

Followers of the Way
Crossing the Desert:
The place of revelation and transformation
Steve Campbell, 14-05-23

Numbers 13: 1-2; 17-33

The fourth book of the Bible is known in English as 'Numbers' due to the two censuses, one at the beginning and the other near the end. However, in Hebrew this 4th book of the Torah is simply entitled 'In the Wilderness' and follows the Israelites 40 years of crossing the desert. But *why* were they condemned to wander across the desert for all those years? Not everyone knows. I was involved with a ministry called 'Walk Through the Bible' telling the story of the Old Testament in 77 easy steps. I was doing it in a primary school assembly, walking the children through the OT storyline in one term. We came to the book of Numbers:

Counting the Faces – Kadesh Oasis
Twelve Spies – Wanders, Dies

After the assembly lesson the principal said to me, 'I always thought the Israelites wandered in the wilderness because they had made the golden calf!' But no, it was because of the response of the spies in Canaan.

Around a year after the Exodus from Egypt, when they had received the Law and built the Tabernacle, the Israelites upped camp and left Sinai. The LORD led them to an oasis at Kadesh Barnea, from where Moses was to send twelve spies into Canaan. One man from each tribe was to go, each a leader so that the report would carry weight.

The parallel passage to this in Deuteronomy 1:22-23 tells a slightly different story: on reaching Kadesh Barnea Moses commands the people to go and take possession of the land. 'Then', he said, 'all of you came to me and said, "Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us and bring back a report about the route we are to take and the towns we will come to." The idea seemed good to me; so I selected twelve of you, one man from each tribe.'

This is the same story from two different perspectives. Deuteronomy recounts the events from the perspective of people, whereas Numbers presents the same story from God's perspective. We shall return to this later.

So twelve men were chosen to go and spy out the land. We all know the names of Joshua and Caleb, but who has ever heard of Shammua son of Zakkur; or Igal son of Joseph; or Palti son of Raphu?

Why are we not familiar with these men? Because they were among the bad spies.

Twelve Men Went To Spy in Canaan,
(Ten Were Bad, Two Were Good)
What Do You Think They Saw in Canaan?
(Ten Were Bad, Two Were Good)
Some Saw Giants, Tough and Tall!
Some Saw Grapes in Clusters Fall,

Some Saw God Was in it All.
(Ten Were Bad, Two Were Good).

The twelve spies were given specific instructions for this reconnaissance trip from v.17ff, 'Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. 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? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in 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.)'

The command of Moses to 'Go up' referred not only to the geography, but there is a sense in which this upward journey could be seen as a symbol of assault, conquest and victory. This was a military operation; the spies were searching out the land, the people and their cities, as well as their produce, to gain a greater understanding before their conquest (or so it was thought!)

The NIV's rendering of v.20 'Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land' does not do it justice. The ESV translates it better, 'Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land.'

It is a command for them to be bold in taking some of the fruit, which in effect was stealing. Yet, as the Lord was giving them the land as He promised, they were only sampling what was to become theirs anyway. The detail about it being the season for the first ripe grapes places the trip in July.

The twelve obeyed Moses and surveyed the land as he had described to them, spending 40 days and taking careful note of all they observed. They took some fruit on their homeward journey, including a huge cluster of grapes from the Valley of Eshcol (Cluster Valley) which two of them carried on a pole. As an interesting aside, the State of Israel uses as its logo for the Ministry of Tourism the two spies carrying the cluster of grapes ([show image](#))

On their return after 40 days exploration there must have been great excitement and also a tangible sense of anticipation as all the Israelites waited to hear their report. Everything started well as they gave their account in v.27 'We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit.'

So far so good! The spies had explored the land from south to north and back again and found it was just as God had promised Moses back in Exodus 3:8, 'a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.' Visual proof of its abundance was found in the enormous bunch of grapes they brought back.

