

Reformation Fellowship Notes • March 24, 2019

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Handout #7

Numbers 12 & 13

I. Introduction

- A. A theme of the Pentateuch: Who has authority to lead this people, and will the people accept that leadership?
 - 1. That was one of Moses' concerns when God appeared to him in the burning bush.
 - a) The people frequently questioned Moses' leadership.
 - 2. Moses faces a couple of particularly tough challenges in the next few chapters of Numbers.
- B. Some things we have seen that become important in understanding the next chapters:
 - 1. Moses is not power hungry.
 - a) When Jethro advised him to appoint men to help judge disputes, he did.
 - b) Moses wanted Hobab to join him as a scout.
 - c) At God's prompting, Moses appointed men to help shoulder the burden of the people's complaints.
 - (1) God put his spirit on those men, and they prophesied as a sign of that fact.
 - (a) Two men prophesied as a sign of receiving the spirit even though they were not at the Tabernacle when they were supposed to be
 - (b) Joshua, Moses' lieutenant, thought this suggested these two might be rogue power brokers.
 - (i) They had not come to the Tabernacle as they were supposed to do, but they still prophesied.
 - (ii) He thought they should be reined in.
 - (c) Since they manifested the spirit of God, Moses was not concerned.
 - d) There is a recognized distinction between the Israelites and the foreign element in their midst.
 - (1) That division will become important in the rebellion we see in chapter 12.

II. Numbers 12:1-8

- A. Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses.
 - 1. It is difficult to piece together the nature of their objection.
 - 2. It would appear that Miriam was the instigator.
 - a) Her name is listed first.
 - b) She alone is punished.
 - 3. Main concern: foreign element is the source of our problems.

- a) The foreign element instigated the complaint that led to the food poisoning episode.
 - b) Moses is too closely tied to the foreign element to appreciate the danger.
 - (1) He is married to a non-Israelite.
 - c) The foreign element needs to be more tightly controlled.
 - (1) Miriam is probably the one who was pushing most forcefully in this direction.
4. Their solution to this problem:
- a) Moses is monopolizing his position of power.
 - (1) Has God spoken only through Moses?
 - b) They are suggesting that they are equally qualified and should have equal power.
 - (1) Miriam has prophesied.
 - (a) In Exodus 15:20, she is called “the prophetess.”
 - (b) In her mind, this apparently makes her qualified to share more of Moses’ power.
 - (2) Aaron has been given a position of authority by God.
 - c) They are implying that Moses has his power because he refuses to share his power.
 - d) If Miriam (and Aaron) had more authority, they would control the foreign element.
 - e) They may have felt like they were slighted when Moses picked the 70 to share his burden of leadership.

The root of their problem may be that they, the siblings of the leader, were not included in the sharing of Yahweh’s Spirit with the elders (11:4–35 does not mention Aaron). (Ashley, p. 222)

B. “Moses was very humble.”

- 1. Could Moses have written this?
 - a) If someone says they are humble, is this not bragging and therefore proof that he is not humble?
 - b) No brag, just fact
 - (1) Bragging implies an attitude.
 - (a) I am X, and therefore I am inherently more worthy.
- 2. Moses does not defend himself.
 - a) We just have a parenthetical comment at this point.
- 3. This is a very significant claim.
 - a) Moses was not grasping; he did not worry about getting what was his.
 - (1) Devout, trusting
 - (a) He trusts God to take care of him, such that he does not have to put a premium on putting himself forward.
 - (2) The LXX translates this with the word that gets translated as “meek” in the beatitudes.

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:5)

C. “And the LORD heard it.”

1. Miriam and Aaron were acting as though God, who searches the depths of our hearts, was not there to unmask what was actually happening.
2. He called all three to the tent of meeting.
 - a) This is God’s designated place to meet with humans.
 - b) God came down as a pillar of cloud.
 - c) He called Aaron and Miriam to himself.
3. God spoke to Aaron and Miriam.
 - a) God speaks to them directly and not through Moses.
 - b) God speaks to his prophets in visions and dreams.
 - c) But Moses is in another category.
 - (1) God speaks to him face to face.
 - (2) Moses has seen God.
 - (3) He is completely faithful.
 - d) How is it that you could not see this and sought to bring him down?
 - (1) How could you be so presumptuous?
 - (2) They are putting themselves forward in a way that shows they lack humility.

III. Numbers 12:9-15

A. God was angry with Miriam and Aaron.

1. “The anger of the Lord burned against them, and he left them.”

“God’s departure brings punishment in its wake. Also, God’s departure from Miriam and Aaron suggests the cancellation of their prophetic gifts, a fact underscored by Aaron’s plea to Moses to intercede—a basic prophetic function—implying that he, Aaron, no longer could.” (Milgrom, p. 97)

- a) I am not inclined to agree with Milgrom at this point.
2. The cloud lifted from the tent.
3. Miriam was leprous
 - a) Aaron first saw that this was the case.
 - b) Aaron appealed to Moses to cure her.
 - (1) This is recognition of Moses’ greater status and his role as intermediary.

