



Numbers - Chapter Twenty

Summary of Chapter Twenty

Following a brief statement that Miriam has died, the account turns to the familiar theme of the Israelites complaining to Moses and Aaron, this time over the lack of water. Moses and Aaron prayed to God, who instructed them to command the rock and water would pour forth. Moses was angry with the people and so he struck the rock, producing the required water. However, Moses had not obeyed the Lord's command, which would cost both men their place in the Promised Land.

The Israelites needed to pass through the land of Edom, the people descended from Jacob's twin brother Edom. Even though Israel clearly stated they would remain on the main highway and would pay for any food or water consumed, Edom sent out a large military force and told the Israelites they could not pass through the land, and so the Israelites turned away.

The Israelites arrived at Mount Hor on the border with Edom. God instructed Moses to take Aaron and his son Eleazar up the mountain for it was time for Aaron to die. On the mountain, Moses stripped the high priest's garments from Aaron and dressed Eleazar in them; thus the office of high priest passed from father to son. Aaron died and the people mourned his passing.

IV Numbers 20:1-21:35 - Marching from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab

After a long time, nearly forty years, of aimless wandering in the wilderness, Israel is ready to move and enter the Promised Land. In this section one may see parallels with the earlier journeys from the Red Sea to Sinai and from Sinai to Kadesh (Exodus Chapters 13-19 and Numbers Chapters 11-12 respectively). Most of the older generation have died out, and the younger ones are now taking over. Although not perfect, the younger generation are not so harsh in

their complaints, nor do they show their fathers' readiness to contend against the leaders of the nation. Now it is those very leaders, Moses and Aaron, who make the most serious mistakes.

IV.a Numbers 20:1-13 - The Waters of Meribah

The Israelites arrive once again in the region of Kadesh and it was here that Moses' sister Miriam died. Complaints about lack of water characterised the journey from the Red Sea to Sinai (Exodus 15:22-27 and 17:1-7), and now they occur again. In both situations Moses struck the rock with his staff. This is what he had been told to do in Exodus 17:6, but on this second occasion he had been told to speak to the rock (v.8). This deviation from carrying out God's instruction led to Moses' being condemned not to bring this assembly into the land (v.12). Since this seems like a minor error, it has been suggested that it was Moses' anger (v.10) to which God took exception. However, v.12 seems to make it clear that it was carelessness in attending to God's command that was the real issue. As the prime mediators of God's laws to Israel, Moses and Aaron had to be exemplary in their obedience. Their failure to follow the divine instruction exactly led to their forfeiting their right to enter Canaan.

Some have suggested that another factor was involved. Since God had told Moses in the earlier incident: **<<I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb>>** (Exodus 17:6a), Moses should have known that God was present here on the rock as well; therefore Moses' speaking to the rock (v.8) would be actually speaking to God, and therefore when Moses struck the rock with his staff twice (v.11), it was a serious manifestation of anger against God, and it is not surprising that God punished Moses severely; refer to the comments made on 1 Corinthians 10:3-4 on the website.

Others hold that the emphasis here is on the difference between what God commanded and what Moses did; usually Moses did just what God commanded him, but not here. It was similar carelessness by Aaron's sons that led to their death in Leviticus 10:1-3. The phraseology of v.12 also echoes that of the spy story, where God righteously complains: **<<How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?>>** (Numbers 14:11b). The people's unbelief led to their exclusion from the land; so did Aaron's and Moses' unbelief.

¹ The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and was buried there.

Numbers 20:1

Kadesh was last mentioned in Numbers 13:26, when the spies returned. The wilderness of Zin was the area first traversed by the spies (Numbers 13:21), so it is just north of Kadesh.

In the first month. The year is not mentioned, but according to Numbers 33:38, Aaron died in the fortieth year after the exodus, and this would fit here.

The death of Miriam is a watershed. She was the sister of Moses, the preserver of his life (Exodus 2:4-8), and a prophetess (Exodus 15:20-21). She was clearly the leading woman of Israel, although her part in the rebellion left a stain on her character (Numbers Chapter 12). Her death was an important demonstration of the fulfilment of what God promised - that the generation which refused to enter Canaan would die in the wilderness, and the new generation would enter instead (Numbers 14:29-34). It has often been noted that the leading woman of the NT was also called Miriam, i.e. the Virgin Mary who gave birth to the Messiah.

² Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. ³ The people quarrelled with Moses and said, 'Would that we had died when our kindred died before the Lord! ⁴ Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? ⁵ Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink.' ⁶ Then Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting; they fell on their faces, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

Numbers 20:2-6

Now there was no water for the congregation. The need was real, but the response of Israel was filled with unbelief and bad attitude, which always go together! Wherever a bad attitude is found, so too a lack of simple, secure trust in God is also to be found.

