

Rebellion in the Wilderness (Again): Numbers 10-21

1. Departing from Sinai, en route to the Promised Land.

- The narrative in the Book of Numbers begins at Sinai and spans the 40 years of wilderness wanderings before Israel's entry into the Promised Land.
- Num 10-20 tells the story of Israel's departure from Mt. Sinai and its wilderness journey from Sinai to Moab. At the outset, Israel celebrates its first Passover in remembrance of the Exodus (9:1-14), and it is stressed how God travels with His people, guiding them in their journeys by means of a cloud by day and fire by night, which rest over the Tabernacle when they're camped and lift when it's time to move from one place to another (9:15-23).
- Literary features of Num 10-20: speeding up of narrative time, as well as a return to narrative-dominated discourse and to the redactional combination of different sources:

Narrative Material	Legal Material
10: Trumpets and departure from Sinai (JP)	
11: Rebellion of the people with regard to their lot in general and with regard to only eating manna all the time; establishment of council of elders (E)	
12: Rebellion of Aaron and Miriam, competitive for Moses' authority; Miriam struck with leprosy (E)	
13-14: Twelve spies investigate the Promised Land, leading to rebellion over fear of the problems in settling there; Caleb and Joshua emerge as leaders of the next generation (JP)	
	15: Sacrificial laws (P)
16: Rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, competitive for Aaron's authority (JP)	
17: Choice of Aaron as head of line of high priests confirmed through budding staff (P)	
	18: Responsibilities of Aaronic priests and Levites (P)
	19: Red heifer rite (P)
20: Rebellion of Moses, burial of Miriam, and death of Aaron (P)	

2. Tales of Rebellion in Numbers 10-20

The key theme in Num 10-20 is rebellion. These tales follow the same pattern established in Exodus 14-17 (i.e., in the incidents en route from the Reed Sea to Sinai):

1. People complain because of hardship of life in the desert, often with a negative appeal to the Exodus, which they cite as a bad decision to leave a comfortable, settled life in Egypt for dangers and discomfort and uncertainty in the wilderness.
2. In response, God punishes them in some way (e.g., plague); often Moses intercedes to lessen the punishment, citing the Exodus in a positive way.
3. In a number of cases, the story of rebellion ends with an etymological aetiology of the place name at which the rebellion happened.

Within Numbers, this pattern is established by the first tale (11:1-3), which is essentially a skeletal structure of the rebellion tale in its basic structure:

Now when the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, the LORD heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the LORD burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire abated. So that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned against them.

This is followed by a series of variations on this theme:

- Israelites (11:4ff): some complain about eating manna all the time; God gives them quails but sends a plague upon them nonetheless.
- Aaron and Miriam (12): they complain about Moses' Cushite wife, in part out of jealousy over his claim to prophetic authority; God strikes Miriam with leprosy; Moses intercedes for God to heal her. The compromise is that she has it for 7 days and must live outside the camp for these days.

- Israelites (13-14): after spies are sent to investigate the Promised Land and see the people already settled there, their reports lead to complaining based on fears over the problems and dangers that will be involved in settling there, with all by Caleb (leader of Judahites) and Joshua (leader of Ephaim) succumbing to rebellion. God again considers destroying them and beginning anew with Moses; Moses intercedes on behalf of Israel, and God decides on another punishment: Caleb and Joshua will enter the Promised Land, but the rest of the generation will die before entry into it.
- Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (16-17): these Levites challenge the authority of Moses and Aaron's status as high priest; Moses arranges a test and God shows the chosenness of Aaron as high priest.
- Israelites and Moses (20): Israelites complain because of thirst; Moses asks God what to do. He doesn't follow God's instructions with regard to how precisely to get water from the rock (see below), so he is punished by being denied entry into the Promised Land.

In Exodus, these tales of rebellion culminate in the story of the Golden Calf (Ex 32) and the reestablishment of the newly made, newly broken covenant at Sinai. Just as the Golden Calf incident occurred just after the establishment of the Sinaitic covenant, so the first rebellion in Numbers (11:1-3) ironically occurs right after the Passover, when God's salvific activity should be fresh in the Israelites' minds!

