

Parashah One Hundred and Nine

Numbers 13:1–33; Joshua 2:1–24; Ephesians 6:10–18

notes by Tim Hegg

In the narrative history of Israel contained in the Torah, only two sins on a national scale are singled out during the wilderness period: the sin of the golden calf (Ex 32–34) and the faithlessness of the scouts described in our *parashah* (cp. Deut 1:22f). The two sins are linked by the fact that in both cases, God threatens the annihilation of Israel (Ex 32:10; Num 14:12), and in both cases the salvation of Israel is mediated through Moses. But they are also linked by the fact that rebellion against God’s word is akin to the sin of idolatry: “For rebellion is as the sin of divination, And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry” (1Sam 15:23). In Deut 1:26, Moses describes the unwillingness of the scouts to go up to conquer the Land as the sin of rebellion: “Yet you were not willing to go up, but rebelled against the command of Adonai your God...”

We may also note the manner in which Num 11–13 are linked thematically: chapter 11 relates the manner in which some of the people complained against God, and suggested that He had not kept His promise to provide and protect the nation; chapter 12 relates the sin of Miriam and Aaron as they foster slander against Moses; and chapter 13 speaks of the “evil report” brought back by the scouts. In all three cases, the people involved were unwilling to accept God’s prescriptions, and evidenced their lack of faith through wrongful speech. “But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man” (Matt. 15:18).

Our *parashah* begins by stating that God commanded Moses to send out scouts. Yet Deut 1:22–23 indicates that the sending of the scouts was done at the request of the people:

Then all of you approached me and said, ‘Let us send men before us, that they may search out the land for us, and bring back to us word of the way by which we should go up and the cities which we shall enter.’ The thing pleased me and I took twelve of your men, one man for each tribe.

The Samaritan Pentateuch actually conflates these two texts, putting Deut 1:20–23a at the beginning of Num 13. The Sages note this apparent discrepancy (that God commands Moses to send the spies, but in Deut 1 Moses lays the responsibility for the mission upon the people’s request) by noting the manner in which our *parashah* begins: “Send out for yourself (שְׁלַח־לְךָ) men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan.” They suggest that though Moses was well aware of God’s promise to give the Land into the hand of Israel (Ex 34:24), God gave him the option of sending scouts in order to encourage the people to trust His promise. Thus, “send for yourself” is understood as “Send, if you please.” They give a parable to explain their interpretation:

Someone wants to buy a donkey, but says that he must first test it. The seller enthusiastically agrees, “May I take it to both mountains and valleys?” “Of course!” Seeing that the seller is so confident of his animal’s prowess, the buyer decides he has nothing to fear and forgoes the test. He buys the donkey and is satisfied. So, too, Moses thought that his willingness to let the people have their way would convince them that they had nothing to fear. He was mistaken; they wanted to hear about the Land from their peers. So he sent the spies. (*Stone Chumash*, p. 799)

If this interpretation has merit, then it might highlight an obvious principle: it is often easier to believe what we can “see” rather than to trust the word of God. As mortals, we struggle to accept the plain word of God, thinking that we need additional confirmation in order to believe it. Faith, on the other hand, accepts God’s word as already fully confirmed. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1).

Twelve men who were the leaders among their tribal clans are chosen for the mission. These were not the same as the tribal chiefs (Num 1:3ff, cp. 7:12ff), but were apparently those men best suited for the mission, and those who were considered by each tribe as able to represent their interests. The only two that are known elsewhere in the Tanach are Caleb, from the tribe of Judah and Joshua, Moses’ assistant, from the tribe of Ephraim. We receive the notice in our *parashah* that Joshua’s given name was Yehoshua (יהושע), listed as Hoshea (הושע) in v. 8. Hoshea is a shortened form of Yehoshua, and we discover other shortened forms as well in the list: Palti (פַּלְטִי v. 9) is short for Paltiel (פַּלְטִיאֵל), while Gaddiel (גַּדִּיאֵל) is the full form of the shortened Gad (גַּד) or Gaddi (גַּדִּי), in the same way that Daniel (דַּנְיֵאל) is the full form of Dan (דָּן). We need not think that this was the occasion on which Moses changed Hoshea’s name to Joshua. He was known by this name previously (e.g., Ex 17:9ff). Rather, in an official listing of the scouts and their tribal affiliations, Joshua’s given name is noted, as well as the name by which he was commonly called. We may also note that the “tribe of Joseph” (v. 11) is fully represented since Gaddi was from Manasseh and Joshua from Ephraim.

Moses’ instructions to the scouts involved a number of things. First, they were to go into the Negev, the southern desert region of the Land, and then into the hill country that rises out of the desert as one travels north. Secondly, they were to assess the strength of the people, including their military strength and number. Thirdly, they to discover whether the towns were unwallled villages, or fortified cities. Fourthly, they were to see if the Land was arable, and whether it was suitable for growing crops, including orchards. And finally, since it was the time of the year when grapes were ripe (which would have been August to September), they were instructed to bring back what produce they found as proof if the Land was, in fact, able to sustain abundant crops.

