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Theological Reflections on the Spy Story



The spy story in **Numbers 13** and **14** gathers together several central themes in the theology of the TaNaKh and B'rit Chadashah. The story explores sin; the interplay of forgiveness and judgment; the death of the old and the birth of the new; trusting in the power of **ADONAI** versus trusting in human power and resolve; and **Ha'Shem's** power over "giants" verses **God's** grace on "the little ones." The following **five illustrations** are ways in which these themes are intertwined in both the spy story in the TaNaKh, sayings in the B'rit Chadashah, and stories of **Yeshua Messiah**, as well as early Church tradition.

1. The nature of the sin in Numbers 13-14 is the rejection of God's free gift of the Promised Land, which was Isra'el's for the taking. The rebels in the spy story fall so low because the sense of expectation and hope that the entire Torah attaches to this one moment is so high. All the ancestral promises in **Genesis** and their constant reiteration since **Exodus Chapter 1** have looked forward to this dramatic point where **Isra'el** was on the cusp of entering **the Promised Land** of Canaan. But the people refuse to trust **ADONAI** to make good on **God's** promises. One analogy in the B'rit Chadashah to this moment is the story of the crucifixion of **Yeshua**. The cross is a sign of the world's rejection of **God's** great gift of salvation in **Messiah**. **YHVH's** fulfillment of **Isra'el's** messianic expectation was ironically met by the people's rejection of their **Messiah**.

2. The spy story highlights the forgiveness of ADONAI through the intercession of Moses. **Moshe's** appeal to **God's** lovingkindness (see the commentary on **Ruth**, to see

link click Af - The Concept of Chesed) was an appeal to **His** commitment to the promises **He** had made to **Isra'el**. In the process, **Moshe** denied **himself** and the possible glory of becoming a great nation. Instead, **Moses** used **his** uniquely intimate relationship to **God** to pray for forgiveness for the people (**14:12-19**). Similarly, **Paul** in **Romans 8** assures **his** readers that **nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Messiah Yeshua our Lord (Rom 8:39)**. And the basis for the assurance of **God's** lovingkindness is in the intercession of **Yeshua who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us (Rom 8:34)**. Like **Moshe**, **Yeshua** denied **Himself** and **His** own glory for the sake of others through **His** suffering and death (**Philippians 2:1-11**).

3. The spy story upholds the dialogical tension between God's forgiveness and God's judgment through the paradigm of the death of the old and the birth of the new. Death in the desert was **God's** just judgment on the old **Exodus** generation. They would never reach **the Promised Land**. But out of death came new life. **ADONAI** promised to raise up a new generation of hope who would enter the land of Canaan. Thus, **YHVH** was above all merciful and faithful to the promises that were made. But **the LORD** also preserved a sense of responsibility and justice by giving the old **Exodus** generation the punishment that corresponded to what they had said they wanted, which was to die in the desert.

In a similar way, the promise of forgiveness and new life arises out of the judgment and death that **Yeshua** bore on the cross. **Messiah** opens up the way through the death of the old to the birth of the new as **He** calls **His** disciples to **take up their cross daily and follow Me (Luke 9:23)**. The rebels in the spy story wanted to save their lives by refusing to stand up to the enemies of Canaan. **Yeshua** instructs us that the road of faith moves in the opposite direction: **For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for My sake will find it (Luke 9:24)**. The way of faith is always through death to life, through the cross to resurrection. The concrete expression of that movement for the believer is baptism into **Messiah** signifying the death of the old self and the rebirth of the new self: **Therefore, we have been buried with Him in baptism into death, so that just as Messiah was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we, too, might walk in the newness of life (Romans 6:4)**.

