

# Exegetical Notes on Numbers 11

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The reading from the Old Testament which is assigned to the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost in Series B of Lutheran Worship consists in a total of sixteen verses of chapter 11 of the Book of Numbers, namely, verses 4-6, 10-16, and 24-29.

## THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SETTING

The Book of Numbers is called in addition, quite correctly, the Fourth Book of Moses. Moses completed the volume late in the year 1407 B.C. (as demonstrated in *Isagogical Notes on the Pentateuch*). More specifically, however, chapters 10:11-14:45 (as well as part of the general itinerary of Israel in the wilderness in chapter 33) were written during the intermediate months of 1445 B.C., which is to say between May and September of the year following the exodus on 15 Nisan (March-April) in 1446 B.C. (*ibid.*).

Chapters 10:11-12:16 relate the events which occurred to the people of Israel on the way from Mount Sinai, where they had spent a year receiving the divine constitution of the new nation, to Kadesh-Barnea, where the major rebellion occurred which necessitated a full forty years between the exodus and the entrance into Canaan (as is recounted in chapters 13 and 14). The two instances of querulous ingratitude related in Numbers 11 (in verses 1-3 and verses 4-35) set the stage for the major rebellion in Kadesh-Barnea. Intervening is the account in Numbers 12 of the rebellion of Miriam and Aaron in particular at Hazeroth.

It appears, actually, that all of the developments recorded in Numbers 11 took place in the same location, even though the name "Taberah" occurs in verse 3 and the name "Kibroth-Hattaavah" appears in verses 34-35. There is, firstly, no mention of a move to a new campsite until the end of the chapter (in verse 35). Nor, secondly, does any campsite intervene in the general itinerary of Numbers 33 between the Wilderness of Sinai and Kibroth-Hattaavah (verse 16). The name "Taberah" applied, in all likelihood, only to the one end of the campsite which was destroyed by the fire dispatched by the Lord as an initial warning of worse to come if carping continued in Israel (verse 1). It was only this one specific sector of the site which was called "Taberah" (which is to say "Burning") by virtue of the burning which consumed the tents which had been pitched within its confines (verse 3).

The area as a whole, on the other hand, was called thenceforth "Kibroth-Hattaavah" (which is to say "Graves of Craving") by virtue of the events, recorded in verses 4 and following, which eventuated in the plague which killed a great many of the people craving meat (verses 33-34). Such a name would, after all, necessarily have to encompass, not only the whole encampment of Israel per se, but also the environs of the camp in which the graves thereby commemorated would have been dug (since the law allowed, of course, no burials within the camp). The location of all the action in Numbers 11 was, then, a distance of but three days by foot from Mount Sinai (Numbers 10:33), where Israel had accepted with solemn self-assurance the terms of the special bond with the Lord which He had formulated and offered her (in Exodus 34: 1-8, within the context of Exodus 19-40, the Book of Leviticus, and Numbers 1:1-10:10).

**NUMBERS 11: 4-6**  
**A LITERAL TRANSLATION WITH COMMENTS**

4. But the mixed people which were within it were filled with desire, and then also the sons of Israel again wept and then they said: "O that someone would let us to eat meat!"

The initial conjunction is best rendered "but" in this case. The weak waw is used before a noun at the beginning of a clause, in accordance with its most common use, with adversative force (listed as IV.D.1.a. in *Classical Hebrew and the English Language*), to make the transition from the first section of Numbers 11 (verses 1-3) to the second section (verses 4-35). The rationale is the contrast between, on the one hand, the chastening which the Lord had already meted out in the sector of the camp called "Taberah" (for this very reason) and yet on the other hand, the continuing impenitence which erupted again so quickly in the ingratitude expressed in the verses which follow.