The scouts began in the wilderness of Zin which was the northern part of the Negev, and went as far as Rehob (רְהוֹב), which is most likely the city situated near the Jordan river, roughly two-thirds of the way north between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Thus, the scouts traversed the majority of the Land from south to north. The first entered Hebron, populated by the descendants of Anak, and ruled by Arbah, from which the city derived the name *Kiriat-Arbah*, or “city of Arbah” (cf. Joshua 14:15). Three sons of Anak are named (see also Joshua 15:14; cp. Judges 1:20) whom Caleb eventually defeated in the conquest, and therefore Hebron was awarded to him as plunder of war. In Deut 1:28; 9:2, the “sons of Anak” are also called “sons of the Anakim,” denoting that they were people of large stature, or giants. The first people whom the scouts saw in the Land were those who appeared impossible to defeat in war.

When the scouts came to the valley (literally “wadi,” וַדִּי) of Eschol (which means “cluster” and was north of Hebron on the way to Jerusalem), they found grapes in abundance, and cut a branch to carry back. The grapes, along with the figs and pomegranates they also had gathered, were so large, and the clusters so heavy, that it required two men to carry them. Grape clusters alone could weigh eight to ten pounds, and even today some grapes produced in this region are as big as plums. Indeed, Gen 49:11 speaks of tethering an animal to the vine, indicating its strength and size. It may be that the cluster was gathered on the return trip, since it seems unreasonable that the scouts

would carry the produce on their trip to the north. Their reconnaissance took 40 days, indicating that they made a full assessment of the Land.

On their return to Kadesh, where Israel had encamped, the scouts made their report (vv. 25f). The report that the Land does “flow with milk and honey,” and they produce the fruit as evidence. The phrase “flowing with milk and honey” is an idiom for abundance (eg. Ex 3:8, 17). “Honey” may indicate the presence of wild bees (necessary for orchards) or to dates (cp. Joel 4:18, where the hills “flow with milk”), for the sweetness of dates was compared to honey. Milgrom suggests that the phrase may mean “fruits as pure as milk and as sweet as honey.” Whatever the exact meaning, the point was clear: the Land was able to produce abundant crops, and was therefore desirable.

Yet though the Land was desirable, it appeared beyond the reach of Israel’s fighting forces. The scouts immediately communicate the caveat: the people are strong, the cities large and fortified, and the Anakim, considered unconquerable, reside there. Once the people heard this, they lost heart. Regardless of the Land’s goodness, it was out of the reach of the agrarian people of Israel.

Caleb steps forward to quiet the agitated people, and gives his report (v. 30): “We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it.” But the other scouts had already dissuaded the people. Their negative assessment is noted by the word *וְעַתָּה* (*‘fes*, “in the end,” translated “nevertheless” in the NASB) in v. 28, for in giving an unbiased report, there was no need to use a negative word that implied a contradiction to their previous optimism (so Ramban). The consensus of the scouts was that the value of the Land did not outweigh the cost in obtaining it. But more than that, their perspective left out any sense that God would fulfill His word, that He would give them the Land and subdue their enemies before them. Their assessment, that Israel was no match militarily for the warriors residing in the Land, was doubtlessly true; “they are too strong of us” (v. 31). Had they forgotten that God had promised to fight for them against their enemies? Indeed, they lacked the faith to count God as their overwhelming advantage in war. As a result, they emphasize what appears as the greatest obstacle—the Nephalim (giants) reside there, and give an “evil report” (*הַדְּבָרָה*, *debbah*) to the people. The word *debbah* in this case, as often (cf. Jer 20:10; Ezek 36:3; Ps 31:14; Prov 10:18; 25:10), denotes something that is contrary to what is right. What the scouts reported was correct, but the manner in which they reported it was fashioned to persuade the people against obeying God.

The connection of our *parashah* to the *haftarah* is obvious, but contrastive. While the leaders of the tribes returned an evil report in the manner in which they communicated their lack of faith, Rahab, hides the spies, protecting them with her words, and gains divine protection and deliverance. Her faith (cf. Heb 11:31) is in stark contrast to the lack of faith on the part of the scouts in our *parashah*, even as does the faith of Caleb and Joshua in our text.

In selecting the Apostolic portion for this *parashah*, we may make a midrashic connection: the battle each of us faces as we strive to live righteously is one fought against “giants,” too formidable for our own strength. But clothed in the “armor of God,” we are able to gain victory, and therefore to receive from Him the blessings He has promised. “But put on the Lord Yeshua Messiah, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Rom 13:14).