

-Save This Page as a PDF-

The Abrupt Slide into Rebellion Chapters 11 to 20



The first ten chapters of **Numbers** could be called the Book of Obedience. We read phrases like: **Thus, the children of Isra'el did all that ADONAI commanded.** But, **Numbers 11** marks a dramatic shift from the positive tone of the first ten chapters. There, **the people** looked forward to the Promised Land and **the Israelites** were assured of **God's** care and protection (**10:29**). **Numbers 11:1-3** recounts the first instance of **the people's** discontent and complaining against **YHVH** in the book so far. But the motif of **the people's complaining** to **Moshe** and **God** in the wilderness is not new; a number of **complaint** or **murmuring** stories occur in the book of **Exodus** before the giving of **the Ten Words** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy**, **to see link click [Bk - The Ten Words](#)**) and the covenant at **Mount Sinai**, and before **the golden calf** incident. Yet, the **complaints** that **Isra'el** made in **Exodus** are treated as legitimate needs: **the people** needed **water** (**Exodus 15:22-26**), **the people** needed **food** (**Exodus 16**), and **the people** again needed **water** (**Exodus 17:1-7**). In each case, **God** took **their** complaints seriously and fulfilled the needs of **the Israelites** by turning bitter **water** into sweet **water**, by providing **manna** and **quail** for **food**, and by causing **water** to flow from a **rock**.

In the book of **Numbers**, however, **the Israelites** raise **their** voices in **complaint** about similar needs, but here things turn out differently. **The complaints** are treated as acts of unfaithfulness. The whining of **the Israelites** rouses **Ha'Shem's** anger and punishment, which is mitigated only by **Moses'** aggressive intercession. The contrasts between the

parallel sets of narratives *before Sinai* in **Exodus** and *after Sinai* in **Numbers** raises the obvious questions that beg to be answered. What happened in the interim that caused this shift from divine accommodation in **Exodus 15-18** to divine punishment in **Numbers 11-20**? What happened in between is that **ADONAI** had established a covenant with **Isra'el** at **Mount Sinai**.

Before **Sinai**, **Isra'el** was like a newly adopted child who did not yet know the rules of the household. Thus, **God**, the divine **Parent**, bent over backwards to satisfy the legitimate needs of **Isra'el** immediately out of Egypt. But by the time we reach **Numbers**, **the Israelites** knew **their** responsibilities in the commandments and were answerable for its relationship to **YHVH**. Moreover, **Isra'el** had already rejected **the LORD** once in the dramatic **golden calf** incident in **Exodus 32**. **God** nearly abandoned **Isra'el** then. **His** powerful and holy presence in the midst of sinful **Isra'el** was a divine concession to **Moshe's** urgent pleas in **Exodus 32-34**. But the holiness of **ADONAI** cannot tolerate unfaithfulness and rebellion without deadly consequences for **Isra'el** as a people. **Isra'el** knew the commandments and was accountable for it, beginning with the first and most important of the Ten Words: **You shall have no other gods before Me**.

Throughout **Numbers 11-20**, **God's people** continually rebel, and **He** punishes **them** with plagues and military defeats. **The LORD** offers signs of forgiveness and compassion, but **the people** in each case resume **their** rebellious ways. First, there is the general rebellion of **the people** in **Numbers 11**. Next, in **Numbers 12**, there is a rebellion for the first time in the wilderness by two leaders of **the people**. This is followed in **Numbers 13-14** by the most serious revolt against **YHVH** - the spy mission into the Promised Land. The spy story defines the central theme and structure of the entire book of **Numbers** as a tale of the death of the **Exodus** generation and the birth of a new generation of hope on the edge of the Promised Land. After a word of hope is offered in **Ch 15**, **the people**, and even **the Levites**, resume the cycle of revolts and disobedience. The spirit of rebellion and unfaithfulness extended even to **Aaron** and **Moses** in the narrative of **Chapter 20**. The death of **Aaron** the high priest and the succession of **his son Eleazar** as the new high priest in **Numbers 20:22-29** is a precursor to the end of the entire **Exodus** generation, and the dawning of an entirely new generation of hope.¹⁷³