Then comes the crunch! 'But...' When you hear that word you know something is amiss; and from the positive report up to now they start to describe things in negative terms, v.28 'But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there.' (i.e. men of great stature)

Now the spies are exaggerating the problems with the people and the cities. There's a cautionary note sounded in the narrative description of the exploration given in v.22 where we are told 'They... came to Hebron'. This should have been significant for them, this is where the patriarchs and their wives were buried, they were literally in the land of their fathers.

Yet there is no mention of this, only the names of three giants - Ahinam, Sheshai and Talmi. Instead of focussing on the patriarchs and promises of God, they were distracted by the size of the people and the buildings. The mention of Hebron having been built seven years before Zoan in Egypt seems to indicate they were looking back, still longing to be in the land of slavery.

This negative report by the ten bad spies was countered by Caleb in v.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."

Caleb, who had a different spirit and followed God whole-heartedly, along with Joshua, believed God's promise to bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey. He knew this was their destiny. However, as usual, it's those who shout loudest and longest who are heard and heeded, and the Israelites went along with the bad spies, even so far as wanting to stone the two good spies along with Moses and Aaron!

How could this be? All spies saw the same thing, they didn't split up, so why such a vast gulf in their opinion? The problem was they had a different perspective.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are on a camping trip. In the middle of the night Holmes wakes up and gives Dr. Watson a nudge. "Watson" he says, "look up in the sky and tell me what you see."

"I see millions of stars, Holmes," says Watson.

"And what do you deduce from that, Watson?"

Watson thinks for a moment. "Well," he says, "astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets.

Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo.

Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three.

Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow.

Theologically, I see that God is all-powerful, and we are small and insignificant. What do you deduce, Holmes?"

"Watson, I deduce that someone has stolen our tent!"

We need to have the right perspective on things.

The ten bad spies had their perspective askew, (grass-hoppers); instead of having a reverend fear of God, they were fearful of man, of their stature and scale of their fortified cities. If they had done a SWOT test – their focus would have been on their weaknesses and threats, and would ignore their strengths and opportunities.

Sadly, because the people listened to and followed the bad spies, that whole generation was doomed to die in the desert. Instead of entering into the destiny the LORD had promised, their words of grumbling would become a self-fulfilling prophecy, Numbers 14:28-29 & 34

So tell them, “As surely as I live, declares the LORD, I will do to you the very thing I heard you say: in this wilderness your bodies will fall – every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me.

For forty years – one year for each of the forty days you explored the land – you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.”

So for 40 years, echoing the 40 days of exploration, they crossed the desert under God’s discipline. During this time He revealed Himself to them and transformed them into the people they ought to be. The LORD remained with them for the duration, dwelling in their midst, providing food and water, and even ensuring neither their clothes nor sandals wore out. (Deut 29:5)

Once the time of discipline was over, the new generation who had grown up while crossing the desert, was ready to enter into their destiny. Only two who were counted in the first census, Caleb and Joshua, the two good spies, were among those who crossed the Jordan to possess the land.

This is a very interesting story, but what has it got to do with us? It is, of course, an historical account, but has it any relevance for us today?

I don’t often read poetry but I have a book by Steve Turner which includes one of the shortest poems I have ever seen – History Lesson

History repeats itself.

Has to.

No-one listens.

What happened to the Israelites, and what is recorded in the Old Testament, is for *our* benefit. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Church at Corinth, a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, outlined what occurred as the Israelites crossed the desert, and concluded, ‘These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.’ (1 Cor 10:11)

Paul had the right perspective; in describing the Israelite’s experience in the wilderness a few verses before, he said, ‘They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.’

1 Cor 10:3-4

From Paul’s perspective the pre-incarnate Christ was with the Israelites in the wilderness, just as the Risen Lord Jesus is with *us* by His Spirit.

So let me ask: what is your perspective? Do you allow your circumstances to cause fear in your heart, or do you rather have a reverend fear of the Lord?

Have you ever been tempted to follow the crowd, or have you had to courage to speak out, even if you are the only dissenting voice?

What do you believe is God’s destiny for you in this life, and are you entering into it?

May we all, with Christ’s help, have the same spirit as Caleb and Joshua, and follow the Lord wholeheartedly.