Would that we had died when our kindred died before the Lord! This is a reference to: <<*Those who died by the plague were fourteen thousand seven hundred, besides those who died in the affair of Korah*>> (Numbers 16:49). Their contention leads them to outrageous statements, words lacking any trust in God. The older generation of unbelief had almost died out, and now the younger generation started to act like the unbelieving generation. They openly doubted God's promise that he would lead them into the Promised Land.

Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Their outrageous accusations continue. The new generation accuses Moses just as the previous generation of unbelief did!

It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates. Their contentions lead them to a stunted vision. Of course the wilderness was not a fruitful land. But they would never make it to the land of rich fruit until they came through the wilderness trusting God.

Moses and Aaron fell on their faces. They realised how serious this was. With this contentious attitude, the new generation would be just as unbelieving, as untrusting in God as the old generation was, and they would likewise perish in the wilderness. The only hope for the nation was their intercession with God and he responded immediately for the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

⁷ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ⁸ Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.

Numbers 20:7-8

Take the staff, and command the rock before their eyes. Specifically, God told Moses to take the staff but not to use it. Water would be provided if Moses would simply command the rock in the presence of the whole congregation.

To yield its water. Back at Mount Sinai, God told Moses to strike the rock and water came forth (Exodus 17:6). But now he was merely to speak to the rock, yet with the staff in his hand. This staff was a symbol of his authority from God.

The prophets would later speak of God providing water for his people: <<*I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water*>> (Isaiah 41:18), <<*The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people*>> (Isaiah 43:20), and: <<*With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn*>> (Jeremiah 31:9). **Jesus would become the living water:** <<*Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water'*>> (John 4:10).

⁹ So Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he had commanded him. ¹⁰ Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, ‘Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?’ ¹¹ Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank.

Numbers 20:9-11

So Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he had commanded him. Moses began by doing exactly what the Lord had told him to do: Take the staff, and gather the people of Israel.

Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock? God did not command him to speak to the nation, and to speak so severely to the nation, yet Moses did so. The ‘we’ either referred to Moses and Aaron or Moses and God, whereas it was God alone who would provide the water from the rock. He alone must be given the glory.

Moses, after doing what God had told him to do, then did something God had not told him to do: he lectured the nation. Worse, he lectured the nation with an attitude of heart he had not shown before, one of anger and contempt for the people of God, with a bitter heart. Before, Moses fell on his face before God when the people rebelled (Numbers 16:4). At Meribah, when the people contended with Moses because there was no water, Moses cried out to the Lord, not against the people (Exodus 15:22-25). When the people did need to be boldly confronted, Moses did it; but without the edge of anger, contempt, and bitterness demonstrated here. There are a hundred explanations for Moses’ frustration here. Psalm 106:32-33 describes how the people provoked Moses, but there is not a single excuse. Worse yet, Moses not only took the rebellion of the people against the Lord too personally, he also over-magnified his own partnership with God: <<*shall we bring water for you out of this rock?*>>. Moses spoke as if he and God would do the job, as if they divided the work fifty-fifty; as if God could not bring water unless he was around to speak to the rock. His lapse into contempt for the people led him into a lapse of subtle pride.

Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. Moses disobeyed God directly, striking the rock instead of speaking to it. Not only did he strike it, but he struck it twice. When he struck the rock at the beginning of the Exodus journey, he only had to strike it once, but now, out of anger and frustration, he did it twice.

Water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. Yet, despite Moses' lapse into sinful attitude and action, God still provided abundantly for the people.

This teaches that God's love for his people is so great that he will use very imperfect instruments, and that the fact God uses someone is no evidence, to themselves or to the people, that they themselves are really right with God or ministering according to God's heart. God would deal with Moses, but the people needed water, and so it was provided. Moses might have come away thinking he did the right thing, and the people probably thought so as well, because what Moses did seemed to work. However, what works is not the best measure of what is right before God.

¹² But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.'

¹³ These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarrelled with the Lord, and by which he showed his holiness.

Numbers 20:12-13

Because you did not trust in me. Moses' sinful attitude and action was rooted in unbelief. He did not really believe God when the Lord told him to speak to the rock and not to strike it.

To show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites. What Moses did was an unholy thing. He made God look no different than an angry man or one of the temperamental pagan gods. He did not reflect the heart and character of God before the people.

Therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them. God's correction of Moses was hard; he would not lead Israel into the Promised Land. That which he dreamed of and felt called to even as a young man in the palaces of Egypt, to deliver God's people, would not be completed. Another person would finish the job. This is only painful because of Moses' faithful heart; an unfaithful man is not pained at the idea that he cannot complete what God had called him to. It might be thought, indeed Israel might have thought, and Moses might have thought, that he was exempt from the decree that all the generation that was of age when the Exodus began would perish in the wilderness. After all, Moses was Moses! But Moses, as great a leader as he was, was still merely a man subject to God and God's law.