Aaron intercedes with Moses who, in turn, intercedes with Yahweh for Miriam’s restoration. Here again, the irony is obvious. Aaron, who had wanted to be able to be like his brother in the latter’s role as a speaker for Yahweh, is forced to intercede with Moses who intercedes with God. Thus the theme of equality and the complaint over Moses’ wife (issuing in this judgment) come together at this point. Yahweh is right—Moses is special! (Ashley, p. 227)

- (2) Although we have sinned, don't hold our sin against us.
- (3) Don't let her be like one dead.

“Moses’ intercession has ironic implications: Only he whom Miriam and Aaron have wronged can help them.” (Milgrom, p. 97)

- 4. Moses appealed to God to heal Miriam.
 - a) God did not immediately do so.
 - (1) If her father spit on her, she would have to endure shame for at least 7 days.
 - (2) Send her out of the camp for 7 days.
- 5. Miriam went outside of camp for 7 days.
 - a) They stayed put for that time.
 - (1) This was not due to uncleanness (she was clean) but because of shame (as the given example shows).
- 6. They were delayed for one week because of the sin of Miriam (and the sin of the people as a whole).

IV. Numbers 12:16

- A. They left Hazeroth and went to Paran.
- B. What follows is the second great sin of the Israelites in the wilderness.
 - 1. The first is the golden calf episode.
 - 2. This is the second.
- C. We have seen how the text has shown several indications of a general tendency toward insubordination.
 - 1. What comes next is the great act of insubordination.

V. Numbers 13:1-16

- A. God told Moses to send out men to spy out the land.
 - 1. According to Deuteronomy 1:22, 23, 37, the idea of sending out scouts originated with the people.
 - a) The idea was apparently approved by God, and Moses was told to do it.
 - 2. As I have pointed out, God gives general direction, but Israelites are to act prudently.
 - a) The Israelites are expected to decide and do what is reasonable.
 - b) They want to gather intelligence information so that they can plan their attack.
 - 3. They send a leader from each tribe.
 - a) Milgrom argues that these were not military scouts.

Thus the men were not ordinary military scouts but distinguished leaders of each tribe who were chosen to witness God's truth by verifying the virtues of His land. According to this tradition, then, the venture was more a test of faith than a military expedition. (Milgrom, p. 100)

- b) Names of each leader
 - (1) These are not the leaders listed in chapters 1, 2, and 7.
 - (2) This task required younger men.
- c) One of them, Caleb, who represents Judah, is not a descendant of Jacob.
 - (1) A Kennizzite—Kennizzites are thought to be a branch of Edomites.
 - (2) It is not clear whether Caleb joined the Israelites in Egypt or while they were passing through the Sinai.
 - (3) Caleb and his descendants were given land in the Hebron area.
 - (a) David marries into his line (Abigail).
 - (b) More about the significance of Caleb shortly.
- d) Joshua, under the name of Hoshea, is listed from the tribe of Ephraim.
 - (1) Joshua is apparently the updated equivalent of the more ancient "Hoshea."
 - (a) Hoshea means "he saved."
 - (b) Joshua means "YHWH saved."

VI. Numbers 13:17-20

- A. They were sent into Canaan.
 - 1. The description of where they were to go shows little knowledge of the land.
 - a) Into the Negev
 - b) Into the hill country
 - 2. What kinds of information they were to gather:
 - a) What is the land like?
 - (1) Geography
 - b) Are the people strong or weak, few or many?
 - (1) Assessment of army strength
 - c) Is the land good or bad?
 - (1) Assessment of the land's value
 - d) Are there cities, and are there fortifications?
 - (1) Assessment of defensive strength
 - e) Is the land fat or lean?
 - (1) Assessment of the land's productivity
 - f) Is it treed?
 - (1) Is it well-watered, and does it have forest regions (wood)?
 - g) In sum, is the land good, is it well-defended, and what is the geography?
 - (1) They were not charged with determining whether it could be taken; they were charged with determining how good the land was and how to attack it.
 - 3. Bring sample of the fruit of the land
 - a) "the time of the first ripe grapes"
 - (1) So, the time of year is late July or early August.

