

NAIROBI EVANGELICAL GRADUATE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

ISRAEL'S REBELLION IN NUMBERS 11-21:
ITS CHALLENGES TO *Moses* LEADERSHIP AND
LESSONS FOR THE AFRICAN CHURCH
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BY
LUBUNGA W'EHUSHA

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate School in
Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Theology

JUNE, 2003

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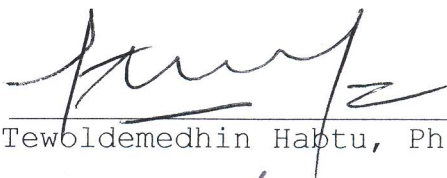
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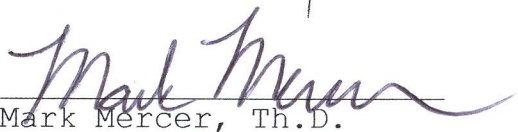
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June, 2003

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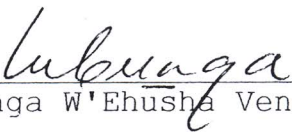
STUDENT'S DECLARATION

ISRAEL'S REBELLION IN NUMBERS 11-21:
ITS CHALLENGES TO MOSES' LEADERSHIP AND
LESSONS FOR THE AFRICAN CHURCH.

I declare that this is my original work and has not been
Submitted to any other college or university for academic
credit

The views presented herein are not necessarily those of the
Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology or the
examiners

(Signed)


Lubunga W'Ehusha Venance

June, 2003

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze the rebellion of the people of Israel in Numbers 11-21 and highlight its challenges to Moses' leadership. The findings of this inquiry then draw lessons for the African Church. The covenant of Sinai and the presence of Yahweh manifested by the cloud by day and the fire by night could not prepare the people to face confidently the hardships of the wilderness. The section of the book of Numbers we have studied shows that Israel persistently murmured against Yahweh and against his servant Moses during the wilderness journey. This rebellious attitude constituted a real challenge to Moses who struggled, on the one hand to provide for their daily need and, on the other hand pleaded with God so that he may forgive their rebellion. We identified three major causes for the rebellion of the Israelites, namely complaints due to the privations of the wilderness, complaints against Moses' leadership, and complaints against God. Moses was challenged to find solutions for the survival of his people in the wilderness and to make sure that they finally made it to the Promised Land. It was not an easy task but Moses was successful in living up to his assignment because of his intimate relationship with God and his own exemplary character. Whenever his leadership was challenged, Moses was so patient not only in handling the provocation but also in relying on God to miraculously provide to all the needs of the people and the vindication of his chosen leaders. Even though the generation of those who left Egypt, including Moses himself, did not enter Canaan, this study shows that he had been a successful leader of his people.

From the wilderness journey experience African church leaders can learn how to handle a murmuring and rebellious attitude displayed by their constituencies. This study focuses on the quality of the leadership as a tool in dealing with a grumbling spirit. The Church should seek to confer the position of leadership to: (1) leaders with a genuine call from the Lord and chosen according to biblical standards, (2) leaders whose heart is burning with compassion and willingness to meeting people's need, and (3) leaders who can identify themselves with their congregation. If the Church displays such a capacity of handling members' discontent, it will become a source of inspiration even to the political leadership of the continent.

This work is dedicated to my wife,
Esther Kenge Lubunga,
for her support and patience during the
five years of my study at NEGST.

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I am very grateful to God for His protection and provision for my family throughout my study at NEGST. He has enabled me to carry on this work and bring it to its completion.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Moses was chosen and called by God to lead out of Egypt a people who had in common primarily the desire to be free from slavery. Under Moses' leadership, the Israelites set out for the wilderness of Sinai where they entered into covenant with Yahweh and became his people. At Sinai, the people acquired the consciousness of their identity, a common way of life, the laws and the religion, and important features for their settlement in the Promised Land. The Israelites were also assured of the presence of Yahweh who rescued them as they confessed "the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an out-stretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders" (Deut. 26:8 NIV). The Bible declares that the presence of God was manifested daily in the journey across the wilderness, by the cloud over the tabernacle by day and fire by night (Exod. 40:38). The chief leader of the people was Moses, a man who held a special relation with God, and who spoke with him face to face (Num. 12).

Surrounded by God's care and protection on the one hand, and the leadership of a man of outstanding spiritual and moral qualities on the other hand, there was the temptation to believe that Israel would be assured of crossing the desert peacefully - defeating her enemies and settling in the Promised Land. Unfortunately, that was not the case. The journey was fraught with many hardships and uncertainties and on many an occasion they longed for the 'fleshpots of Egypt.' In his account on the wilderness journey, Anderson remarks:

The journey was difficult. Freedom in the desert was, to many of the pilgrims, a poor substitute for slavery in Egypt. Water was scarce, there was no food; existence was precarious. . . It was a time of murmuring, discontent, internal strife, rebellion against Moses, and above all, lack of faith¹

Anderson shows that despite God's grace the people experienced affliction under the leadership of Moses, the sojourn in the wilderness had been a time of hardship, testing and deficiencies for the Israelites. This situation had led the people to revolt against their leaders. Israel encountered several crises in the wilderness that a series of murmurings and revolts dominated the account of the journey given in Exodus and Numbers. Lawrence Boadt gives the following list of incidents in the two books where

¹Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), 55.

