



Numbers - Chapter Thirteen

Summary of Chapter Thirteen

Israel now stood on the borders of the Promised Land and God instructed Moses to choose twelve leaders, one from each tribe, to travel into the land to determine what it was like and how strong the local people were. So the men journeyed for nearly six weeks into the land and brought back with them samples of the wonderful food that was on offer.

After forty days the twelve spies returned to report to Moses, Aaron and the congregation of Israel. The report of the land was favourable: it was indeed flowing with milk and honey as God had promised. However, they were negative with regard to the strength of the people who lived there, providing a report indicating they were too powerful for Israel to take on. Only Caleb voiced the opinion that it was right to go in and take the land.

III Numbers 13:1-19:22 - Forty Years Near Kadesh

The central section of the Book of Numbers brings together events spanning forty years, when the Israelites lived in and near Kadesh-barnea. Kadesh is a large oasis about 50 miles or 80 km southwest of Beersheba; refer to the map in Introduction document on the web site. It marked the southern limit of the land of Canaan according to Numbers 34:4. So when Israel reached there, they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. However, as a result of the rebellion prompted by the spies' negative reports, God punished the people by making them wait forty years to enter the land. A few important episodes from this period are recounted in Chapters 13-19.

III.a Numbers 13:1-14:45 - The Mission of the Spies and the National Rebellion

The significance of this episode is indicated by its length. It stands alongside the golden calf episode in Exodus Chapters 32-34 as one of the two great apostasies of

the wilderness wanderings. On the former occasion, Israel broke the first two commandments (Exodus 20:3-6) and the Lord threatened to annihilate them and create a new people from Moses' descendants (Exodus 32:9-10). Only Moses' intercession persuaded God to relent (Exodus 32:11-14). This time the people turn their backs on the Promised Land and propose returning to Egypt. Again the Lord threatens their destruction, which is averted only by Moses' intercession.

III.a.i Numbers 13:1-24 - Spies Sent into Canaan

The first part of this chapter is the choosing of twelve leaders, one from each tribe, and their despatch into the Promised Land to spy out its resources and the strength of the local peoples. It recounts what they find.

III.a.i.1 Numbers 13:1-16 - Spies Sent Out

Twelve tribal leaders are selected to go from Paran to spy out the land of Canaan and to bring back a report concerning the quality of the land, as well as the strength and the morale of its inhabitants, probably with the intention of strengthening the faith of the Israelites.

¹ The Lord said to Moses, ² 'Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites; from each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, every one a leader among them.' ³ So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the Lord, all of them leading men among the Israelites.

Numbers 13:1-3

Send men to spy out the land of Canaan. These men were on a reconnaissance mission; to observe the land of Canaan and bring back a report to the nation. However, it is worthwhile to ask if they really needed to go on this mission or if there was useful information they lacked, which would prove vital in taking Canaan.

Which I am giving to the Israelites. The reminder that the land has been promised by God to his people should be noted.

From each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, every one a leader among them. According to Deuteronomy 1:20-25, the plan to send spies did not directly originate with Moses, but came from the people. Moses told them simply to go and take the land, and the people suggested this plan to Moses: <<*All of you came to me and said, 'Let us send men ahead of us to explore the land for us and bring back a report to us regarding the route by which we should go up and the cities we will come to'*>> (Deuteronomy 1:22). Furthermore, in Deuteronomy 1:23 Moses said that he was pleased with the plan. This expedition had an unfortunate result; it may very well be that Moses was wrong in taking this

suggestion from the people. Perhaps the accusations of Miriam and Aaron, petty, false, and self-interested as they were, had made Moses hesitant to take strong leadership.

Since the people of Israel initiated this excursion, perhaps Moses only came to God asking how to send out the spies, not if he should send out the spies. From each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, every one a leader among them describes the method of sending the spies.

According to the command of the Lord. Nevertheless, this was in the plan of God. God used the report of the spies as a test of Israel's faith.

⁴ These were their names: From the tribe of Reuben, Shammua son of Zaccur; ⁵ from the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat son of Hori; ⁶ from the tribe of Judah, Caleb son of Jephunneh; ⁷ from the tribe of Issachar, Igal son of Joseph; ⁸ from the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea son of Nun; ⁹ from the tribe of Benjamin, Palti son of Raphu; ¹⁰ from the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel son of Sodi; ¹¹ from the tribe of Joseph (that is, from the tribe of Manasseh), Gaddi son of Susi; ¹² from the tribe of Dan, Ammiel son of Gemalli; ¹³ from the tribe of Asher, Sethur son of Michael; ¹⁴ from the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi son of Vophsi; ¹⁵ from the tribe of Gad, Geuel son of Machi. ¹⁶ These were the names of the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land. And Moses changed the name of Hoshea son of Nun to Joshua.

