

18. Numbers 20:1-13

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This chapter forms the introduction to the third part of Numbers. The period of wanderings through the desert of the Sinai peninsula have come to an end and although the people are still on the move, from now on they will move directly towards their goal, Canaan. The first month in verse 1 is in the fortieth year. We may consider this month to be a turning point in Israel's lot. From now on the Bible will keep us regularly informed about events. We are much better informed about this one year than the entire period of thirty eight years preceding it. We receive that information in Numbers 20-36 and all thirty four chapters of Deuteronomy.

Israel is now in the desert of Zin (to be distinguished from the wilderness of Sin, between Elim and Sinai, Exodus 16). Check a Bible Atlas. According to Numbers 33:36 they came from Ezion-Geber; present day Elath on the Gulf of Aqaba. Once again they are in Kadesh. Again; because the events of chapter 13 took place there; and who knows how often in the meantime the people have been there.

While Israel camped at Kadesh, Miriam the sister of Moses and Aaron, died. She would have been a number of years older than Moses for it is generally agreed that Miriam was the sister who watched the baby Moses at the river's edge (Exodus 2:4). In Exodus 15:20, she is called the prophetess, the sister of Aaron (why specifically Aaron?), and pictured taking a timbrel in her hand leading all the women who approached Moses and Israel with timbrels and dancing. Their song was a response to the beautiful song of Moses. Miriam, the prophetess; that is how she will live on in the memory of the people, compare Micah 6:5. An honourable mention for this woman. On the other hand there are the events of Numbers 12. This woman too, had her shortcomings; Scripture does not hide them; she was punished for them. The date of her death proves that she is the last of the generation that would die in the wilderness. She was buried in Kadesh. On the border of the promised land. We do not read that the people mourned for her as they did when for Aaron and for Moses when they died.

The narrative of verses 2-13 is strongly reminiscent of a similar event recorded in Exodus 17:1-7. I would ask the reader of this outline to compare the two and pay attention to similarities and to differences. Something we often neglect but critics of the Pentateuch relish in it. Because of the similarities between the two stories they concluded that originally there was only one story about a miraculous provision of water from a rock. That story was later described in two versions, Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:2-13. Two different traditions about one event. Needless to say, I do not share this view. That does not need to be argued. But I do not want to leave it at that. The statements of Scripture critics serve to make us more alert. Now we must ask: Are these stories of two different events only parallel to each other? Or is there something else or something more going on in the second version? Biblical history is not just a series of examples that can be used to make exemplary sermons or introductions but it is the history of God's revelation. The LORD first guided the patriarchs, and then the people from one stage to the next, and so eventually guided them to the Day of Christ Jesus. The Christ who still had to come; and yet already then, was present. 1 Corinthians 10:4: "And all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ." YAHWEH guided His people from the house of bondage, and ever further away from that house of bondage – Egypt, representative of the realm of the Evil one – ever nearer and nearer to Canaan, to the rest that would be enjoyed there in Christ, their Redeemer. And now I look at matters in a very wide context, but we can draw a narrower circle by remaining closer to the period covered in Exodus and Numbers. Then we can ask: Should the Church that was on its way to the rest under God's good guidance, not have learnt from their experience at the first Meribah? Should they not have known about the miraculous way in which the LORD then provided for their needs? Are they not, through their complaints and murmurings, much more guilty than their fathers were thirty nine years ago? Or did the current generation receive a rather one-sided picture from its fathers, to say the least of it? It was largely dependent on verbal information because the previous generation – those who at the time were twenty years or older – now had all died, Numbers 14:29. Had this generation pictured the sunny side of Egypt and the dark side of the Sinai peninsula?

In both stories the cause for complaint is the same: lack of water. The congregation gathered together against Moses and Aaron. And just as in Exodus 17:1, the people contended with Moses. You can elaborate on the word “to contend” (Hebrew “rib”, pronounced “reeb”), in this sense: they proceeded against Moses. Like two people, who are engaged in a lawsuit and who take each other to court before a judge. As if Moses could do something about it. As if he was to blame! “Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness that we and our animals should die here?” “The assembly of the LORD,” so they call themselves. And of course, that is what they *are*. But I wonder if they speak on the basis of a true vision of the Church. There are people who always speak of the church, yet their position towards the LORD of the Church is false. Korah, in Numbers 16, was such a person. He spoke in lofty words against Moses. That is bad. But much worse is the fact that Israelites who may not have seen Korah face-to-face, but who would have heard much about him, now adopt the same tone of voice. That was *the* event of those thirty eight years. “If only we had died when our brethren died before the LORD!” “Before the LORD”. That could not refer to a natural death but to a death by a plague. They long for such a death!