Israel grumbled and rebelled against God during the years in the desert:²

Exodus 14-17

- Ex 14:10* Complaint that the Egyptians were about to slay them.
Ex 15:23 The people grumble at Elim about bitter water.
Ex 16:3 The people grumble at the lack of food in the desert of Sin.
Ex 17:2 The lack of water at Rephidim

Numbers 11-21

- Num 11:1* The people grumble against Yahweh at Taberah: they are punished by fire.
Num 11:4 The people grumble about the lack of meat at Kibroth-hattaavah: God sends quail, but also a plague.
Num 12 Miriam and Aaron rebel against Moses: God strikes Miriam with leprosy.
Num 14 The people complain of desert journey: God extends the time to forty years.
Num 16 Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rebel against Moses: God consumes them in fire.
Num 20 The people grumble about lack of water: Moses strikes water from the rock.
Num 21 The people grumble about food: God sends fiery serpents

Andrew Tunyogi adds, in his account of the rebellions of Israel, some events prior to the wilderness when Moses resisted the call to be the leader and the reluctance of the people to accept his leadership. He also mentions some stories in the wilderness left out in the above list. They are as follows:

- Exod. 2:11-15 The refusal of Moses' mediation by an Israelite in Egypt fighting with his fellow Israelite

²Lawrence Boadt, Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 192.

- Exod. 3-4 Moses' objections to the Lord against being sent to deliver Israel from Egypt.
- Exod. 5:19-21 Moses rebuked by the Israelite foremen.
- Exod. 6:2-9 Moses' second call in Egypt and the people's refusal to listen to him.
- Exod. 32 The golden calf incident.
- Lev. 10 Nadab and Abihu.
- Num. 25 The sin with Baal-Peor.³

The foregoing accounts demonstrate that the wilderness journey was the time when Israel persistently murmured against Yahweh and against his servant Moses. The journey was both a positive experience of God's guidance and provision and a negative theme of trial and rebellion which culminated in the perishing of an entire generation in the wilderness. Even Moses and Aaron came under judgment and were not permitted to enter the Promised Land. Coats argues that this murmuring motif is an act of Israel's rebellion that challenges Moses' position as leader of the people:

The pattern of the murmuring stories includes: (1) some account of the crisis confronting the Israelites; (2) the response of the people to it as a challenge to the validity of Mosaic leadership; (3) an explicit goal announced by the people to return to Egypt or an implicit wish expressed as an accusation against Moses or Moses and Aaron for their role in facilitating the exodus, thus an element that would reverse the exodus; (4) Some tales include the response of Moses or Moses and Aaron and, on occasion, the response of God either

³Andrew C. Tunyogi, The Rebellion of Israel (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1969), 33-4.

by defending the issue challenged or by punishing the people as rebels.⁴

The term 'tales', which Coats borrowed from Gressmann's literary analysis can lead to confusion, casting a doubt on the truth of Moses' stories. He defines a tale as a piece of literature having in balance realism and fantasy.⁵

The stories of the exodus and the sojourn in the wilderness are, first of all, an expression of Yahweh's mighty acts of intervention with signs and miracles, with divine guidance and daily sustenance so that the figure of Moses can easily be overlooked. Yahweh who has come down to rescue Israel from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up into a land flowing with milk and honey (Exod 3:7-8), should be taken as the one responsible for any failure in the process of this journey. Nevertheless, in the biblical narrative, Moses played such an essential role that he is known as the one who brought the people out of the land of Egypt and gave them the laws called by his name.

The study in the book of Numbers shall help us to

⁴George W. Coats, Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 57 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 109.

⁵Ibid., 28.

answer the question why Moses was so concerned with the murmuring of Israel and how the murmuring motif should be considered as a challenge to his leadership. Key questions that will guide the investigation in this research include:

- a) How did Moses become the leader of Israel and what was his commission?
- b) Why did the people murmur and rebel during the wilderness journey?
- c) How did the people's rebellion affect Moses' leadership?
- d) What was God's reaction to the rebellion of his people?
- e) What lesson can the African Church learn from Israel's experience?

Significance of the Study

The book of Numbers, as its Hebrew name **במדבר** 'in the wilderness' indicates, gives a full account of the events that occurred during the wilderness wandering. The rebellion theme dominates Numbers 11-21 where murmurings directed either against the hard conditions of the wilderness or against the authority and leadership of Moses are reported. The experience of Israel, a people that had been rescued from the bondage of Egypt and were awaiting to enter the Promised Land can be understood as a real portrait of God's people in every generation. They have always lived between promise and fulfillment. The significance of the Hebrew story is that it has become a refe-

rence peg of God's redemptive purpose and the way he leads his people to real freedom and liberation.

Christians today are saved, but heaven has not yet come to earth, nor has the Church yet entered Paradise; mean-while they have to suffer the hardship of the Christian journey. This analogy between the Christian experience and the wilderness wandering makes the study of Numbers a very exciting exercise. In his comments on the book of Numbers Olson notes that: "The focus is not on a gradual spiritual improvement on the part of the people. Rather, the focus is on the activity of God who, though intolerant of rebellion, remains faithful to his promise."⁶ The rebellion narratives reveal the quality of leadership that Moses exercised during the wilderness journey. It was his responsibility not only to lead the people out of Egypt, but also to meet their needs in the wilderness as they faced hunger, thirst and enemies, until they reached the Promised Land. Besides this active side of the role played by Moses in the wilderness, we can also see God's presence behind the scene as the main leader of Israel through the wilderness. His intervention on behalf of his

⁶Dennis T. Olson, The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch, Brown Judaic Studies, 71 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 180.

