

Numbers 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 11 Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance was like that of Bdeium.

The people went about and gathered it and ground it in handmills or beat it in mortars, and boiled it in pots and made cakes of it. And the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil.

When the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it. Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the Lord blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased.

Moses said to the Lord, Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favour in your sight that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people?

Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child, to the land that you swore to give their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?

[1 : 37] For they weep before me and say, Give us meat that we may eat. I am not able to carry all this people alone. The burden is too heavy for me. If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favour in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people, and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you.

And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the spirit that is on you, and put it on them. And they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.

And say to the people, Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat. For you have wept in the hearing of the Lord, saying, Who will give us meat to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt.

Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wept before him, saying, Why did we come out of Egypt?

[2 : 50] But Moses said, The people among whom I am number six hundred thousand on foot, and you have said, I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month. Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, and be enough for them?

Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, and be enough for them? And the Lord said to Moses, Is the Lord's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him, and put it on the seventy elders.

And as soon as the spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not continue doing it. Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them.

They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.

[3 : 54] And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, My Lord Moses, stop them. But Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit on them?

And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp. Then a wind from the Lord sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side, and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, and about two cubits above the ground. And the people rose all that day and all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers, and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.

While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck down the people with a very great plague. Therefore the name of that place was called Kibrath-Hateva, because there they buried the people who had the craving.

From Kibrath-Hateva the people journeyed to Hazoroth, and they remained at Hazoroth. Numbers chapter 11 is set just after Israel has left Sinai. They are uprooted from a long-term camp, where they were beginning to feel a bit settled, and the struggles of life in the wilderness were somewhat alleviated.

[5 : 11] But now they are on the move again, and they feel their presence in the wilderness much more keenly. These chapters of Numbers are a litany of complaints and or rebellions, involving just about every single group of the nation of Israel.

It begins with this complaint concerning the food. They miss the sort of food that they ate in Egypt, and their inclination is not to look forward to the promised land and the great food that they'll enjoy there, but to look back to the food of slavery, yearning for what they left behind in Egypt.

The rabble, presumably the mixed multitude of non-Israelites accompanying them, had a craving, and then the Israelites join in too in their complaining. Now this occurs after the events of Taborah, where they had complained, and the fire of the Lord had come, and burnt certain parts of the camp. Moses had to intercede for them on that occasion, in order for it to die down. But even Moses starts to complain to the Lord at this point in the story. He feels caught between what the Lord requires of him, and the complaints of the people.

He's the man in the middle between these two parties, who aren't pleased with each other. The provision of quail is reminiscent of the earlier provision of quail, in Exodus chapter 16, once again in response to the grumbling of the people.

[6 : 29] In Exodus chapter 16, verses 8 to 13, we read, And Moses said, When the Lord gives you in the evening meat to eat, and in the morning bread to the full, because the Lord has heard your grumbling, that you grumbled against him, what are we?

Your grumbling is not against us, but against the Lord. And Moses said to Aaron, Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, Come near before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling. And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness.

And behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. And the Lord said to Moses, I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread.

Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God. In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. This happens at the same time of the year. Exodus chapter 16, verse 1, They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month, after they had departed from the land of Egypt.

And then in Numbers chapter 10, verse 11, In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony. Once again, the manna is part of the story, and it's described once more.

[7 : 46] We've already just had a new setting apart of firstborn, in the Levites, replacing the firstborn of Israel, and a second celebration of the Passover. So we're retreading the same story.

However, all of the events of Sinai have intervened. What might have been more understandable prior to Sinai is less so now. As a result of the unfaithfulness and the complaints of the people, the Lord is angry, and Moses is displeased.

Moses is feeling the burden that the Lord has placed upon him. It's far too weighty a responsibility. He thinks that the people are like an infant that the Lord has deposited with him, expecting him to play the part of a nurse.

Yet Moses didn't bring the people to birth. Israel was born through the Passover and the Red Sea as the Lord's firstborn son, and this was done at the Lord's instigation. Like Elijah later does, Moses sees his life as wretched and wishes for death if the situation continues as it is currently. God addresses both the despair of Moses and the desire of the people for meat, and he addresses these two things together. They are associated requests, and the response to them is supposed to set up a contrast.

[8 : 55] The Lord instructs Moses to take 70 elders of the people with him to the tent of meeting, or the tabernacle. Once again, we're retreading ground from the journey to Sinai, where under his father-in-law Jethro's counsel, Moses had appointed elders to assist him in this judging of Israel.

One presumes that it's most likely that the 70 elders of the people are the same as the elders that participated in the covenant meal in Exodus chapter 24. These elders would be equipped to assist Moses not just in his work of judgment, as in chapter 18 of Exodus, but also in his spiritual leadership of the people, that they would support him in that regard.

The Lord also declares that he will provide quail, even though Moses finds this hard to believe. Moses' questioning is similar to the questions that the disciples asked to Jesus concerning the provision of food for the crowds on the occasions when Jesus multiplies the loaves and the fish. Some of the spirit of Moses is placed upon the 70 elders. The spirit is given around the tent of meeting, or the tabernacle, at the very heart of the camp. It's similar to what happens with Saul in 1 Samuel chapter 10, verses 6 to 12.

Then the spirit of the Lord will rush upon you and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man. Now when these signs meet you, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you. [10 : 16] Then go down before me to Gilgal. And behold, I am coming down to you to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait until I come to you and show you what you shall do.

When he turned his back to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart. And all these signs came to pass that day. When they came to Gibeah, behold, a group of prophets met him. And the spirit of God rushed upon him and he prophesied among them.

And when all who knew him previously saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets? And a man of the place answered, And who is their father?

Therefore it became a proverb, Is Saul also among the prophets? There are two of the elders who are not with the others around the tent meeting, Eldad and Medad, and they prophesy in the camp. This is a concern to Joshua and others who think that they may be usurping the authority that's proper to Moses. But Moses is not troubled at all. This is the spirit of the Lord. And he's happy to see the spirit of the Lord spread as widely as possible.

[11 : 23] He would love to see all of the people of God have the spirit of God. And his desire here anticipates the future that God has intended for his people. In Joel chapter 2 verses 28 to 29, this desire is expressed in the form of a prophecy that will come to pass.

And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants, in those days I will pour out my spirit. Then a wind from the Lord, this is connected with the spirit, wind and spirit are the same word, blows the quail from the sea and it falls outside of the camp about a day's journey outside on either side.

You should note the difference between this and Exodus chapter 16, where the quail covered the camp itself. Here the quail are outside of the camp, quite a distance away, and they'll have to leave the camp and go outside to get it.

The quail are presented as a judgment upon the people. They're given what they want, but they're going to get it until they're sick of it. To get it, they had to leave the camp. And they get their fill of quail and huge quantities of quail, but they're struck with a very great plague.

[12 : 41] And we should contrast God's fulfillment of these two requests. One leads people much closer to him, and another allows them to be led away from him by their appetites.

They go out into the wilderness and they get the quail and they're struck down by a plague, whereas those who are brought round the tabernacle receive the spirit and prophesy and are nearer to God as a result of that.

A question to consider, how does the gift of Moses' spirit to the 70 elders help us in our understanding of the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2?