the rock was more obedient than the people. Now it was Moses who had not followed the instructions. These instructions were received in the tabernacle through direct communication with the Lord. As prophet, punishment for his actions was greater. Some may reason that the punishment does not fit the crime. However, as the leader who has struggled with the people's disobedience, it is his responsibility to be a better example for them to follow.

Numbers 20:12–13

The Lord describes this disobedience as disbelief and an act that did not glorify Him before the people. Although not explicitly stated, Moses and Aaron appear to find themselves alone with the Lord again, perhaps at the entrance of the tabernacle. Moses's being told in private that he would not accompany the people into the promised land meant that he would have to tell the congregation that he too had been punished. That conversation is not recorded in the Old Testament.

Numbers 20:14–21

Moses sends messengers (the same word translated in other passages as "angels") as ambassadors to the king of Edom. Edom, both a land and a people, descended from Esau (see Genesis 36:1). Edomites and Israelites were cousins (see Genesis 25:25–26). The messengers are sent to share their cultural history, relaying to their relatives what has happened since their forefathers were together. The language employed had been chosen carefully. The term translated as "angel" in Numbers 20:16 is the singular form of the same Hebrew word translated as "messengers" in verse 14. Just as an angel/messenger sent by the Lord had led the people out of Egypt, the prophet Moses is now sending angels/messengers to make arrangements for the people's safe passage through the Edomite land.

The Edomite king refuses to allow the people to walk through his land. It is not difficult to see why he did so. The messengers had told him that the people would not travel through the vineyards or drink the water. Yet the fulfillment of this declaration does not appear probable. The people had been walking through the desert and had complained more than once about the lack of both fruit (Numbers 11:5; 20:5) and water (Exodus 20:1–2; Numbers 20:2–3). The king had every reason to doubt that the people would not eat or drink anything in their path.

In this discussion, we see ancient bargain talk. The messengers offer a second proposal. Recognizing the difficulty of the first, the messengers offer to pay for any of the water that the people and the cattle would

most certainly drink. Perhaps not convinced, the king does not accept this proposal. The messengers had not included any mention of payment if the people were to eat from the Edomite vineyards. Grapes from someone's vineyard were the only fruit brought back by the spies in an earlier story (Numbers 13:20, 23–24). Grapes appear to have been a part of Edom's agriculture (see Obadiah 1:1, 5).

This decision to not mention grapes or payment for their consumption came entirely from the messengers, straying from the original instructions. Moses had committed his people to not eat anything from Edom. By not staying with the script given to them by Moses, the messengers were not obedient. In previous verses, Moses had not followed the Lord's words exactly, and this action is almost repeated as his messengers do not follow the prophet's instructions. Moses's example may have influenced their decision to hopelessly bargain themselves with the king of Edom. Once more, Israel (Jacob) and Esau (Edom) found themselves on non-speaking terms (compare Genesis 27:41).

Numbers 20:22–29

Mount Hor is somewhere between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Dead Sea, on the border (not "coast") of Edom. Therefore, we can see the people moving themselves north through the desert. As they near the promised land, the Lord tells Moses that Aaron would not be entering the land of promise. Knowing Aaron would die soon elicited the transfer of priesthood attire. Eleazar, Aaron's son, would take his father's place. This ceremony of sorts happens on Mount Hor, not in the tabernacle. The risk of having a dying and perhaps dead body in the tabernacle may have been the reason for performing the change of garments on a mountain top, a natural temple. At this sacred location, all proper steps for wearing the priestly garb must have been officiated (see Exodus 28). This may be comparable to an account in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 8:31, Jesus tells the disciples that He will be killed. A few days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to a "high mountain apart by themselves." They see Moses and Elias, and a cloud descends upon them (Mark 9:2–7).

In contrast to Moses, whose location of death or translation is unknown (see Deuteronomy 34:5–6), Aaron's death is seen by all the congregation. This detail may have favored the priestly class.

Numbers 21:1–3

The people of Israel had avoided the Edomites but soon reached one of the southern city-states of Canaan. When they came by the route of Atharim (which most likely does not mean "spies"), the king of Arad attacks them. The king of Arad is clearly on the offensive, taking prisoners of war. Perhaps fearing defeat as had happened earlier (see Numbers 14), the Israelites plead the Lord for assistance, and they are victorious. When the people consult the Lord first, they are successful.