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⁶Dennis T. Olson, The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch, Brown Judaic Studies, 71 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 180.

people through his aid and mighty acts shows that Moses and Aaron were only supporting characters of God himself.⁷

The role played by Moses in the wilderness stories as a leader who acts in full responsibility towards his people on the one hand, and on the other hand in the shadow of the leadership of God, is one of the qualities of spiritual leadership the Church of Christ is looking for. The findings of this investigation should help us to set up principles for African Church leadership as we minister to the people who murmur and rebel because of many crises on the continent. Leaders need to be aware of these challenges and be equipped to face them. People in Africa, including Christians, suffer from poverty, civil wars, natural calamities, political instability and incurable diseases. The outcome of such a situation is the revolt/blame laid upon all authority, be it political, spiritual or divine. In many cases the challenges are so harsh that the leadership crisis observed in African Christianity reveals the incapacity of the leaders to cope with the members' discontent.

Thesis and Methodology

Moses had been endowed with power to perform all kinds of miracles and was assured of the presence of

⁷Coats, Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God, 124.

Yahweh, the Almighty God of Israel, in order to take the people into the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. But the Bible reports that the journey was not peaceful. The wilderness is portrayed as a time of discontent, grumbling, rebellion against Moses' leadership and lack of faith, that the people found the bondage of Egypt more bearable than the hardship of the wilderness. B. Maarsingh notes that "they were saying in effect that the entire so-called 'deliverance' from slavery had turned out to be one huge disappointment."⁸ How did their attitude during this journey affect Moses' leadership? The writer of this thesis will investigate the challenges Moses faced as he led the Israelites through the hardships of the desert.

In spite of all the pressure exerted by the murmuring and discontentment of the people against his leadership, Moses' role was to restore hope to the hopeless and courage to the discouraged, to be a problem-solving leader. It required spiritual qualities that could be developed only in the intimacy with Yahweh. To do this Moses leaned on his intercession to meet the privations and dangers of the wilderness as Coats notes:

Moses shows himself to be the heroic leader of the people by his faithful defense of them in the face of crises posed by hunger, thirst, and enemies. Indeed,

⁸B. Maarsingh, Numbers: A Practical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 39.

that defense comes to its most poignant expressions in Moses' intercession for his people before God.⁹

The term 'defense' here should not be considered as an argument to prove the innocence of the people of Israel.

What Coats means is that many times the people deserved the just wrath of God, but it was Moses' duty to plead with God for forgiveness.

This study is primarily an analysis of the book of Numbers chapters 11-21 giving an account of the different crises the people faced in the wilderness and their impact on Moses' leadership as recorded by the author. This study will concentrate on the rebellion motif with regard to the people of Israel as opposed to the role played by Moses alone or in association with Aaron and God's intervention in blessing or punishment. The investigation will focus on Moses' leadership during the wilderness journey, but will also take into account related references in Exodus and other biblical books and relevant materials from other writings as far as they can shed light on this topic.

The book of Numbers, as well as the rest of the Pentateuch, has been studied from a wide variety of perspectives. The present study will not engage in the polemic raised by scholars in relation to the Pentateuch- between the conservative scholars who have tended to defend the historicity and antiquity of the text and critical scholars

⁹Coats, Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God, 123

who focused on the multi-layered dimension of the text labeled as Yahwist (J), Elohist (E) Priestly (P), and Deuteronomic (D). Without underestimating the value of those methods, the writer would like to analyze this portion of the history of Israel as part of the inspired word of God. This study will acknowledge both the historicity of the events and the character of God's revelation through those events. In agreement with Maier I affirm that:

We cannot pass over the mystery of the intermixing of man's word with God's Word. The attempt to inquisitively unravel this intermixture and ultimately to divide it into quantitatively definable entities was the gross mistake of the higher-critical method.¹⁰

This investigation will also be conducted within the framework of the Old Testament canon. This means that each historical event of the murmuring texts the researcher intends to analyze will be considered as it is reflected and recounted in the book of Numbers. At this point the approach is in accord with Sailhamer as he defends his position in these words: "A biblical-historical approach first recognizes that, according to all indications in Scripture, Israel's community of faith never possessed another view of their history than that which lies before

¹⁰Gerhard Maier, The End of the Historical-Critical Method (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), 70.

us in the Pentateuch."¹¹ Therefore, this study is not seeking to work on reconstructed events but on those recorded in the Bible. The writer will analyze each portion with the African context in mind by noting the points of resemblance or areas of application as they appear in the text. A summary of these interactions will help me to draw lessons for the African Church in the conclusion of this study.

Limitation and Delimitation

Moses' leadership is a very wide area of study, which the researcher will not be able to cover in the scope of this work. It would be interesting to consider the life of Moses from his stay in Pharaoh's palace and all the challenges he met before leading his people out of Egypt. This could be extended to his exploits of snatching out of the hands of Pharaoh the slaves he led for forty years until his death in the desert of Moab. This task is too overwhelming to undertake in this study. The writer will limit himself to the account given in Numbers chapters 11-21 and the focus will be only on the texts dealing with the rebellion or murmuring of Israel in the wilderness.