In Numbers, the narrative setting is different: the covenant and priesthood have been established through revelations during the year that Israel spent at Mt. Sinai and are in effect. Esp. as Num 10 and follow represent are the reader's first chance to see how this system works in practice, it is striking that the redactors of the Pentateuch do not paint an idealized picture of these institutions. Rather, Numbers uses rebellion tales to tell of the continued challenges raised by a mutual relationship between the all-powerful God and His chosen – yet all too human – people.

Whereas Num 1-9 had developed the image of God as transcendent and “wholly Other” (consistent with the theology of the P source), the rest of Num uses the trope of rebellion to explore the paradox of a holy and “wholly Other” divine choosing to interact so closely and caringly with imperfect mortal creatures and, in the process, draws on the anthropomorphic approach to divinity in J and E (e.g., as angry, but also warmly parental) to develop a poignant image of God as deeply committed to being immanent in His Creation and caring and guiding for those whom He created, even despite the difficulties. That the elevation of Israel is subordinated to this aim shows the importance of this concern to the redactors; their aim is not to celebrate Israel, but to celebrate God.

3. Rebellion Tales in Sources Critical Perspective: Doublets in Exodus 17-18 and Numbers 10-20

The similarity between some of the rebellion tales in Exodus and Numbers go beyond a common narrative pattern. Three of the tales are doublets of stories told in Ex 16-18.

The Documentary Hypothesis explains this as the combination of different versions of the same story from different sources:

Egypt to Sinai	Exodus	Source	Sinai to Canaan	Numbers	Source
Moses and his father-in-law	18:1-27	E	Moses and his father-in-law	10:29-32	J
Murmuring of the people	16:1-12	P	Murmuring of the people	11:1-6	E
Quails and manna	16:13-35	P	Quails and manna	11:4-35	E
Water from rock at Meribah	17:1-7	J and E	Water from rock at Meribah	20:2-13	P

4. Rebellion Tales in the Redacted Whole

Intertwined with the rebellion tales is a progressive exploration of the nature of authority:

Leadership - Intertwined with the rebellion tale in Num 11:4-35 (Quails) is an exploration of the pressures and difficulties put on Moses by ruling alone; just as the Golden Calf incident was answered by the creation of the priesthood and sacrificial system to mediate proper sacrifice, so the incident with the Quails leads to the creation of a council of elders.

Prophetic authority – Eldad and Medad in Num 11(positively) and Miriam and Aaron in Num 12 (negatively)

Priestly authority – Korah, Dathan, and Abiram

Political/military authority – Caleb and Joshua emerge in Num 13-14 as the next generation of leaders, due to their steadfast belief in God's promises about the Promised Land, even after glimpsing its inhabitants.

EXAMPLE: THE TWO INCIDENTS AT MERIBAH	
Ex 17 (JE)	Num 20 (P)
Introductory itinerary notice (Ex 17:1a) "From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim."	Introduction itinerary notice (Num 20:1): "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."
Problem and people's response (Ex 17:1b): No water. "The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"	Problem and people's response (Num 20:2-5): "The people quarreled 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."
Moses' response = consult God (Ex 17:4): " ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."	Moses and Aaron's response = consult God (Num 20:6): " 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."
God's solution (Ex 17:5-6a): " ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. <u>Strike the rock, and water will come out of it</u> , so that the people may drink."	God's solution (Num 20:7-8): " ⁷ The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ⁸ Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and <u>command the rock before their eyes to yield its water</u> . Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.
Implementation of solution (Ex 17: 6b): "Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel" – no complications.	Implementation of solution (Num 20:9-12): "...Moses lifted up his hand and <u>struck the rock twice with his staff</u> ; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. 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, <u>therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.</u> "
Aetiology of place name (Ex 17:7): "He called the place Massah ^a and Meribah, ^b because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"	Aetiology of place name (Num 20:13): "These are the waters of Meribah, ^a where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and by which he showed his holiness."
Subsequent narrative about interactions with other nations: Success = Amalek attacks Israel and is defeated	Subsequent narrative about interactions with other nations: Failure = passage through Edom refused