Numbers 21:4–9

The people have become discouraged because of the lack of water and day-after-day manna. Their complaints bring consequences, which in this case, are fiery serpents. In a very practical sense, we can image snakes and reptiles throughout the desert. The longer they stay at one location, the more likely it would be to attract snakes looking for a shaded area.

Understanding “fiery” (*seraphim*) as something that causes a burning feeling or fever, these serpents may be best understood as poisonous, causing death. On the other hand, the brazen serpent, a symbol of Christ (see Alma 33:18–22), brought healing and life. Therefore, the serpent image could both be positive and negative. In the book of Isaiah, we see *seraphim* (the same word used in Numbers) in the temple that purify the prophet’s guilt and sin (Isaiah 6:6–7). Therefore, these temple serpents can provide purification if the individual is worthy. Bringing together these symbols may provide insight. The seraphim came when the people complained about the bread and water, symbols that represent life and purification. Although this story in Numbers is not about the sacrament, there may be room for comparison.

Speaking of the sacrament, the apostle Paul taught the Corinthians that everyone needs to “examine” themselves in order to “eat of that bread, and drink of that cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28). “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” (1 Corinthians 11:29–30). By saying that “many sleep,” Paul refers to death. For the apostle, eating the sacrament unworthily brought damnation and death. The Israelites brought death among themselves by not being grateful for the little water they did have and the bread they constantly received from heaven. We too need to be grateful every time we take the bread and water of the sacrament, no matter how many times we’ve done it before.

Numbers 21:10–20

This detailed route is the product of good record keeping. Two sources are mentioned at this point. The first is the “book of the wars of the Lord.” This source text was not preserved. It may have included the record of the battles that the Israelites had conducted since leaving Egypt. It may be that their defeat recorded in Numbers 14 had motivated them to abandon this military record. It may also be that the nature of a war document was not needed for the spiritual record of God’s people.

The second source is a song, remembered from the time the Lord gave the people water from a well. This had been an answer to their pleas. We can almost hear the people share their stories about their time with Moses. When they describe their arrival at Beer, they remark, “That is the well whereof the Lord spake

unto Moses.” These often-called books of Moses contain the prophet’s experience and the people’s memoirs of their sacred and trial-ridden journey in the desert.

Numbers 21:21–30

The king of Sihon, like the king of Edom (see Numbers 20:14–21), does not accept the Israelites’ proposal. There are some differences between this story and the last. Previously, Moses had been the one to send the messengers (verse 14), now it is the people themselves who are sending them. The messengers promise not to eat or drink anything from the Amorites. Nonetheless, their repeated complaints for food and water in the desert may have become familiar to the local population. When the Amorites defend their lands by going out on the offensive, they are defeated by the Israelites. The record of their victory may well have come from the book of the wars of the Lord (see verse 14). Defeating the Amorites meant the Israelites had access to their land and cities. “And Israel dwelt in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all the villages thereof.” What follows is a song or proverb describing the past victories of the Amorites. By defeating the Amorites, the Israelites could now conquer territories of Moab, Arnon, and so on.

Numbers 21:31–35

Building their confidence and living now in the Amorite cities, the people of Israel become more established. Seeing their improved situation, Moses follows a previous tactic (from Numbers 13). When the spies went out to Jaazer, their report must have been good. On this occasion, the Israelites go out to battle and win.

When threatened by Og, the king of Bashan, the Israelites believe the Lord’s promise of victory, and they soon possess the land. Living in the Amorite cities (Numbers 21:25) must have given them a sense of security and stability. On many occasions and circumstances, faith can strengthen when the basic needs are met. Being settled with their families for a brief period may have given the Israelites that boost of faith.

Numbers 22:1–6

As the Israelites arrive on the plains of Moab, King Balak and his people are afraid of their reputation. In an effort to protect his people, Balak forms a coalition with the Midianites. The reason to fear the Israelites is the same as before: the locals would be defeated, and their food would be eaten. This fear is presented poetically. The Israelites would “lick up all that are round about us, as the ox licketh up the grass of the field.” In other words, they would be left destitute. Because the Lord had continuously blessed the His people, Balak took the initiative to meet them with a curse. This king appears to misunderstand that it is the Lord who blesses and curses. His petition to Balaam that “I wot that he whom thou blessest

is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed” is an echo of the Lord’s statement to Abraham in Genesis 12:3: “And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee.” Balak, as many other kings of the past, may have considered himself divine.