Time and space will not allow the writer the use of

¹¹John H. Sailhamer, Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 109.

all the materials relative to this topic in the Pentateuch. Therefore, I will study the texts dealing with the rebellion and murmuring of Israel during the period from the departure from Mount Sinai up to the arrival in the desert of Moab. This choice is justified by the analogy drawn between the events in the book of Numbers and the Church of Christ in her earthly journey. The wandering in the wilderness, with its challenges and God's provisions, stands as the best illustration of what Christianity in Africa, or may be all over the world, is undergoing at the present. The researcher has chosen to focus on challenges to leadership because he thinks that the key to solving problems in the Church lies in getting responsible leadership capable of handling the cry of the people suffering from various crises - spiritual, social, and economic.

Although the divine intervention is not expressed as the object of the writer's focus, one cannot examine Moses' leadership without giving due consideration to God, who actually is the effective leader of his people. I shall demonstrate later that any challenge or attack against Moses was directed against God. Therefore, this study shall examine the role played by God and his involvement in the history of his people, as it appears in the text the researcher is proposing to study. The writer may not be able to establish what the relationship between God and

Israel was but, in so far as this work is concerned, the writer shall draw some principles of leadership under God's supervision.

General Content

Chapter 1 covers all the introductory materials, including the statement of the problem, significance of the study, thesis and methodology and limitation and delimitation. Chapter 2 will deal with the background of Moses' leadership, his appointment and commission as head of Israel. In chapter 3 the focus will be on the exegesis of the main texts in Numbers 11-21. The writer will attempt to answer the question of how the rebellion of the Israelites affected Moses' leadership. Texts will be grouped under three main topics of the revolt, namely against the hardship of the wilderness, against Moses' leadership, and against Yahweh. In the last chapter the writer will conclude this study by drawing lessons for the Church in Africa and its leadership as the people of God who face trials and calamities in their journey.

CHAPTER 2

MOSES' COMMISSION

Moses' Background

The biblical narrative portrays Moses as a historical figure who led his people to freedom. He was born at a critical moment in the history of Israel. After a peaceful settlement in Egypt at the time of Joseph, the Scriptures declare that the situation of the descendants of Jacob's family turned into oppression upon the coming to power of a new king who did not know Joseph. The growing threat included enslavement, more hard work and the genocide of male babies to reduce the number of the Hebrews (Exod. 1:8ff). Upon Moses' birth, his parents struggled to hide him so that he might escape the genocide. This early life of Moses, as well as other stories in the Pentateuch, is described as saga, legend, and tradition by the school of Wellhausen and those who seek to take out of the Scriptures all supernatural or miraculous facts.¹ They consider the narration about the hiding of the baby in a basket in order

¹Brevard S. Childs, "The Birth of Moses" Journal of Biblical Literature 84 (1965):109. Childs quotes Gressmann who wrote that "the story of Moses' birth is a legend which belongs to one of the youngest strata of the exodus traditions and stands in tension with the earlier traditions."

to save him from slaughter as a legend because of its parallelism to Sumero-Akkadian texts.² But similarity with some legends cannot constitute a solid argument to refute the true story about the birth of Moses, since there is no other ancient text to contradict what the Bible teaches. All that is known about Moses is contained only in the biblical records. Brevard Childs makes the point in his analysis of the Sargon legend that it was of another motif, dealing with how a poor and rejected child succeeded to leadership position and that it cannot be applied to Moses. He observes that the exposure of Moses on the river Nile is not borrowed from the legend. He pursues his analysis by saying that the Moses story, like other biblical announcements of a coming child, carries features of Israel's tradition. He continues: "Therefore, we argue that the motivation for the exposure is not part of the inherited tradition but belongs to the special feature of

²Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, 36. He argues that "the tradition of Exodus 2 that Moses was brought up and trained in Egyptian circles is authentic, although it is coloured with elements of folklore. The story of the baby in the basket of bullrushes (Ex. 2:1-10), for example, is reminiscent of a similar account of Sargon of Akkad." Walter C. Kaiser, A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998) also remarks that "the similarities with the Moses story are striking indeed" as he considers the Sargon of Agade and another parallel Sumero-Akkadian texts (p.89).

the Moses story."³ Our task is to consider biblical facts as they are given in the scripture and draw lessons for our world.

The biblical narrative affirms that Moses was brought up and trained in Pharaoh's palace (Exod. 2:8-10). Moses' name is an authentic indication of his Egyptian upbringing in the court of Pharaoh, coming as it does from the root *ms(w)*⁴ meaning to 'beget a child.' Many Egyptian Kings bore a compound name of the same root joined with the name of an Egyptian deity, as in the names Ah-mose, Ptah-mose, Thutmose, and Ra-meses. Kaiser indicates that the short form of Moses' name is found frequently in the New Kingdom documents.⁵ This Egyptian origin of Moses' name is mostly accepted by scholars, although the meaning given by the Hebrew writer "I drew him out of the water" (Exod. 2:10) suggests that the name might be derived from the Hebrew verb **מָשָׁה** meaning 'to draw out' an allusion to the 'baby in a basket' story. There is similarity of sound between the Hebrew and Egyptian roots that could force one to take one

³Brevard S. Childs, The Book of Exodus : A Critical Theological Commentary, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 10.

⁴Walter C. Kaiser, A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars, 89.