This may seem an excessively harsh punishment for Moses. It seems that with only one slip-up, he now had to die short of the Promised Land. However, Moses was being judged by a stricter standard because of his leadership

position with the nation, and because he had a uniquely close relationship with God. It is right for teachers and leaders to be judged by a stricter standard (James 3:1); although it is unrighteous to hold teachers and leaders to a perfect standard. It is true the people's conduct was worse than Moses' but it is irrelevant. Worst of all, Moses defaced a beautiful picture of Jesus' redemptive work through the rock which provided water in the wilderness. Paul makes it clear this water-providing, life-giving rock was a picture of Jesus: *<<I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ>>* (1 Corinthians 10:1-4). Jesus, being struck once, provided life for all who would drink of him (John 7:37). However, it was unnecessary, and unrighteous, that Jesus would be struck again, much less again twice, because the Son of God needed only to suffer once (Hebrews 10:10-12). Jesus can now be approached with words of faith (Romans 10:8-10), as Moses should have only used words of faith to bring life-giving water to the nation of Israel. Moses spoils this picture of the work of Jesus God intended.

Meribah means quarrelling. In Exodus 17:7, Rephidim was also nicknamed Meribah: *<<He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?>>*, linking also with: *<<Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness>>* (Psalm 95:8).

He showed his holiness. At the end of it all, God was seen as holy among the children of Israel. Moses did not hallow God in this incident, but God hallowed himself through the correction of Moses. God will get his glory, God will be hallowed, but will it come through the church's obedience or correction? John's Gospel clearly indicates that God will be given the glory he deserves: *<<Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again'>>* (John 12:28).

IV.b Numbers 20:14-21 - Passage through Edom Refused

According to Genesis 25:24-26, Edom was Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, who later became Israel. This made the Edomites the people with whom Israel felt greatest affinity. Yet the history of Israelite/Edomite relations is one of tension, if not bitter hostility, as this story illustrates. The form of address, 'your brother Israel', is of note.

¹⁴ Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, 'Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the adversity that has befallen us:
¹⁵ how our ancestors went down to Egypt, and we lived in Egypt for a

long time; and the Egyptians oppressed us and our ancestors; ¹⁶ and when we cried to the Lord, he heard our voice, and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt; and here we are in Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. ¹⁷ Now let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, or drink water from any well; we will go along the King's Highway, not turning aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory.'

Numbers 20:14-17

Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom. Israel was now at Kadesh, and they wanted to go through the land of Edom, taking them closer to the Promised Land than they had ever been before, beyond where they failed to go in because of unbelief. This was the fifth stage of the Exodus:

- First, from Egypt to Mount Sinai (Exodus 12:31 to 18:27).
- Second, the sojourn at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1 to Numbers 10:10).
- Third, the first approach to the Promised Land, beginning at Mount Sinai, but being aborted at Kadesh with the refusal to enter the Promised Land in faith (Numbers 10:11 to 14:45).
- Fourth, the 38 years of wandering in the wilderness until the generation of unbelief had died out (Numbers 15:1 to Numbers 20:13).
- Fifth, the second and final approach to the Promised Land (Numbers 20:14 to Joshua 2:24).

Thus says your brother Israel. The nation of Israel was brother to the nation of Edom, because the patriarch Israel, also known as Jacob, was brother to Esau, also known as Edom, as related in Genesis 25:19-34.

Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. In the Second Millennium BC, Edom's main settlements were southeast of the Dead Sea, whereas Kadesh-barnea is a long way west of there, in northern Sinai. This suggests either that the Edomites were living west of the Dead Sea, or that another Kadesh is meant instead of Kadesh-barnea.

The King's Highway is the main trade route from Damascus to Arabia, passing through the Edomite heartlands on the high hills southeast of the Dead Sea. Israel wanted to travel along this road from south to north to bring them to the northern edge of the Dead Sea.



Now let us pass through your land. All Moses asked for on behalf of Israel was the permission to pass through. They expected no provision from the Edomites, because they trusted God to provide all their needs.

¹⁸ But Edom said to him, ‘You shall not pass through, or we will come out with the sword against you.’ ¹⁹ The Israelites said to him, ‘We will stay on the highway; and if we drink of your water, we and our livestock, then we will pay for it. It is only a small matter; just let us pass through on foot.’ ²⁰ But he said, ‘You shall not pass through.’ And Edom came out against them with a large force, heavily armed. ²¹ Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through their territory; so Israel turned away from them.

Numbers 20:18-21

You shall not pass through, or we will come out with the sword against you. This was an unnecessary refusal. It would have cost Edom nothing and been a genuine gesture of goodwill. However, the Edomites, perhaps out of suspicion or fear, refused.