4. The spy story portrays unbelief as fear and trust in God's power above all else. The first commandment of the Ten Words (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Bk - The Ten Words**) is: **You shall have no other gods beside Me (Deuteronomy 5:6-7)**. The spy story illustrates the two primary ways in which this mitzvah was broken. First, **the**

rebellious **spies** and **the people feared** the inhabitants of the land of Canaan more than **they feared God**. Yet, **the fear of ADONAI is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10a)**. They also exaggerated and made up lies about the enemy, speaking of **a land that devoured its inhabitants** and about giants who had died long ago in the Flood (**Numbers 13:32-33**). Secondly, at the end of the spy story, **the Israelites** presumed to go up and conquer **the Land** by **their** own power and resolve. **They** did this in spite of **Moshe's** warning that **God** was not with them. In **their** pride, **they** trusted in **their** own efforts and determination to gain for **themselves** the promises of **ADONAI**. The result was defeat and death (**Numbers 14:39-45**). Whether in pride or in despair, the old **Exodus** generation failed to learn the fundamental lesson of the Bible: to **fear**, love, and trust **God** above everything else.

5. Finally, the spy story affirms both God's mighty power to conquer giants and His loving power to save the children of the Exodus generation. Caleb and Joshua knew that the giants in Canaan were nothing compared to the power of **Isra'el's God**. They declared: **ADONAI is with us, do not fear them (Numbers 14:9)**. Just as **Ha'Shem's** power defeated the mighty Pharaoh and his army, so **God's** power would deliver **the children** of the **Exodus** generation into **the Promised Land**. **But your children, who you said would be taken as booty - them I will bring in. They will know the Promised Land you have rejected (Numbers 14:41 and Deuteronomy 1:39)**. The B'rit Chadashah likewise portrays the power of **YHVH** to fight the enemies of **God**. **Yeshua** sent out seventy of **His disciples** to preach and to heal, and **they** came back saying: **Lord, in Your Name even the demons submit to us! Yeshua responded: I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning (Luke 10:17-18)**. The demonic enemies, even the giant **Satan** fall before the power of **God's** holy war weapons of healing and preaching **the Gospel**. **Ephesians 6:10-12** urges followers of Messiah to **be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His power**.

In later traditions with the TaNaKh, the proper weapons by which **Ha'Shem** conducted holy war (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Ag - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh**) against the enemies of God had already begun to be reinterpreted. No longer were God's people to use swords of violence; rather, they were to fight with weapons of **God's Word** and obedience to **God's Torah (Deuteronomy 33:10-11; Joshua 1:7-9; Isaiah 2:1-4)**. This tradition was carried on into the B'rit Chadashah. **Yeshua's** disciples didn't battle evil with weapons of violence, but with **God's Word** and with a ministry of **reconciliation (Luke 22:49-51)**. And those who received these gifts were often **the little children** of this world. **Yeshua** called **the little children** to **His** side, saying: **Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the**

kingdom of God belongs (Luke 18:16).

Yeshua's parable of **the great banquet** is in many ways a commentary on the spy story (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ [Hp](#) - The Parable of the Great Banquet**). A delicious dinner is prepared, not unlike **God's** preparation of **the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey for the Israelites**. The master of the house extends a gracious invitation to many people. However, all those who are invited refuse to come to the banquet and offer excuses as to why they are not able. Instead, the master then decides to invite **the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame** to come and eat a great banquet with him. They came and received the gracious gift of food. The master vowed concerning those who were invited first: **For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner (Luke 14:24)**. The parable is a metaphor for the kingdom of **God** and **the little children** to come and eat at the table of **ADONAI (Luke 22:24-30)**. The apostle Paul reminded **the Corinthian** church that **God** has chosen the foolish and the weak to shame **the wise and the strong**, "**But God chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise; God chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the strong; and God chose what the world looks down on as common or regards as nothing in order to bring to nothing what the world considers important; so that no one should boast before God**" (First Corinthians 1:27-29).

As we move on in the book of **Numbers** from this central and defining story of the rebellious spies, and the failed attempt to conquer the Promised Land, these important theological themes of judgment and hope will continue to weave in and out of the story that follows.²⁶⁴