⁵Ibid.

name for another. It is recorded that many other Hebrews took Egyptian names during their long stay in that country. Among the levites, Moses' tribe, some members bore Egyptians names, such as Phineas, Hophni, and Merari.⁶

The killing of an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Hebrew worker marks a turning point in Moses' history. It is first of all, the manifestation of his identification with his Hebrew kinsmen, in spite of the forty years in Pharaoh's palace. It is not reported how Moses came to know about his identity and develop a strong feeling of kinship. Most likely his Hebrew mother taught him about his origin while nursing him as a child on behalf of Pharaoh's daughter. Was Moses old enough to remember Hebrew stories when he left the hands of the mother/nurse to join the palace? The biblical account assumes it. This murder is also significant as the first attempt of Moses to be the deliverer of his kinsmen. Unfortunately, his impulsive action was such a failure that he was obliged to flee to Midian for his life. His fellow Hebrews refused to recognize him as their leader "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" (Exod. 2:14). Also he was not bold enough to face Pharaoh's anger. Moses' flight to Midian marks the end of the first part of his life in the palace and opens the

⁶Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, 36.

period of forty years of preparation as the shepherd in the wilderness. Many scholars have located the territory of Midian in the area of the Sinai Peninsula, northeast of Egypt, where Mount Horeb is found.⁷

The tragic intervention against the Egyptian was not just an isolated act in Moses' life, but it portrays the deep character of a man who is devoted to defend the oppressed. This is displayed as he started his sojourn in the land of Midian. Though his first attempt of aid was rejected, Moses could not remain inactive when injustice is manifested. Upon his arrival at the well in the land of Midian, he offered to defend Jethro's daughters against ruthless shepherds. But this time his help was highly rewarded, he received an invitation to a meal, he found a home to live in, and above all he was given a wife. Childs has the right words as he comments ". . . the emphasis falls on Moses' active concern for justice to the weak which transcends the narrow bounds of nation and people."⁸

The writer of scripture is very restrained in describing the forty years of Moses' sojourn in Midian. In 8 verses (Exod. 2:15-22) he introduces Moses' connection with

⁷George Ernest Wright and Floyd Vivian Filson, eds., The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 38b.

⁸Childs, The Book of Exodus, 32.

the Midianites and their land which will play an important role in Moses' ministry. The setting for the encounter with his future spouse is situated at the well. The story of a woman at the well as the beginning of important events reminds one of Rebekah in Genesis 24 and the Samaritan women in John 4. This second episode of the life of Moses is sketched in few snapshots: Moses meets Jethro's (Reuel's) daughters at the well, he rescues them from the brutality of the shepherds, he is received into Jethro's house and is given a wife, he becomes the shepherd of Jethro's flock, and finally his marriage is blessed with a son who bears a significant name recalling his status as a foreigner in this region. This flight raises some questions to the reader. Did Moses choose deliberately to flee in the direction of Midian? Was it because of its proximity to the land of Egypt or because the Midianites were also Abraham's descendants by Keturah? Although the Bible teaches that the Midianites had been friendly to Joseph and Moses, later on they became enemies and joined the Moabites to oppose the Israelites (Num. 22). Whatever may be the reason for this sojourn in this desert, God's providence has brought Moses to this desert as part of his preparation to be acquainted with the wilderness in which he will be leading his people for forty years, as we shall see it in

the course of this study. The stay of Moses in the territory of Midian is interrupted by his encounter with God at the burning bush.

The call of Moses

God appeared to Moses while he was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law around Mount Horeb (Exod. 3:1-2). The description of this event, which is of great importance in the history of Israel, is enmeshed with supernatural facts that even the commentators who attempt to provide scientific explanations cannot undo. There is nothing in the natural world comparable to the burning bush coupled with the appearance of 'the angel of the Lord' - the theophany - (v. 3), and the voice from this burning bush declaring the place holy (v. 5). Roy Honeycutt thinks,

such a revelation, however, may well have been mediated through a visionary experience. The visionary experience would likely have assumed its descriptive character from the cultural ideas common to the era in which Moses lived.⁹

Werner Keller has quoted two scientists who attempted to find a scientific explanation to the phenomenon of the burning bush, but their arguments are mere suppositions rather than facts grounded on a genuine record.¹⁰ The first

⁹Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., "Exodus," in The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 1 rev., ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 312.

¹⁰Werner Keller, The Bible As History, rev. (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 133.

one is Harold N. Moldenke, an expert in botany who suggests that the phenomenon of the burning bush can be explained as a variety of the gas plant or Fraxinella, the Dictamnus Albus L. The blossoms of this plant have tiny glands filled with volatile oil capable to turn into flames when approached with a naked flame. The second scientist quoted by Werner is Smith who thinks of the crimson blossoms of mistletoe twigs (Loranthus Acaciae). When this mistletoe is in full blossom, it can turn a bush into a brilliant flaming color and looks as if it is on fire. The Bible shows that Moses was so astonished by the phenomenon that he turned aside to watch the extraordinary fact. This could not happen if by a mistake he has put fire on the volatile oil from the flaxinella. Or if it were just an illusion of fire from a flaming color, Moses would quickly discover it and such a deceiving curiosity would be of no consequence.

