

The Story (5) – From Sinai to Canaan's Border

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I. Review and Background

A. The Israelites left Egypt around 1446 B.C. on the fifteenth day of the first month. They entered the wilderness after passing through the Red Sea, and then journeyed to Mount Sinai, arriving there three months after having left Egypt (Ex. 19:1). According to Num. 10:11, they departed Mount Sinai on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year after leaving Egypt, so they were camped at Sinai for eleven months and five days.

B. During that time, they entered into a covenant with God and received numerous laws and rules governing their lives and their worship. The focus of the laws from Exodus 25 through Num. 10:10 is worship. Those sections treat, among other things, the ark and the tabernacle (Ex. 25-28), priestly clothing (Ex. 28), ordination of priests (Ex. 29-31), sacrificial laws (Lev. 1-7), consecration of the priesthood (Lev. 8-10), teaching on clean and unclean (Lev. 11-15), the Day of Atonement and the principle of life being in the blood (Lev. 16-17), laws of holiness (Lev. 18-26), and religious vows (Lev. 27) (Kaiser, 122).

C. The tabernacle was erected and consecrated on the first day of the first month of the second year of their leaving Egypt (Ex. 40:17). In the middle of that month they celebrated the Passover (Num. 9:1-5), and then they departed from Mount Sinai just over a month after that.

D. People question how such immense human and animal populations could have found adequate water and food in southern Sinai for that length of time. Eugene Merrill writes (p. 82), "The biblical account suggests, however, that the whole enterprise from beginning to end – from Egypt to Canaan – was an unending series of miraculous acts whereby God redeemed, sustained, and delivered his people."

II. From Mount Sinai to Kadesh Barnea

A. The Israelites' course of travel was set by the cloud that covered the tabernacle. When it lifted they followed it to the next place where it settled down. The first encampment was only a three-day journey from Mount Sinai, a place called Taberah, the precise location of which is unknown. There the people complained about their difficulties, and fire from the Lord burned up some of the outer parts of the camp. The people cried out, Moses prayed, and the fire died down.

B. The people then complained about the lack of meat to eat and about the manna the Lord had graciously provided. They had the audacity to say that things were better for them in Egypt! ⁴ *Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. 6 But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at"* (Num. 11:4-6, ESV).

God covered their camp in quail, and then struck down many with a great plague. That location became known as Kibroth-hattaavah, "Graves of Craving," for that reason.

C. The people next camped at Hazeroth, where we are told in Numbers 12 that Moses' brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam, challenged his unique role in God's relationship with Israel. God rebuked them for speaking against Moses and inflicted Miriam with leprosy for seven days.

D. The Israelites left Hazeroth and camped at many other sites en route to Kadesh Barnea (Num. 33:17-36), but the exact locations of those places are not known. It is at Kadesh Barnea, a location that is known with high probability, where the pivotal event involving the 12 spies occurred.

III. The Twelve Spies

A. At Kadesh Barnea God instructed Moses (Num. 13:2) to send men from each of the twelve tribes to spy out the land of Canaan. It was to prepare Israel for conquering the land that God already *was in the process of giving them*. The twelve, which included Joshua and Caleb, scouted out the land all the way north of the Sea of Galilee, and then returned with a report forty days later.

B. The spies all agreed the land was rich and tremendously bountiful, but ten of them told the people, in essence, that the cities were too fortified and the inhabitants too large and fierce to make conquering it feasible. Now mind you that these are the people who had just waltzed out of Egypt with the Egyptian's gold and jewelry and watched Pharaoh's army drown in the Red Sea!

C. The people of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron for bringing them to where they were going to be killed by the inhabitants of Canaan, and they wanted to choose a leader to take them back to Egypt (Num. 14:4). When Joshua and Caleb told them God could do the job and urged them not to rebel against him, they were ready to stone them to death.

D. The Lord appeared and rebuked the people. And after Moses interceded for them, the Lord told the people, through Moses, that none of them age 20 and older *who were listed in the census* (in chapter 1) of men able to go to war, except Joshua and Caleb, would enter the promise land. (Note that women and Levites were not listed in the census, and the tribe of Levi was not represented by any of the spies.) Rather, Israel's entrance would be delayed until they had lived in the wilderness for forty years (not clear whether that means a *total* of 40 years, which would be 38 additional years, or 40 *additional* years), during which time all the men listed in the census would expire. The ten spies who had instigated the rebellion "died by plague before the Lord" (Num. 14:38).