Numbers 22:7–14

Both the elders of the Moabites and the elders of the Midianites approach Balaam “with the rewards of divination in their hand.” Balaam, a diviner of sorts, tells them he will inquire of the Lord, but they will have to wait. In fact, he tells them to stay the night. Nevertheless, it is only the princes of Moab who stay, implying they were more invested in the cause than the rest. The princes would only have been a percentage of the elders of Moab. The Midianites disappear from the story at this point.

In regular fashion, God asks the individual with whom He is speaking to describe the situation. He then instructs Balaam to neither join the Moabites nor curse the Israelites. His answer is quite clear. The following morning, Balaam only relays half of the message. He tells the princes that he will not accompany them but does not say he will not curse the people of Israel. As a result, when the princes return, they only communicate to Balak that Balaam will not come to him. Balak still has every reason to believe Balaam will curse the children of Israel.

Numbers 22:15–21

Balak then sends more honorable leaders from his people and addresses the only concern he knows: “Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me.” Since the curse was not the issue—or at least Balak was not aware of it—he simply wanted Balaam to join him. As a gift, Balak offers to honor Balaam if he comes. The word for “honor” in Hebrew is the same for the honorable princes who were sent and for the act of honoring Balaam. Perhaps the offer was to make Balaam a member of his court.

As expected, Balak pleads that Balaam curse the people. Balaam does not refuse. He proceeds to speak like a bargainer or negotiator. He tells Balak what he wants (a “house full of silver and gold”) but says he would not accept it due to his allegiance to the Lord. When the Lord appears to him, the Lord gives Balaam specific instructions. The Lord says that if they call on him again, then shall He go. Despite this clarity, Balaam gets up in the morning and, on his own initiative, rides out with the princes. Through this story, Balaam appears to be obedient but, on closer look, is only taking care of himself (see 2 Peter 2:15). The text says Balaam rode his donkey. Whereas horses are a sign of war, donkeys are a sign of royalty in the ancient world.⁵ It is possible that by riding out on a donkey, Balaam was attempting to be viewed equally as an honorable prince of Moab.

⁵ See Judges 10:4; 2 Samuel 17:23; Zechariah 9:9.

Numbers 22:22–35

This portion of the story is meant to be humorous. First, God is angry with Balaam because he had not obeyed. Balaam had gone out to meet Balak, either ignoring or being blind to God's will. When the angel of the Lord appears in the way, only the donkey can see him. Balaam the "seer" could not see what the donkey could. Balaam is blinded from reality. The real donkey in the story is Balaam. Humorously, Balaam tells the donkey he would kill her if he had a sword while the angel is standing over him with a sword. When his eyes are finally opened, Balaam learns that the donkey has saved him from the angel's wrath.

Balaam had selective obedience and was only thinking about himself. He also had high aspirations. The donkey says that Balaam has owned her for quite some time. Balaam has been aspiring to be a court official for probably as long as he has owned her. Finally, Balaam is given another opportunity to serve the Lord, but he must obey diligently. His actions mirror the Israelites' behavior—that is, obeying but never completely.

Numbers 22:36–41

King Balak greets Balaam by meeting him on the border (not coast) of his territory because he was anxious to see this diviner. Balak speaks under the assumption that Balaam has come to be promoted to a place of honor. Balaam responds as a negotiator, telling Balak what he wants (power) but that he can't have it due to his allegiance to God. To benefit the king's cause, the two men travel together, allowing them to build a relationship. Perhaps as the priest king to his god Chemosh (see Numbers 21:29), Balak offers sacrifices. What is then "sent to Balaam, and to the princes" could be none other than the meat sacrificed to Chemosh. By offering the sacrificed meat to Balaam, Balak may have been considering him now one of his priests (see Leviticus 7:5–6). The ritual procession continues. On the following day, Balak takes Balaam to the high worship places of the god Baal. This may all be part of Balaam's initiation ceremony. He is being inducted into Balak's court.