The description of the burning bush and the dialogue, which followed between Moses and the voice coming from the bush, is unique in history and denotes the presence of God. That is why Moses is called to remove his sandals because the place was holy. It should be noted that the bush did not become a permanent holy place, because this holiness is linked to the presence of the God of Israel who is Holy, the holiness of the bush had only a temporal character. By his upbringing in Pharaoh's palace Moses understood the meaning of the removal of his sandals because in Egypt it

was customary to go before the king barefoot.¹¹ Moses found himself in the presence of the King of kings. The practice of the removal of shoes in the sanctuary is widespread, not only among Muslims but also among the Kimbanguists of D. R. Congo and other messianic movements in Africa.

The commissioning of Moses was clearly stated. He was to take upon himself the political leadership to free the people of Israel from the bondage of Egypt (Exod. 3:10). Moses was called to play an important role on behalf of the ultimate owner of the people, the God of Israel. God revealed himself as the one concerned with the oppression of the people, who heard their cry, knew their sorrows, and now he has come down to deliver them (vv. 7-9). Moses was the agent to implement this deliverance.

Moses understood that it was not an easy task, since he knew what it entailed; namely to challenge Pharaoh politically on the sensitive matter of depriving him of his slaves who were helping him build cities in the country. He knew also that he was wanted by Pharaoh to answer the murder he committed forty years ago. What would happen if he was thrown into jail? In his assessment of the

¹¹ Nahum M. Sarna, Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 40. Sarna quotes Erman who wrote: "It might be added that Egyptian custom required going barefoot in the presence of a superior, especially the king."

implication of such a responsibility, Moses asked God many questions before accepting the challenge. The major questions are given bellow.

The first question was: Who am I? (Exod. 3:11 NIV) By this question Moses expressed his unfitness for the task. Many people who have been used by God have had the same feeling. Isaiah recognized that he was a man of unclean lips (Isa. 6:5 NIV). Jeremiah said, "I am a child" (Jer. 1:6 NIV). Amos describes himself as "a sheepbreeder and a tender of sycamore fruit" (Amos 7:14 NIV). Paul confessed "I persecuted the Church" (Gal. 1:13 NIV). Who is fit to take upon himself the work of the Lord? God in his sovereignty has used the "weak things to put to shame the things which are mighty" (1 Cor. 1:27 NIV).

The second question was: "What is the name of the God who has sent you?" (Exod. 3:13[Paraphrase mine]). It was necessary that the source of his appointment be clearly settled. People did not elect him and he was not from the tribe of leaders in Israel. Only the name of his God could validate his authority before the people of Israel.

Thirdly, he asked, "What if the people do not believe me or listen to me?" Having been rejected by the same people forty years ago, Moses had a serious concern about his acceptance. He needed the support of the people in order to be their spokesman before Pharaoh, otherwise he

would appear as an eccentric rebel who acts for his own interest and fame.

Fourthly, he said, "I am not eloquent" (Exod. 4:10). Communication is one of the required qualities for any leader. John Davis argues that "however, we do know from a famous Middle Kingdom document that eloquence in speech was not only a desirable quality, but was that which could bring about justice and positive decision."¹²

Lastly, Moses told God, "Please send by the hand of whomever you may send" (Exod. 4:13). At this point Moses was almost sure that despite all the assurances he got from the Lord, he could not carry out the job. The commentator of the New King James Version qualifies these excuses as a series of crises of confidence in the life of Moses.¹³ I am not sure that the questions raised by Moses indicate a crisis of confidence because he had some legitimate concerns in relation to his assignment. He knew how Pharaoh would react in case this enterprise failed. Moreover, it is out of the persuasiveness of God that he got a full revelation of his mission and the assurance he needed to carry

¹²John J. Davis, Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in the Book of Exodus, Old Testament Studies (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Book House, 1977), 68.

¹³New King James Version, "The Word in Life Study Bible" (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 121-22. He speaks of "the crisis of identity, the crisis of authority, the crisis of faith, the crisis of communication, and the crisis of obedience."

out God's assignment. God disclosed his own name to Moses and promised his presence to him, He also assured him that He would bring him back to the same place for worship after He had delivered the people from Egypt. God taught him how to perform miracles and finally gave him Aaron as an assistant. God used persuasive argument, sometimes even leading to anger to break Moses' reluctance. At the end of their dialogue Moses was fully convinced of the call of the Lord and decided to return to Egypt and face Pharaoh whose heart had been hardened (Exod. 4:21).

What can we learn from the call of Moses? First of all it is important to notice that the choice of Moses was not an accident; God had prepared him for this task long before the burning bush event. Scripture reveals that there was something deep in his character even before the call. The writer of the book of Exodus has depicted for us, in two snapshots, the heart of Moses as a man who was moved to defend the oppressed. He showed his eagerness for social justice by slaying an Egyptian oppressing a Hebrew slave and also he rescued Jethro's daughters from the abuse by rough shepherds. Character is very essential in any leadership - more so in spiritual leadership. John Maxwell places 'character' first on his list of the twenty-one indispensable qualities of a leader.¹⁴ The standards for

¹⁴John C. Maxwell, The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 3.

Christian leadership listed in the books of Timothy and Titus deal more with character than skill.

God was ready to use Moses because of his knowledge. Prior to his call Moses had acquired in the royal court of Egypt the intellectual capacity and training to lead the people and even to be a writer. Davis argues that " formal education in Egypt included reading and writing of the hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts, the copying of text, instruction in letters and other formal document."¹⁵ Kaiser suggests that Moses was not only introduced to a spectrum of languages but he would also be taught a variety of subjects including the geography of Palestine.¹⁶ The Bible declares that "Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22).