Numbers 13:4-16

These were their names: From the tribe of Reuben, Shammua son of Zaccur. One leader was chosen from each tribe except Levi, so that the spies would represent the entire nation.

This list of tribal leaders differs from that in Chapters 1-2; perhaps younger, more energetic leaders were needed for the spying mission. In v.16, it is revealed that Hoshea, meaning 'he saves', is renamed Joshua, or 'Yahweh saves', anticipating the faith he shows in 14:6. Joshua and Jesus are the same name.

III.a.i.2 Numbers 13:17-24 - Mission Accomplished

The spies cover some 220 miles or 354 km from the Negeb or Negev, the arid region south of Beersheba, right up to the north, Rehob, near Lebo-hamath, about 47 miles or 76 km north of Damascus.

¹⁷ Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, 'Go up there into the Negeb, and go up into the hill country, ¹⁸ and see

what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many,¹⁹ and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are un-walled or fortified,²⁰ and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land.’ Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes.

Numbers 13:17-20

See what the land is like. Moses’ direction to the spies was a subtle manifestation of unbelief. Did he really doubt that the land was good? Did he doubt that the land was rich? Did he doubt that there were useful forests? Did it matter if the people were strong or many, or if they lived in strongholds? This was an entirely reasonable pursuit for Moses, and representative of the curiosity of the whole nation. After all, they had never seen this land, nor had any Israelite for more than 400 years since Jacob had led his people into Egypt. God had already told them what the land was like. At Moses’ calling at the burning bush, God told him the land of Canaan was a good and large land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8), and Moses told the people of the goodness of the land (Exodus 13:5).

Whether the people who live in it are strong or weak. It can only be imagined what the people of Israel thought they would do if a negative report came back. Would they resolve to return to Egypt?

Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes is probably late July or early August, a time when crops would be ripening ready for harvest.

²¹ So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, near Lebo-hamath. ²² They went up into the Negeb, and came to Hebron; and Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the Anakites, were there. (Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) ²³ And they came to the Wadi Eshcol, and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them. They also brought some pomegranates and figs. ²⁴ That place was called the Wadi Eshcol, because of the cluster that the Israelites cut down from there.

Numbers 13:21-24

So they went up and spied out the land. As these spies toured the land, they saw some of the people and the produce of the land. This spectacular produce included clusters of grapes so big, they had to be carried between two men on a pole.



The Journey of the Spies

When the Israelites first arrived at Kadesh-barnea, Moses dispatched twelve spies to scout out the Promised Land of Canaan. For forty days the spies travelled throughout Canaan, from the Negeb to Rehob and back again, a distance of over 500 miles or 805 km.

Hebron is about 20 miles or 32 km south of Jerusalem. Theologically it is very significant as the burial place of the patriarchs and their wives, e.g. Genesis Chapter 23) and the place where God had promised the land to Abraham forever (Genesis 17:8).

Zoan is Tanis in the Nile delta. It was the capital of Egypt in the time of the Israelite monarchy, but this verse must be referring to its earlier history. Tanis was founded in the early Second Millennium BC, and excavations at Hebron demonstrate that the first fortified city dates to the Middle Bronze II period, circa 2000-1750 BC. The correspondence of dating is striking.

Eshcol means cluster in Hebrew. The Wadi Eshcol cannot be precisely located, but grapes grow well in the Hebron area.

III.a.ii Numbers 13:25-33 - The Report of the Spies

This report covers the same ground as the narration in vv.17-24. However, whereas the latter is straightforward and factual, the spies' account is lurid and exaggerated, calculated to dismay the hearers. Notice the description of the cities as fortified and very large (v.28), and the long list of inhabitants (vv.28-29).

Archæological excavation has confirmed that Canaanite cities of the Late Bronze Age were large and heavily defended. For example, the city of Hazor consisted of an upper city of 26 acres and a lower city of 160 acres. Estimates put the population at 40,000. Its defence walls were massively built of stone and mud brick; some of the walls measured as wide as 24 feet or 7.3 m.

The spies claim that the land devours its inhabitants (v.32) and, to cap it off, that the tall Anakites are descended from the Nephilim, (refer to the comment made on Genesis 6:4), and therefore must be quite invincible. Given the exaggerated tone of the spies' account, their reference to Nephilim is most likely an expression of their fear and an excuse for their disobedience, rather than an accurate statement indicating that the Nephilim were still living after the flood.