E. The people mourned when they heard that news and decided they would circumvent the Lord's judgment by attacking the land. Moses told them God would not be with them and that things would end badly, but they forged ahead anyway only to see the Amalekites and Canaanites defeat them.

IV. Wilderness Wandering

A. We are told little about the events during these decades of Israel being in the wilderness. That is not all that surprising because, as someone has said, Numbers is not a history of Israel but an essay about the consequences of disobedience. Presumably Kadesh Barnea served as a kind of base for the Israelites during these years.

B. Korah's Rebellion

1. In Numbers 16, Korah, a Levite, and 250 community leaders opposed Moses and Aaron on the basis that they should have equal access to God. All Israel was holy, so no one family line should be exalted to the priestly function. It was a challenge to God's right to choose select groups for specific roles, a spirit that is alive and well today in those who challenge God's right to choose men as leaders of their families and the church.

2. Dathan and Abiram opposed Moses' authority as leader of Israel on the basis he had not brought them into the promise land. The result of this rebellion was that Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were swallowed by the earth and the 250 community leaders were incinerated by God.

3. The people then gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron (Num. 16:42). They apparently supported the challenge of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and were unwilling to accept God's judgment in the matter. God brought a plague on the group, and Aaron made atonement on their behalf by offering incense. God then relented, but only after 14,700 Israelites had died. In Numbers 17, God then had Aaron's staff sprout, produce blossoms, and bear ripe almonds as confirmation and visible proof of God's selection of Moses as leader and of Aaron's line as the priesthood.

C. In Numbers 20, Miriam dies and the people quarrel with Moses and Aaron because there was no water. This is where Moses spoke to the people and struck the rock with his staff to bring forth water rather than speak to the rock as the Lord had commanded. And for his unbelief in that regard (20:12), Moses himself was not permitted to enter the promise land.

V. From Kadesh to the Plains of Moab

A. In the fortieth year, Moses made plans to enter Canaan from the east. This would require Israel to pass through Edomite and Moabite territory, so Moses sent messengers asking permission from the King of Edom to traverse his land. That permission was denied, and then the Israelites set out from Kadesh Barnea to Mount Hor, the location of which is uncertain. Aaron died on Mount Hor.

B. The Canaanite king of the city-state of Arad learned of Israel's presence and decided to launch a preemptive attack against them. The Lord granted Israel the victory, and they destroyed Arad and the nearby places that presumably allied with the king in its attack.

C. And then Israel turned south and went all the way to the Red Sea, meaning the Gulf of Aqaba, to go around Edom (Num. 21:4).

1. They apparently intended to travel north from there on a route that was east of the well-known King's Highway, a route known as "the way of the wilderness of Edom" or "the way of the wilderness of Moab."

2. On the long journey southward, the people again spoke against God and Moses, and the Lord sent poisonous snakes among them. When the people repented of their sin, Moses prayed and the Lord provided a cure for the snake bites. He had Moses make a bronze serpent and hoist it up on a pole. Whoever was bitten and looked at the bronze serpent would live. Jesus applied this healing event to himself in Jn. 3:14-15 (ESV): ¹⁴ *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

D. Having avoided confrontation with Edom and Moab, as Israel continued north they sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites requesting permission to pass through their land. Instead, Sihon attacked Israel and was defeated. That gave Israel control of the land east of the Jordan from the Arnon River, which runs east and west from the middle of the Dead Sea, to the Jabbok River, which runs east and west about 45 miles to the north.

E. North of the kingdom of Sihon was that of another Amorite leader, Og of Bashan. He controlled from the Jabbok River to far north of the Yarmuk River, which runs east and west just below the Sea of Galilee. These are the regions of Gilead and Bashan. Israel had advanced all the way to Edrei, about 30 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee, before Og was able to mount an attack against them. God gave Israel the victory over Og, which meant they controlled the Transjordan from the Arnon Valley in the south to Mount Hermon in the north, some 150 miles.

F. This is what prompted Balak, king of Moab, the land to the south of that now controlled by Israel, to hire Balaam to put a curse on Israel. Balaam was unwilling or unable to speak falsely in God's name and wound up blessing Israel rather than cursing her.