It is interesting to notice that apart from his character and education, Moses needed a spiritual formation for this task which, at the burning bush, consisted specifically in knowing God and the ability to perform miracles. What can we learn today from these two facts?

First, the knowledge of the God who commissioned him

¹⁵J. J. Davis, Moses and the Gods of Egypt, 55-6.

¹⁶Walter C. Kaiser, A History of Israel, 89. He argues "If Moses was introduced to documents of training such as this, it is no wonder that he had such advance understanding of the terrain, peoples, and situations he would encounter as he moved through the Sinai Desert into Transjordan into Palestine."

was very important for Moses. God introduced himself at the start: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (Exod 3:6). The phrase "I am" is a formula of introduction, which God had used for his disclosure to the patriarchs and prophets of old testament. During their dialogue Moses insisted to know the very name of that God in order to convince the people of Israel of his commissioning (Exod. 3:13). God then identified himself as "I AM THAT I AM" (v. 14). The four letters (יהוה) of God's name are differently translated by scholars. What is common is that it is a verb derived from the Hebrew root היה 'to be' as an imperfect third person singular Qal or Hiphil. It carries the ideas of self-being or self-existence.¹⁷

The Name of God is given to Moses as the tool he needed for his assignment. This may seem ridiculous today since we know that Moses' primary task was political liberation. What has God to do with political affairs? In the Ancient Near East during the time of Moses there was a close relationship between the rule of a king and the god/gods of his nation. Whoever attempts to overthrow a king is seen as provoking the deities, thus the defeat of a nation by another was perceived as the defeat of their god/gods. The history of the rise of Old Babylon can be

¹⁷J. J. Davis, Moses and the Gods of Egypt, 65.

given to illustrate the belief of the time. After the decline of the reign of other nations in the region (Sumerians, Assyrians, Hittites) the Babylonians became rulers of the region, and Marduk, their god, was elevated above other gods even to become the creator god. Wolfram von Soden affirms that the creation epic Enuma Elish was designed to establish Marduk as king of the gods.¹⁸ In the case of Moses, the relationship with Yahweh was indispensable to the accomplishment of his assignment. Moses was not to win a military battle but the deliverance of Israel was primarily to declare the sovereignty of God over the gods of Egypt, whose Pharaoh was their representative on earth.¹⁹ Davis affirms:

The Egyptian Pharaoh did not merely rule for the gods, but he was in a literal sense one of the gods. His birth was a divine act. He was counted specifically as the child of certain deities and thus possessed the properties of deity.²⁰

God also sees the gods of Egypt behind Pharaoh: ". . . against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments" (Exod. 12:12). Knowing God was thus very important to Moses as it is today for every one sent with a spiritual assignment. Even the prophets who came after Moses had to draw

¹⁸Wolfram von Soden, The Ancient Orient: An Introduction to the Ancient Near East (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 212.

¹⁹Alan Gardiner, Egypt of the Pharaohs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 51.

²⁰Davis, Moses and the Gods of Egypt, 89.

their authority from a special encounter with and knowledge of the God of whom they were spokesmen. E. W. Heaton argues that "the feature common to all prophets in the ancient world is that they claimed to speak with the authority of their god. They were essentially spokesmen."²¹

This reminds us of those who fought for independence in Africa; many of them adopted a religious language of liberation and considered themselves as on divine assignment. Richard Sklar has the right words to describe the movements of liberation in Africa as he notices that:

Such movements have frequently involved a form of ideology which has been called 'the catastrophic myth' derived in part from Judeo-Christian eschatology and in part from indigenous cultural values. A core belief is the certainty of providential intervention, directly or through a messianic agent, in connection with an apocalyptic catastrophe for the hated conqueror.²²

²¹Eric William Heaton, The Old Testament Prophets (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), 29.

²²Richard L. Sklar, "The Colonial Imprint on African Political Thought" in African Independence, The First Twenty-Five Years, eds. Wendolen M. Carter and Patrick O'Meara (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 12-13. The same article has this comment on Patrice Lumumba, a Congolese pioneer of independence: "after his violent death at the hands of rivals who were amenable to Western tutelage, Lumumba's heirs, notably Pierre Mulele were associated with syncretic blends of Marxist-Leninist revolutionary thought and messianic supernaturalism. With effects that were not less tragic than bizarre, a nonindigenous theory was adduced to justify the nonscientific practice of utopian revolutionaries." This assertion is applicable to many revolutionary movements in Africa such as Mau Mau in Kenya and others.

It is common in Africa to see political leaders often seeking a divine approval to build themselves up in the eyes of the people even though the regime they install may be ungodly. Idi Amin Dada, the former president of Uganda, described by some writers as the most tyrannical and despotic leader Africa has ever had, started his reign as God's envoy. The U.S. Ambassador to Uganda wrote

Amin has woven his rule with an aura of spirituality. Suddenly after becoming the 'top man,' he began claiming his Moslem heritage. . . . He frequently uses God in his speech, giving the impression to the simple, believing Ugandan that he is a prophet.²³

In many countries leaders take their oath upon the Bible or Koran to affirm their allegiance to God's sovereignty. Though many political leaders are labeled as Moses by their nations, there is quite a different motif between Moses' assignment and political freedom or the theology of liberation held by some African theologians. Elmer Martens has depicted the uniqueness of biblical liberation in these terms:

The exodus event was a political event since it involved the escape of a people from Pharaoh, a political power. But the liberation pointed forward to a life with Yahweh, to a covenant community, to a life enriched by Yahweh. This goal of a religious and spiritual nature is crucial.²⁴

²³Thomas and Margaret Melady, Idi Amin Dada: Hitler In Africa (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1978), 18.