The "mixed people" represents the hapax legomenon 'asaphsoph. Deriving from the root 'sp (which means most basically "gather" (BDB, 62a-63a), *A Hebrew and English Lexicon* defines the masculine noun as "collection" or "rabble" (BDB, 63b). The reference is clearly to the people who are called a "great mixture" (using a completely different root) in Exodus 12:38 and who probably come up again in Deuteronomy 29:10 as hewers of wood and drawers of water for the people of Israel themselves. For here again in Numbers 11:4 this mixed crowd is distinguished from the Israelites themselves, who, however, were unfavorably influenced by the sentiments of these aliens. They were evidently a mixture of non-Israelites residing in Egypt (perhaps including Egyptians themselves of low rank) who had decided to leave Egypt with the Israelites in hopes of sharing in the bounty which the God who had shown His powers in the ten plagues could be expected to bestow on His special people.

The word "it" represents a masculine singular pronominal suffix which refers to Israel as a corporate entity.

The phrase "filled with desire" renders the hithpael of 'wh followed by a feminine noun derived from the root. The basic significance of the root is "desire" (BDB, 16a). The hithpael strengthens the significance to a longing which is almost always sinful (*ibid.*). One of the ways, in addition, of intensifying the force of a verb is to subjoin a cognate noun in some accusative relation. Here, specifically, the feminine noun ta'awah, meaning "desire" (BDB, 16b), follows the third common plural of the perfect aspect of the verb. The plural is predicated here of a singular noun by virtue of the "mixed people" consisting in many and various individuals who were filled with sinful desire.

The phrase "again wept" represents an example of an idiomatic use of shubh before waw and another verb. The idea is that the subject involved "returned" to doing the action indicated by the second verb.

The phrase "O that" represents an idiomatic use of the interrogative pronoun mi (meaning "who?") to introduce a wish expressed by the imperfect (BDB, 566b). Thus, an overly literal rendition here of mi followed by the hiphil of 'kl would be this question: "Who will cause us to

eat meat?" The Israelites had, to be sure, herds of livestock with them, but they needed the females as a continuing source of dairy products and they needed the males to serve as the victims of sacrifice and as the sires of the stock which they intended to raise in Palestine. The craving for the meat which was lacking in the desert had already surfaced in Exodus 16 before Israel had even reached Mount Sinai, a year before the events unfolding in Numbers 11; the meat, evidently, which the Israelites enjoyed in Egypt had ordinarily figured in stews.

5. "We remember the fish which we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic-bulbs."

The phrase "used to eat" represents a use of the imperfect aspect to indicate habitual action in the past (listed as II.B.2. A.1.c.(2.b.) in CHEL). This usage flows from the basic nature of the imperfect as the aspect (rather than tense) of the verb which stresses incompleteness.

All of the various foods mentioned in this verse have, indeed, been plentiful and commonly enjoyed in Egypt from ancient times down to the present. None of them, on the other hand, was then obtainable in the Sinai Desert. They constitute a list of foods now missed by the Israelites in addition to the "meat" mentioned in the previous verse (which, however available in Egypt, would never have been as common as these foods).

The phrase "for nothing" renders the substantive *hinnam*, which derives like the noun *hen*, meaning "grace" (BDB, 336a-b), from the root *hnn*, which signifies "be gracious" (BDB, 335b-336a). Thus, *hinnam* is used in the accusative as an adverb to mean "grais" (BDB, 336b). The memory of free fish in Egypt was, of course, much worse than an idle exaggeration. Fish were, to be sure, plentiful in the Nile and could either be caught directly or purchased cheaply from others. The Israelites, however, are ungratefully ignoring, not only the time or money (however minimal) required to enjoy fish in Egypt, but, much more gravely, the grinding toil required of them as slaves in Egypt, who were therefore paying dearly for whatever delights of the palate they managed to obtain there.

6. But now our soul is dried up. There is nothing at all except for this manna before our eyes."

In the phrase "this manna before our eyes" the definite article attached to the first noun is construed as demonstrative (in accord with the original force of the article), and the second noun is understood as an accusative of specification (listed as III.A.C.8.a. in CHEL). Here the ingratitude of Israel reaches its culmination with an insulting reference to the manna which was the undeserved gift of God. The inclusion of the word "eyes" to the complaining words of the Israelites implies that they were voicing these thankless sentiments even as they were looking at the free gift of God lying on the ground in the morning or already gathered and prepared in the several ways described verse 8.