Scholars generally accept that the location of Kadesh is modern Tell 'Ain el-Qudeirat. This site, however, has revealed no remains before the Tenth Century BC. This lack of evidence may be explained in a number of ways:

1. The identification may be incorrect.
2. Earlier remains may not have been discovered yet.
3. Groups on the move like the Israelites may have left no remains to be discovered.

²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land.

²⁶ And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back

word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ And they told him, ‘We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites live in the land of the Negeb; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea, and along the Jordan.’

Numbers 13:25-29

At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. The reconnaissance mission took forty days. When God tested his people, he often used a period of forty, such as forty days or forty years. Such a period of testing also applied to Christ: <<*He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him*>> (Mark 1:13).

We came to the land to which you sent us. They seemed to sense they were more on a mission from Israel than on a mission from God; it might already be sensed that the report will be given according to a human perspective, not according to God’s perspective.

It flows with milk and honey. Unsurprisingly, what God had promised about the land was indeed true.

Yet. At that moment, Moses, and every man of faith in Israel should have cried out and said, “Yet nothing! How can one say, ‘We went to the land, found it good, and God’s promise true,’ and then say, ‘Despite all this . . .?’” Despite God’s faithful promise:

- The people who live in the land are strong.
- The towns are fortified and very large.
- We saw the descendants of Anak there.
- The Amalekites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Canaanites live there; all the land is taken up, there is no room for us!

It is hard to imagine a report more unbelieving and unfaithful to God than this; a report that recognises the faithfulness of God’s promise, the truth of his Word, and yet says, ‘Despite all that.’ Whatever the exact nature of God’s testing in the minds and hearts of the twelve spies during the forty days in Canaan, it is clear that they have, as a whole, failed the test!

We saw the descendants of Anak there. Anak is Hebrew ‘*anaq* and means neck, and the Anakim were famous for their height: <<*It also is usually reckoned as a land of Rephaim. Rephaim formerly inhabited it, though the Ammonites call*

them Zamzummim, a strong and numerous people, as tall as the Anakim. But the Lord destroyed them from before the Ammonites so that they could dispossess them and settle in their place>> (Deuteronomy 2:20-21), and: <<Hear, O Israel! You are about to cross the Jordan today, to go in and dispossess nations larger and mightier than you, great cities, fortified to the heavens, a strong and tall people, the offspring of the Anakim, whom you know. You have heard it said of them, ‘Who can stand up to the Anakim?’>> (Deuteronomy 9:1-2).

³⁰ But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, ‘Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.’

Numbers 13:30

But Caleb quieted the people before Moses. Caleb commanded the people to immediately trust and obey God and to take the land, because God had made them able. For his faithfulness, Caleb would be one of only two men born in Egypt who would be allowed to settle in Canaan. Joshua was the other, for he too elected to go into the land (Numbers 14:5-9). All the rest would perish in the wilderness in the coming years.

Let us go up at once and occupy it. It took great courage for this man to stand against the tide of unbelief, of doubt and despite all negative attitude displayed by the other leaders. Caleb had the spirit of Romans 3:4b: *<<Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true>>.*

³¹ Then the men who had gone up with him said, ‘We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we are.’ ³² So they brought to the Israelites an unfavourable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, ‘The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. ³³ There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.’

Numbers 13:31-33

We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we are. Their unbelieving response was a potent combination of truth, lies, and exaggeration. They were forgetting that it would be God that would overcome their opponents: *<<Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of cedars, and who was as strong as oaks; I destroyed his fruit above, and his roots beneath>> (Amos 2:9).* This statement reflects a lack of faith in the Lord, for the spies were evaluating the situation only from a human

perspective. As a result, they have no courage. By contrast, trust in the Lord would produce genuine courage, as it does when the people of Israel are given a second opportunity to enter and conquer the Promised Land after forty years of wandering in the wilderness, as confirmed by: *<<No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go>>* (Joshua 1:5-9).

Before being too critical of the Israelites here, it should be remembered that Christians today still fear persecution from apparently stronger human and spiritual forces. They too need to reflect on God's Word in such circumstances, especially the words of Paul: *<<Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm>>* (Ephesians 6:10-13). and Jesus stated: *<<I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!>>* (John 16:33).

The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants. Unbelief often presents itself as being 'factual' or 'practical' or 'down to earth.' Yet, the most factual, practical, and down to earth thing a believer can do is trust the Word of the living God. Their unbelief was not according to the facts, but despite the facts. Significantly, two men could see the exact same sights, the same grapes, the same men, the same land, the same cities, one can come away singing in faith, and the other is filled with a sense of certain doom. Ultimately, faith or unbelief does not spring from circumstances or environment, but from the heart, which God must change.