VII. Numbers 13:21-24

A. Where they went:

1. I assume they split up.
2. Wilderness of Zin
 - a) Just north of Paran
3. As far north as Rehob at Lebo-hamath
 - a) This is apparently Dan.
4. Some went into the east part of the Negev.
 - a) They went to Hebron.
 - (1) This area was important to Abraham.
 - (a) This is the land associated with Abraham.
 - (b) This is the land God gave to Abraham.
 - (2) It had a long history.
 - (a) Founded before Zoan in Egypt
5. They collected a sample of the fruit of the land.
 - a) Huge cluster of grapes
 - (1) Two men carried it on a pole.
 - (2) Eschol means “cluster.”
 - b) Pomegranates and figs

VIII. Numbers 13:25-33

A. Gone for 40 days

B. Presented their findings to all the Israelites

1. Moses and Aaron; all the people
2. Their report:
 - a) Good part
 - (1) Flowing with milk and honey
 - (a) Not just assessment of productivity
 - (b) Assessment of diversity
 - (i) These are people who have lived in the desert.
 - (ii) The land of Canaan has forests (honey) and pasture land (milk).
 - (c) The “flowing” suggests productivity.
 - b) Bad part
 - (1) People are strong.
 - (2) Cities are large and fortified.
 - (3) Descendants of Anak are there (giants).
 - (4) Populated by Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Canaanites
3. People were alarmed.
 - a) Caleb had to quiet the crowd.
 - (1) They were discouraged by what they heard.

- b) Caleb said they should go in.
 - (1) We will surely take it.
- 4. The other spies said it was too strong to take.
 - a) Genuine subjective response
 - b) We are not able to take it.
 - c) They are too strong.
 - d) Now the spies resort to hyperbole to push their perspective.
 - (1) This land devours its residents.

“Thus this idiom can only mean that the nature of the land is such that it will perpetually keep its inhabitants at war, perhaps a reflection of the geopolitical position of Canaan as a land bridge whose city-states were either fighting each other or stemming invasion from Asia or Africa.” (Milgrom, p. 107)

- (2) We became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.
- 5. Next week we will see the response of the people to this interaction.

IX. Conclusion

- A. This section of Numbers (about ten chapters) deals with insubordination.
 - 1. Who has the authority to lead this people?
 - 2. Why do Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses’ authority?
 - a) Miriam thinks she has identified the source of Israel’s problem.
 - (1) It is the foreign element.
 - (2) If they were under control, things would go well.
 - b) Moses can’t see the problem because he is married to a foreigner.
 - c) Miriam is just as much a prophet as Moses, so she should share power.
 - (1) If she shared power, she could make up for Moses’ blind spots.
 - d) To strengthen her case, she recruited Aaron.
 - (1) It is not clear whether Aaron also thought the foreigners were a problem.
 - (2) But Aaron did see merit in the idea that Moses needed to share power.
 - 3. The text disputes both claims.
 - a) The foreign element was not the primary problem.
 - (1) There was grumbling before the “riff-raff” are highlighted.
 - (a) Numbers 11:1-3
 - (b) No indication that the foreign element instigated that
 - (2) When the spies reported, one of the foreigners was the faithful one.
 - (a) Caleb kept things in perspective.
 - (3) We will see more indications that the foreign element is not the problem.
 - b) God had established a hierarchical authority structure.
 - (1) Not all who prophesy are equal with respect to power and authority.
 - (a) To be equal with respect to one thing does not make one equal in all.
 - (2) Moses is in a category all by himself.

- (a) God has given him a unique role.
 - (b) This should have been apparent to both Miriam and Aaron.
 - 4. Miriam and Aaron probably thought their concerns were absolutely justified.
 - a) We are all very good at self-justification.
 - (1) That's bad because we can't see what we are really doing.
 - 5. They were seeing Moses as being power-hungry, but that could not have been farther from the truth.
 - a) Moses was the least grasping of all men.
 - b) We see that he was willing to share power.
 - c) Miriam and Aaron were the grasping ones!
- B. Did the spies lie?
- 1. What is a lie?
 - a) The initial report of the spies was not unfactual.
 - (1) Caleb doesn't dispute facts.
 - (2) The spies selected the facts to produce a desired effect.
 - (3) They wanted to frighten the people of Israel.
 - (a) Their statements after Caleb spoke make that clear.
 - (4) There are other important facts that could have been presented.
 - (a) God's promise
 - (b) God's faithfulness
 - (c) God's love for his people
 - b) Facts do not add up to truth.
 - (1) Facts are just data points.
 - (a) An infinite listing of facts does not result in truth.
 - (2) One can use facts to cast doubt on the truth.
 - c) Truth can't be fact checked.
 - (1) Truth is more subtle than that.
 - 2. What is truth?
 - a) Truth is the story that knits the data points into a coherent whole and accurately describes reality.
 - (1) It is anchored in the relationship of human reality to God the creator.
 - b) Lies are anything that is calculated to subvert this accounting.
 - (1) Whether it is factual or not
 - 3. The spies lied.
 - a) Caleb did not respond by listing other facts.
 - (1) He does not want to engage in a battle of facts.
 - b) He tried to remind them of the narrative of truth.
 - c) The Israelites were resistant to embracing the true narrative.