Numbers 23:1–13

Here Balaam is shown to be taking advantage of the situation. The Lord had not asked anyone, and definitely not a Moabite, to offer Him a sacrifice. As a soothsayer, Balaam does not appear to have allegiance to one particular god. Yet, Balaam asks the king for seven altars, seven oxen, and seven rams. It is now the king who is serving Balaam. Despite the ceremony of Moabite sacrifices, God does meet Balaam and inspires him with words. God's act of revelation had taken place before without any need for sacrifices (see Numbers 22:12, 20). In other words, the sacrifices made no difference in this account. God would have spoken to Balaam with or without Moabite sacrifices. When Balaam recounts the previous events and the blessings of Israel, he says that he cannot number the Israelites because they are many. However, Balak had

already told the soothsayer that he would “not see them all.” Upset, Balak offers to take Balaam to another location where, perhaps, he can see all the children of Israel and finally be able to curse them.

Numbers 23:14–30

Balaam again asks Balak for seven altars, seven bullocks (oxen), and seven rams. The king obeys, showing Balaam’s priestly dominance over Balak. When the sacrifices are finished, God’s response is as it has been before: Israel will not be cursed but blessed by divine decree.

The two distinct terms translated as “iniquity” and “perverseness” can better be translated as “trouble, misfortune, or toil” and do not necessarily convey wickedness. By way of explanation, Balaam says God has not seen their trouble perhaps because He has been protecting them all along. They had not faced a real trial that God could not handle. Despite Balak’s wishes, there is no curse against Israel. The children of Israel will be as strong as a lion and conquer their foes.

Numbers 23:25–30

Balak is slowly realizing that his passion for destruction holds no real authority. His hired diviner does not have the ability to curse Israel. Angry, Balak offers to take Balaam to yet another mountain. The men did not travel far: Peor is in the general area of Pisgah (see Numbers 23:14). Again, the sacrifice of seven is offered. Depleting the king’s resources (which he must have taken with him), Balaam is most likely being fed this entire time (see Numbers 22:40; Leviticus 7:5–6).

Numbers 24:1–9

The text informs the reader that Balaam only now realizes that the Lord would not do more than bless Israel and decides to stop seeking enchantments (or curses). This implies that Balaam had gone out with Balak to see if a malicious enchantment would be declared against the children of Israel, allowing him to be made an honorable prince in Moab. Once his eyes are truly open to this fact, Balaam heads back to the wilderness.

Perhaps for the first time, Balaam looks upon the children of Israel, organized in their tribal camps. Upon his seeing how orderly the Israelites are, the Spirit of God comes upon him. Inspiration often comes once we can truly see God’s children in front of us for who they are. Coming to his senses, Balaam begins to share a poem that describes the blessing they deserve. Balaam identifies himself as the one who has now been able to see with open eyes. Yet in the story with the donkey, he was the last one to see who was before him (see

Numbers 21:31). He bears witness to the blessing that Israel will receive—that is, food, water, and victory. No matter what Balaam has said or would say, it is only the Lord who has the power to bless and curse.

Numbers 24:10–14

Angry, Balak repeats that he had wanted the power to curse the children of Israel. The king tells Balaam to leave, reminding the soothsayer one last time that he would have promoted him “unto great honour” had the Lord not been involved. Balaam too repeats not only that he is bound to speak what the Lord commands but also that he has mentioned from the start what he desires: a “house full of silver and gold.” But here he is more specific. Balaam wanted Balak’s own house (see Jude 1:11). Finally, Balaam threatens to advertise to his people what Israel will do to Moab.

Numbers 24:15–19

Ultimately, Balaam speaks about the future of Israel as one who “saw the vision,” fell “into a trance,” and had “his eyes open.” This detail fits the Lord’s description of a prophet as seen before: “If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream” (Numbers 12:6). This temporary vision (seen, “but not now”) prophesies that Israel will have dominion over Moab and Edom. The people of Moab descend from Lot (see Genesis 19:36–37), and Edom from Esau (see Genesis 36:1). The star may be connected to the concept of the divinity of God’s children (see Job 38:7). The scepter is a symbol of governance but is also the same Hebrew word translated as “tribe” in Numbers 24:2.

Numbers 24:20–25

The people of Amalek would be a constant foe (see 1 Samuel 15:18; 30:17) but would be defeated by Hezekiah (see 1 Chronicles 4:43). The Kenites were friends and relatives of Moses (see Judges 1:16; 4:11) but would be taken by the people of Asshur (Asshurim). Chittim is the island of Cyprus, whose people would afflict the Asshurim and Eber. The identity of Eber has been debated and should not be associated with the person of same name in Genesis 10:21.

After this encounter, both Balaam and Balak go their separate ways.

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