## **NUMBERS 11: 7-9**

### **COMMENTS**

In verses 7-9 Moses summarizes and slightly supplements the data which he had already bequeathed to future generations in his record of the initial appearance of the miraculous manna in Exodus 16. The repeated stress here on the free bounty and comely tastiness of the manna accentuates once again the perversity of the people of Israel. In line with the general propensity of sinners, they tire of the bounty which God has freely given them and lust after things instead more stimulating to the senses.

## **NUMBERS 11: 10-12**

### **A LITERAL TRANSLATION WITH COMMENTS**

10. And then Moses heard the people weeping throughout its families, each man at the door of his tent, and then the anger of the LORD burned hotly, while also in the eyes of Moses it was evil.

The word "its" represents a masculine singular pronominal suffix which refers to Israel as a corporate entity.

The word "hotly" represents the masculine substantive m'dh, which can, indeed, be found in the Hebrew Bible with its original nominal significance of "muchness" and so "might" or "abundance" (BDB, 547a). Almost always, however, it has come to be used adverbially in Classical Hebrew to mean "greatly" or "very" (BDB, 547 a-b). In this case it serves to intensify the action of the verb chrh, which signifies "burn" or, more specifically, "be kindled" (BDB, 354a). The English idiom, in consequence, requires some such adverb as "hotly" to serve the same purpose.

The words "while also" represent the weak waw before a noun introducing a new independent clause. In the distinctive use of the waw the clause which follows contrasts in some way with the clause which precedes but less strongly than in the adversative use (listed as IV.D.1.b. in CHEL). Here the rationale is simply the change from the Lord to Moses as the one resenting the complaints of the people of Israel.

11. And so Moses said to the LORD: "Why hast Thou caused evil to

Thy servant indeed, why have I not found grace in Thine eyes so to place the burden of all this people upon me?"

Moses, despite his frustration with the carping of Israel, nevertheless follows the lead of the people into sin whom he has been called to lead (by teaching and example) to faith in the Lord. In line, again, with the usual recourse of human sinners (including even pastors), he too joins in the criticism of God, in his own distinctive way. At the same time, however, one must observe that Moses complains, not to others (much less in unbelief), but rather to God Himself in a prayer which he concludes by throwing himself upon the grace of God.

12. "Was it I that conceived all this people? Was it I that brought it forth, that Thou shouldst say to me, Carry it in thy bosom, as the foster-father carries the suckling,' to the land which Thou didst swear to its fathers?"

The phrase "was it I that" in the translation reflects the way in which Moses twice, not only uses the first person pronoun (which would not really be grammatically necessary at all), but also places it in an emphatic position at the beginning of two questions, immediately following the two different interrogative particles. The independent interrogative 'im usually expects, as here, a negative answer in the same way as the Latin interrogative num (BDB, 50b).

The term "foster-father" represents the qal active participle masculine singular of 'mn, the root with sureness as its core idea (BDB, 52b-53a, which fails, however, to enunciate the central conception of the data cited), from which the most widespread common noun in the world derives, "amen" (which the Blessed Reformer of the Church explained accordingly in the Small Catechism). Some versions translate with "nurse," which could, indeed, be appropriate to the two feminine occurrences of the participle (in Ruth 4:16 and 2 Samuel 4:4). The significance, however, of the masculine participle as "foster-father" appears with crystalline clarity from the other four occurrences in the Hebrew Bible: Esther 2:7, where Mordecai is raising the orphan Esther; 2 Kings 10 (1 and 5), which assumes the practice of princely fosterage; and Isaiah 49:23, where the kings who are to be foster-fathers are distinguished from the queens who are to be nurses. The connection with the root is that a foster-father is one who ensures (makes sure) the welfare of the foster-child.