Taking into consideration that this is the *new* generation, the generation saved from destruction in the wilderness – which had the destiny of their fathers and brethren as a warning example before them – we can only say: This is really bad! Worse than the complaints of their fathers in Exodus 17! This will weigh the heavier against them. The new Israel, clearly destined to live, wished that they had died as their brethren. “Why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place ...?” The same old story of discontent and dissatisfaction that we already know from Numbers 13, 14 and 16, 17. They put the blame on Moses and Aaron, but really, they should blame their fathers. It is true, at the moment they only have eye for their inconvenience. There is a lack of water. And for a cattle breeder that is twice as serious because he not only has to look after his family but also after his herd. But we do not get the impression that they are already on the brink of death. If their fathers, all those years ago in this same region, had shown faith in the words of the two spies both fathers and children would have entered the promised land long ago, gathering and enjoying the harvest of grain, figs, grapes and pomegranates.

Therefore, their real sin is that they have lost sight of the LORD their God, the true Leader of the journey through the wilderness and accuse Him of impropriety. Moses and Aaron had only been assistants in the realisation of God's plan. But it is always easier to remonstrate against man than directly against God. They would never do that. No, they are religious; the assembly of the LORD, you know. They are only unfortunate in having failures like Moses and Aaron as their leaders; men who were not up to their task; fools who brought the people from the good land Egypt to this evil place. Again we ask how they, the new generation, could speak about Egypt in this way, a land of which they could hardly have a memory? Or was this caused by one-sided "information" from the fathers? I am very much afraid that this was the case.

"So Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and fell on their faces." Who does not remember Numbers 14:5 and 16:4? Both men call upon the LORD, that He may provide help. They leave the matter in His hands. "And the glory of the LORD appeared to them." In 14:10 and 16:19 the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people of Israel, to all the congregation. The same happened in 16:42. Here the glory of the LORD appears to the two men. That makes a difference. In earlier events, the appearance of the glory of the LORD signalled few good things for the people; it was a manifestation of the LORD's anger. On this occasion the LORD does not reveal Himself to strike terror in the people. He does not even rebuke the people. He only tells Moses and Aaron that they may provide the congregation and their cattle with water. And He also indicates *the manner in which* they may now produce water from the rock; this becomes a matter of decisive importance.

Undeniably there is a surprising element in this command. Knowing the LORD from earlier revelations in similar situations, we would fear the worst: that judgment would erupt against the stubborn assembly. Possibly Moses and Aaron expected this as well. What follows however is a revelation of God's grace. A grace that knows no bounds. He gives generously and without reproach.

"Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Take the rod ..." Which rod? Moses' rod? The famous rod that he used in Egypt to perform his miracles (Exodus 4:2,17,20; 7:15,17,20; 9:23; 10:13); and during the exodus at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:16-18) and afterwards (Exodus 17:5)? Or was it Aaron's rod, which had been put back before the Testimony, to be kept as a sign against the rebels? Based

on verse 9: “So Moses took the rod from before the LORD,” Noordtzij and Gispen conclude that it must have been Aaron’s rod. But I wonder if the same can not be said about Moses’ rod. He was in regular contact with YAHWEH; he could have left his rod in the place where he customarily met the LORD.

“Take the rod.” “Take,” singular. It is said to Moses alone. Together with Aaron he has to assemble the congregation. “Speak to the rock.” Here the verb is plural. How do we imagine that? Aaron had to assist Moses. Does the LORD mean that they have to speak simultaneously?

What matters most now is that Moses is commanded to *speak* to the rock. At his *word* the rock will yield its waters.

Strange! In Exodus 17, the parallel story, Moses was ordered to *hit* the rock. Is it not obvious that he now would have to do the same, even more so because God instructed him: Take the rod? Not without the rod, but with the rod in his hand he had to go to the rock. Yet he was not allowed to make further use of it. And that is a remarkable difference between the two parallel stories.

Quite rightly Prof. Noordtzij remarks in the *Bible Student’s Commentary*: “It will not be the force of the blow *but the power of the Word* that matters here.” The word will put its weight in the scales! And of Moses “nothing more and nothing less is asked but to stand in the firm belief that the Word of the LORD, spoken to the rock through his mediation, is so powerful that the rock is forced to open itself and give way to the waters behind it for the benefit of thirsty Israel. Hence it is the faith of Psalm 33:9; Isaiah 55:11; Matthew 17:20.” (Noordtzij.) Again we may see a connection with 1 Corinthians 10:4. “And the Rock was Christ.” And we fully understand that to “only speak a word” (compare Matthew 8:8) must be sufficient.

Moses is put to the test here by the LORD. And you might be inclined to think: What? At his age? Almost one hundred and twenty years! After so many years of uninterrupted faithful service!? What sense is there in testing a man like Moses? Also in view of the wonderful testimony of Numbers 12? Was anyone else permitted to draw so nigh to God and behold the form of YAHWEH? Who was it that stayed on the mountain continuously for forty days and forty nights?

