

Good spies. Bad guys.

From Sinai to Canaan

Study 4

Warmup



Every five years, the Australian government conducts a national census, to collect relevant and useful data about its citizens. If the census was held tonight, how would you describe the composition (eg persons, occupations, religion) of your current household? (The next Census in Australia will be held on Tuesday, 10th August 2021).

Introduction

The fourth book of the Bible, the Book of Numbers, is so called because it contains two censuses – one at the start of the book, when the Israelites were still camped at Mt Sinai, and a second at the end of the book (Numbers 26), when their children, after 40 long and miserable years, are counted just prior to their entry to the Promised Land.

Halfway through Chapter 10 of the book, the Israelites were instructed to decamp from Mt Sinai, where they had been stationed for about eleven months. Two months prior to that, they had departed Egypt. As Chapter 13 opens, nearly another month has elapsed, and they are told to undertake a reconnaissance mission of Canaan.

The book of Numbers is full of stumblings and bumbings, some of which Paul picks up in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 10), to warn them about not repeating the same mistakes. This chapter and this Book of Numbers then becomes a very sober and cautionary tale for all Christians.

Read Numbers 13:1-33

¹ The Lord said to Moses, ² "Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders." ³ So at the Lord 's command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran. All of them were leaders of the Israelites.

⁴ These are 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 Manasseh (a tribe of Joseph), 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 Maki. ¹⁶ These are the names of the men Moses sent to explore the land. (Moses gave Hoshea son of Nun the name Joshua.)

¹⁷ When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, "Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. ¹⁸ See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. ¹⁹ What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? ²⁰ How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees on it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land." (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.) ²¹ So they went up and explored the land from the Desert of Zin as far as Rehob, toward Lebo Hamath. ²² They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmi, the descendants of Anak, lived. (Hebron had been built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) ²³ When they reached the Valley of Eshcol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs. ²⁴ That place was called the Valley of Eshcol because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut off there. ²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.



²⁶ They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. ²⁸ But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan." ³⁰ Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." ³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." ³² And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. ³³ We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

First Impressions

Record some of your own first impressions about the passage you have just read.

Question 1

(v1-15) What strikes you as being helpful and agreeable in this command to send one representative from each tribe on the spying mission?

Note: In the list of spies, there are two men who represent the house of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh), and none that represent the house of Levi. The Levites would not be receiving a separate land parcel in Canaan, but would live and serve in the towns of the other eleven tribes.

Question 2

(v17-20) What do you think of Moses' list of questions? Would you have added anything? Would you have included this question: 'See whether the people who live there are strong or weak'?

Question 3

(v26f) Evaluate the spies' report. What are the positives? What are the negatives?

Comment: It seems that in their mission, the twelve spies had encountered a race of giants. When Moses (in the Book of Deuteronomy) recounts the battle against some of the enemy kings, he mentions that the bed of one of those kings, Og, measured 4 metres long and 1.8 metres wide (Deut 3:11). The spies' observation of feeling like grasshoppers (v33) may therefore not be mere hyperbole. Another opinion that has been offered is that the 10 spies are exaggerating their story by likening the people to the ancient Nephilim in order to strengthen their case. The point does not need to be settled.

Question 4

What makes Caleb's speech so impressive? (v30) See also 14:6-9.

Why do you think that Joshua and Caleb's failed to persuade the Israelites?

Comment: Caleb, the leader representing the tribe of Judah, was not afraid to run against giants. It seems like the Judah-men are never afraid. In several hundred years on from this story, David, another in the line of Judah, would run against the giant Goliath. And further in Israel's history, another One from the line of Judah would run against things much bigger, and prevail. And the apostle John would live to hear these words: "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and the seven seals" (Revelation 5:5).

Question 5

As Chapter 14 explains, part of the negativity of the other 10 spies was their fear that their children would become enslaved in Canaan (14:3). What is wrong with this sort of thinking?

Question 6

The after-effects of this sad scenario are that:

- (1) the Israelites grumbled further (14:1-3)
- (2) the grumblers wanted to return to Egypt (14:4)
- (3) the grumblers spoke of stoning Moses and Aaron (14:10)
- (4) the Lord was angered by His people's lack of faith (14:12)
- (5) the Israelites forfeited their chance to advance into Canaan (14:40-45)
- (6) the whole nation was condemned to wander in the desert for 40 years (14:34)
- (7) of all the Israelites present on this occasion, only Joshua and Caleb would enter the Promised Land (14:30)
- (8) the 10 faithless men were struck down by a plague (14:36-38)

Paul warned the Corinthians to learn from the mistakes of these Israelites (1 Cor 10:6,11), but also reminded them that God would help them to stand firm. "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." (1 Cor 10:13).

Paul said to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (4:4). Keeping in mind that Paul wrote this epistle from prison, discuss how he availed himself of God's power and resisted the temptation to grumble, or to "return to Egypt".

Conclusion

What do you see in M C Escher's famous painting called 'Puddle'?

We often sing that hymn: 'Guide me O Thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak, but Thou art mighty. Hold me with Thy powerful hand.' Underline a few words and phrases in these lines that remind us to be humble.