1. Balaam thereafter, however, succumbed to the temptation to harm Israel by advising the Moabites to use their women to pull the Israelites into idolatry, specifically the worship of Baal of Peor (Num. 25:1-9; 31:15-16; 2 Pet. 2:15; Rev. 2:14). This was the Canaanite form of Baalism, which included sexual immorality.

2. At God's direction, Moses told the judges of Israel to kill those of their men who had yoked themselves to Baal of Peor. And while everybody was weeping over the situation, an Israelite man brazenly brought a Midianite woman named Cozbi to his brothers for whatever use they deemed fit. That is when Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, killed both Cozbi and Zimri, the man who was engaging in sexual immorality with her. That stopped the plague, but not before 24,000 Israelites had died.

G. In Numbers 27 Moses, pursuant to the Lord's instructions, publicly commissioned Joshua as his successor. Joshua is described in v. 18 as "a man in whom is the Spirit." In

Deuteronomy 31 there is a private commissioning on the brink of Moses' death where Moses and Joshua met with God in the tent of meeting.

H. In Numbers 32 Moses tells the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh that they can have the land east of the Jordan River that was taken from Sihon and Og. The condition, however, is that these tribes fight with their brothers for the land west of the Jordan River. After that land has been taken, the warriors of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh could then return to their land on the east of the Jordan.

VI. Deuteronomy

A. The Book of Deuteronomy, which is the last of the five books known collectively as the Pentateuch, picks up where the Book of Numbers left them, "on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho" (Num. 36:13). It is Moses' farewell address and charge to the people in which, on the brink of Israel's entrance into the promise land, he essentially retells the teachings and events of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

B. Deuteronomy contains three lengthy speeches given by Moses.

1. After a brief prologue, the first runs from 1:6-4:43. It focuses on the great King's faithfulness by recounting God's mighty acts on behalf of Israel from the covenant at Sinai until the time of his speech. "This survey of Israel's recent past illustrates the benefits of keeping covenant as well as the pitfalls of disobedience" (Arnold & Beyer, 144). Even he, Moses, would not be allowed to enter the promise land because of his disobedience. In chapter 4 Moses exhorts them to obey in the present and the future, and he warns them repeatedly not to "forget" the covenant (4:9, 23).

2. After an introduction, the second speech runs from 5:1-26:19. Moses restates the covenant laws in ways that are more focused on life in the promise land, he draws out and fills in those laws and teachings in ways intended to bless the people in their future lives. He warns them and exhorts them to faithfulness and gives them additional instructions.

a. Here, in Deut. 6:4-9, is found the famous *Shema*.⁴ *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."*⁵ *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*⁶ *And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.*⁷ *You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*⁸ *You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.*⁹ *You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

b. And here (Deut. 8:11-18) is where Moses so powerfully warns them about the temptation to forget God in the midst of plenty.¹¹ *"Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today,*¹² *lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them,*¹³ *and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied,*¹⁴ *then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who*

brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵ who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, ¹⁶ who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. ¹⁷ Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' ¹⁸ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

c. And here (Deut. 9:4-5) is where Moses warns them not to be deceived into thinking that their blessing was because of their own righteousness. ⁴ "Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you. ⁵ Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

d. And here (Deut. 13:1-3) is where Moses tells them that any person who calls for serving other gods shall not be listened to regardless of whether he performs signs and wonders. Deut. 13:3b states, "For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul."

3. The third speech is from 27:1-31:30. Moses gives instructions for a covenant renewal ceremony to be performed after the Israelites had taken possession of the promise land. He then lists the blessing that will accompany faithfulness and the curses that will follow rebellion. He also urges them again to faithfulness and makes provision for the future of the nation. He wrote the law and gave it to the priests with instructions that it be read every seven years before all of Israel at the Feast of Booths. And Joshua was commissioned with the charge from God, "Be strong and courageous, for you shall bring the people of Israel into the land that I swore to give them. I will be with you."

C. Appendices

1. The book ends with The Song of Moses (32:1-47), the Testament of Moses (32:48-33:29) in which he bestowed his final blessings on Israel, and the account of the death of Moses (34:1-12).

2. Moses was 120 when he died, and he was buried, apparently by God, in an unknown location. The uniqueness of Moses' burial is alluded to in Jude 9, which refers to a confrontation between the Archangel Michael and the devil over Moses' body. Perhaps God wanted Moses' burial site unknown to prevent undue veneration of him or to prevent the Israelites from carrying his bones into the promise land.