Well, that is all true. Yet it pleases the LORD to test him! And is He not free to do as He pleases? But what could be the reason? Or the aim? To be an office bearer like Moses is a great privilege, seldom bestowed. This man became grey-headed in the LORD's service. However, that does not make such a person incapable of evil; or above making mistakes; or beyond criticism; or immune to temptation. On the contrary! The danger exists that such a person, bearing the office by the grace of God, uses the influence he has gained in the course of the years to further his own standing and honour among men and not exclusively to further the glory of GOD, his Lord and Master. He remains an office bearer, in other words, he is subjected to the Word and to the God of the Word at all times. No matter whether it is, at a certain moment, to his liking or not. Above all he has to show that he, in his old age and with his wide experience, dares to try it with the Word alone. Because the God in Whom he trusts is able to bring about a miracle through just one single word. Without any assistance from a tool, like a rod. The use of a rod could possibly take away the character of a miracle. I have read somewhere, that for example Bedouins – desert dwellers who are expert judges of the landscape – master the art of hitting water from a rock.

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“So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, as He commanded him.” And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock. And again we may say: “As He had commanded them.” But then Moses speaks to the Israelites instead of to the rock. That was not according to God's command!

And he let them have it! “Hear now you rebels; must we bring water for you out of this rock?” Regarding the translation, Prof. Noordtjij writes: “There are three possibilities: ‘shall we’ or ‘must we’ or also ‘can we make flow’. The first one would imply a hesitation by Moses; the second a degree of aversion; the third would testify clearly to doubt. Depending on the choice of one or the other, the entire aspect would change. For that reason I have eventually chosen for the ‘must we’, because this shows the same aversion as can be detected in the ‘rebels’.”

It is Moses who takes the floor here, asking the people's attention to what is *on his mind*. Moses and Aaron put themselves in the limelight drawing the attention to their persons, as the harassed

leaders, badgered year after year by a bothersome people. But now he will let them know!

And we can understand that an office bearer may sometimes feel tempted to react in this way, to vent his resentment. Yet, even if he is a Moses or an Aaron, if it is not expressly commanded, it is wrong. This is not administration of the Word or service to the Word. It is an airing of one's own grievances; an expression of one's grudges. It is a warning example for God's servants of all times who are called to comfort and admonish the congregation in accordance with the Word of the LORD and according to the needs of the congregation. The pulpit and the home visit are definitely not the place to air one's personal sentiments; or to damage the congregation by one's psychological repressions and problems.

“And Moses lifted up his hand and *struck* the rock *twice* with his rod.” Twice! A deliberate disobedience. Someone could remark that somehow Moses obeyed since he solved the problem of the lack of water. But I wonder if a reluctant obedience can really be called obedience.

Yet, water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and also their cattle. The LORD, YAHWEH, shows His mercy. The LORD is compassionate and slow to anger. It is pure grace, because, let us be honest, the people did not deserve it. And as long as this earth exists there will never be an occasion that the people, the church, can say: we have deserved it.

God shows His grace, despite Moses and Aaron. While YAHWEH shows His goodness to the people, Moses wanted to hit them with the rod. A psychologist would say (not that it would require much psychological knowledge): The blow that hit the rock was meant for the people.

But the LORD is angry with His servants. Hear what He says to Moses and Aaron, typifying their act: “Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.” A severe sentence. Too severe? Is the LORD too strict? Can Moses and Aaron be cast aside just like that? Were they, we ask, all of a sudden unsuitable to guide the people into Canaan?

The LORD is very precise when it concerns His Honour and Holiness. He could not be hallowed by His Word alone, as He had intended. Now He has to be hallowed in this verdict on the

behaviour of the minister of the Word. Something had to be done about it. Israel had not assembled to learn to know Moses but to see the revelation of the LORD in His majesty and grace. After all, grace is revealed, “and the Rock was Christ!”

It is a judgment, a punishment. Moses felt it that way. The sentence weighed heavily upon his mind, as we gather from Deuteronomy 3:23. “Then I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying ... I pray, let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan ... But the LORD was angry with me on your account, and would not listen to me. So the LORD said to me: ‘Enough of that! Speak no more to Me of this matter.’” Also compare Psalm 106:32,33.

Numbers 20:13: “This was the water of Meribah, because the children of Israel contended with the LORD, and He was hallowed among them.” In His grace towards the people and the punishment for Moses.

Meribah - Contention, dissidence. A second station bearing that name along the road to Canaan, to keep the memory of this event alive. A bitter memory. And also a glorious one.

For the sake of Christ His Son, He revealed His grace, despite the leaders.

Questions

- 1 Why does this chapter mark the beginning of a new part of Numbers?
- 2 Can you give an outline and assessment of Miriam’s life?
- 3 Compare the events of Numbers 20:2-13 with Exodus 17:1-7. Do you see similarities? Or differences as well? Why must there be a difference?
- 4 How does the new generation present itself by its own words? Was there then no reason for complaint?
- 5 What is your opinion about their view of “the Assembly of the LORD”, as they call it (we would call it church-view)? What is their attitude towards the Lord of the Church?
- 6 When we consider Moses and Aaron, what does the appearance of the glory of the LORD mean here, compared with previous occurrences?

- 7 It is important to carry out the command to the letter. What *does* the LORD say to Moses? What *not*?
- 8 Was Moses, by reason of his advanced age (compare with an aged elder or an emeritus minister today), beyond criticism and not subject to a test of his faith?
- 9 What exactly was Moses' sin? In which way did he fail to honour the LORD before the Israelites?