## **NUMBERS 11: 13-29**

### **COMMENTS**

In verses 13 and 14 Moses invents his own problems (as Christians and even pastors often do), and in verse 15 he then proceeds to treat God as the source of these problems. For Moses had never been called by God to provide the people with meat, and he already had the authorization to delegate his administrative responsibilities to others, as occurs already with the judges appointed, by the counsel of Jethro, in Exodus 18 (verses 13-26).

In response, nevertheless, to His treatment by Moses, God treats the prophet with paternal patience and promises to empower with special clarity seventy more assistants under his authority (verses 16-17). He even undertakes, as well, to provide his thankless people with a miraculous surfeit of the meat which is now so coveted by them (verses 18-23). The Lord was speaking to Moses in verses 16-23 in the place in which He usually communicated with him during the forty years in the wilderness, which is to say in the tabernacle, while the theophanic cloud was still hovered over the tabernacle for all on the outside to see.

In verse 25, however, the object is to stage a public exhibition of divine communication to Moses and, through him, to the seventy special assistants to his administration. Evidently, then, it is at the door of tabernacle that the Lord speaks to Moses from within the theophanic cloud, which has descended thence from its usual position above the sanctuary. The Lord who spoke to Moses ordinarily in the tabernacle, and clearly the Lord in the theophanic cloud, was specifically the Deus Revelans et Revelatus, which is to say the Second Person of the Holy Trinity who, according to so many promises of God, was one day to become incarnate as the Messiah in order to redeem all mankind by His suffering unto death from the wrath of God justly aroused by human sin. The ruach who already rested with many special gifts upon Moses, and who now was also to be seen by Israel (by means of this public display) as resting with some of the same

special gifts upon the seventy assistants of Moses, was clearly, the Holy Spirit "who proceedeth from the Father and the Son" and "who spake by the prophets" (Nicene Creed).

In the case of the seventy, however, the special gift of prophesying (which is to say speaking by divine inspiration) was not a continuing office such as Moses held. The last two words of the Hebrew Text of verse 25 are correctly translated s "but they did so no more" (literally, "they did not add") or even "although they never did so again" (as in the NKJV), as opposed to the "and did not cease" of the Authorized Version (following the Vulgate and Targum Onkelos). The prophesying of the seventy was, in other words, a one-time testimony to Israel of the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit with these special assistants to Moses in the performance of the administrative offices to which they had now been assigned. The continuing subordination of these assistants to Moses was at the same time made obvious by the public ceremony in which the Lord in the theophanic cloud spoke only to Moses in the presence of all. Even Eldad and Medad, who were excused from the ceremony by some such necessity as illness, were temporarily endowed with the gift of prophecy only by virtue of having been appointed by Moses in writing to his new circle of assistants (verse 26).

The request of Joshua in verse 28 and the response of Moses in verse 29 are presumably the reason why those who constructed Series B chose Numbers 11 as the reading from the Old Testament on the same day as they had chosen Mark 9:38-50 as the gospel. The action, however, of the apostles in Mark 9:38 and the response of our Lord in verses 39-41 differ, in actuality, quite widely from the action and response in Numbers 11. For the apostles took it upon themselves to forbid someone exorcizing in the name of Jesus, while Joshua only urges Moses himself to do so. The apostles were concerned with the exclusive authority of the apostolate (using the first person plural four times in the Textus Receptus of Mark 9:38 and admitting that they had forbidden something done in the name of Jesus). Joshua, on the other hand, was concerned only with the authority of Moses, fearing unnecessarily that the two absentees from the ceremony now completed might claim some independence of him. The response of Moses in verse 29 certainly shows a selfless acceptance of whatever provisions the Lord might make for te guidance of His people, while at the same time by no means abnegating the office of leadership which the Lord had given exclusively to him at that particular time and place. Our Lord, of course, in Mark 9 could express no such wish as does Moses in Numbers 11, because He was and is the Lord of the prophets Himself. The Deus Revelans has, in fact, as a general rule, spoken directly, not to all His people indiscriminately, but only to a relative few whom He called as His prophets and apostles to relay His words (in speech and writing), by the infallible inspiration of the Holy Ghost, to all others to the end of history.