Thwarted by the Edomites, Israel turned away, apparently making their way south toward the Gulf of Aqaba (Numbers 21:4), and then northward through the wilderness east of the King’s Highway; refer also to Deuteronomy 2:1-8. This refusal made the journey of the children of Israel much more discouraging and dangerous (Numbers 21:4-5), but there seems to be no record of God punishing Edom for this sin. In fact, Israel was still commanded to treat the Edomite as a brother (Deuteronomy 23:7). God here showed Israel how to leave the judgement of those who hurt or oppose up to the Lord, and how to love those who have acted as enemies, even if they were brothers: <<*Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling*>> (1 John 2:10), and: <<*The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also*>> (1 John 4:21).

IV.c Numbers 20:22-29 - The Death of Aaron

Aaron’s death fulfils the judgement pronounced on him and Moses in v.12, namely, that they would not live to enter Canaan. Moses prepares to die in Numbers 27:12-23, but his death is not reported until Deuteronomy Chapter 34.

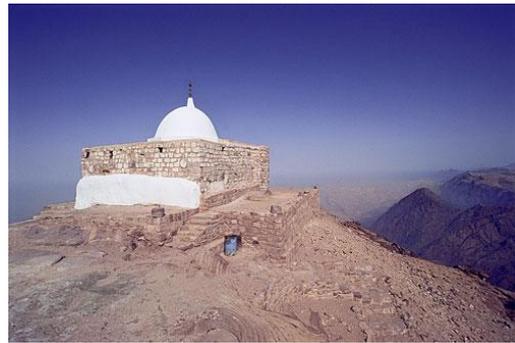
²² They set out from Kadesh, and the Israelites, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor. ²³ Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor, on the border of the land of Edom, ²⁴ ‘Let Aaron be gathered to his people. For he shall not enter the land that I have

given to the Israelites, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah.

Numbers 20:22-24

They set out from Kadesh, and the Israelites, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor. Here a definite marker, indicating the end of the 38 years Israel had been ‘sentenced’ to in the wilderness.

Numbers 33:38 reveals that Aaron died there in the fortieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt. The location of Mount Hor is uncertain; it is probably somewhere north of the Gulf of Aqaba, if that is where the border of the land of Edom ran. ‘The Mount of the Prophet Aaron’ near Petra is the traditional location.



The Shrine of Aaron

There is very little record of what happened during these years; they are compressed into only five and a half chapters, while the single year at Mount Sinai is given almost fifty chapters. This was to demonstrate these years accomplished nothing, except the death of the generation of unbelief. These were just years of surviving in the desert, wasted years, waiting for the ‘old man’ to die: <<Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin>> (Romans 6:6 KJV). During those thirty eight years, there was much movement, but no progress. The Christian walk with God can be the same way.

²⁵ Take Aaron and his son Eleazar, and bring them up Mount Hor;
²⁶ strip Aaron of his vestments, and put them on his son Eleazar. But Aaron shall be gathered to his people, and shall die there.’

Numbers 20:25-26

Gathered to his people. According to OT belief, after death one is reunited with one’s deceased relatives; this expression, noted also in v,24, also occurs in Genesis 25:8, 25:17, 35:29 and 49:33, and Deuteronomy 32:50.

²⁷ Moses did as the Lord had commanded; they went up Mount Hor in the sight of the whole congregation. ²⁸ Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments, and put them on his son Eleazar; and Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. ²⁹ When all the congregation saw that Aaron had died, all the house of Israel mourned for Aaron for thirty days.

Numbers 20:27-29

Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments, and put them on his son Eleazar. The death of Aaron meant that his son must succeed him as high priest. The importance of the high priest as supreme mediator between God and Israel is indicated by his garments; the ritual clothing of Eleazar marks his induction into this highest religious office. Hebrews 4:14-10:18 makes much of the superiority of Christ's high priesthood over Aaron's.

Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. The passing of Aaron is a huge landmark in the history of Israel; he was the first high priest of the nation, and yet not exempt from the decree that his generation would perish in the wilderness.

Aaron died as a great, but complex figure, even more so than Miriam. He was used by God mightily, as Moses' partner (Exodus 4:27-31), to initiate the priesthood (Leviticus Chapter 8), and to plead with Moses for the people (Numbers Chapters 16-17). At the same time, he was instrumental in the grotesque debacle of the golden calf (Exodus Chapter 32), and in challenging Moses' authority with his sister Miriam (Numbers Chapter 12). Aaron's life reveals, among other things, that the office is more important than the person holding that office. Aaron the man was not always worthy of respect, but Aaron the high priest always was worthy of honour, for he was God's high priest: <<*At this Paul said to him, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting there to judge me according to the law, and yet in violation of the law you order me to be struck?' Those standing nearby said, 'Do you dare to insult God's high priest?' And Paul said, 'I did not realise, brothers, that he was high priest; for it is written, "You shall not speak evil of a leader of your people"'>> (Acts 23:3-5).*