²⁴Elmer A. Martens, God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 67.

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²⁴Elmer A. Martens, God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 67.

Second, apart from knowing God, Moses is entrusted with the performance of signs and miracles to validate his commission. It is hard today to ask of every servant of God to perform miracles since miracles are a very controversial subject in Christianity today. Shall we require performing miracles from all spiritual leaders? Paul's question in 1 Corinthians 12:29 "Do all work miracles?" expected a negative answer. Paul does not reject miracles but he acknowledges that it is a gift from the Holy Spirit given to some individuals for the building of the body of Christ. In Moses world, and mainly in Egypt during his time, signs and miracles were commonly known as part of God's manifestations. We read that when Moses and Aaron told Pharaoh that they are sent by God, they accompanied their words with confirmatory signs. Without surprise, Pharaoh responded with similar signs through his magicians and sorcerers to contest the uniqueness of the God of Israel. On three occasions the magicians duplicated the signs: The rods turning into serpents (Exod. 7:12), the water turning into blood (7:22), and the bringing up of frogs (8:7). But they failed to turn dust into gnats (8:16-18) which they confessed as being the finger of God. This exchange of signs corroborates the fact that Moses' liberation was first of all a battle between the gods. There was a need for Moses to show that his God was above the god of the magicians

of Egypt. U. Cassuto argues that " magic played an important role in the life and cult of the Egyptians, just as it did in the life and cult of the people of Canaan and of Mesopotamia."²⁵ Even today people are still fascinated by all kinds of miraculous acts and in some areas miracles are the only way of evangelism. However miracles are not all from God, because in the case of the Egyptians we presume that their miracles came from the Devil or evil spirits. They may thus be deceiving proofs for those who are seeking miracles. It seems important to all spiritual leaders that they display in their daily life and actions an extraordinary character, which shows that they have been in contact with the Most High.

In summary, Moses is commissioned to be the agent of the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt. He has some good qualities but those did not qualify him to be used by God, though they played an important role in his character. He is given the name of Yahweh and the power to perform signs and miracles as tools to be used in his ministry. His first assignment is to rally the people behind him and secondly, to rescue the people from the stubborn king of Egypt. His encounter with God at the burning bush had achieved all the requirements for effec-

²⁵Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1983), 95.

tive leadership. In the following chapter we shall see how he exercised this leadership through the challenging journey in the wilderness.

CHAPTER 3

THE EXEGESIS OF NUMBERS 11-21

Background of the Book of Numbers

The name of the fourth book of the Pentateuch comes from the Latin rendering *Numeri* 'Numbers' of the Septuagint title ΑΡΙΘΜΟΙ 'Arithmoi.' This nomenclature is based on the two censuses found in chapters 1-4 and 26, and also on the several numerical lists and measurements provided in the book. The Hebrew name במדבר 'in the wilderness' is preferred by Bible scholars over the first word or group of words וידבר 'And he (Yahweh) spoke', as it has been applied to other books of the Pentateuch. The Hebrew title better describes the content of the book, which focuses on the wilderness journey. G. B. Gray argues that:

As indicative of the contents of the book the title Numbers is not aptly chosen, for it is only a small part of the book (c. 1-4. 26) that is concerned with the numbers of the Israelites. Though not chosen for the purpose, the Hebrew title "In the wilderness" would be far more suitable, since the wilderness is the scene of the greater part of the book.¹

The book of Numbers is an integral part of what is called the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. Moses'

¹George Buchanan Gray, A Critical And Exegetical Commentary on Numbers, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark LTD, 1976), xxii.

authorship of this book, as well as the rest of the books of the Pentateuch, has raised heated debates among modern Bible scholars. The controversy is even exacerbated by the complexity of the materials contained in the book. Olson notices that "the book includes narratives and laws, itineraries and census lists, list of names and lists of cultic regulations, battle reports and accounts of legal disputes."² JEDP scholars see the book as a compilation of various traditions rather than the work of a single author. They reject the Mosaic authorship in favor of an exilic or post-exilic historiographic reconstruction.³ R. B. Allen has a balanced view on the origin of the book. He stands between the critical and the conservative biases when he writes: "We will not conclude with the critical scholar that the entirety of the book came from a later time, but neither should we insist that every word and every verse necessarily came from the pen of Moses." He adds,

² Olson, The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New, 9.

³Mary Douglas, "In The Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers", Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 158 (1993): 35. She writes: "This study has followed those who consider that the editing of Numbers, along with the rest of the priestly work, was put in hand during the exile in the sixth century and completed around the fifth century BCE, when Judah was a fief of Persia." Martin Noth, Numbers: A Commentary, Old Testament Library (London: SCM, 1968), 168. He argues that "there can be no question of the unity of the book of Numbers, nor of its originating from the hand of a single author. This is already clear from the confusion and lack of order in its contents."

We may conclude, however, that it is reasonable to assume that the essential content of the book did come from Moses, the servant of the Lord. His name is repeatedly in the book, he is the principal human protagonist in the book, and he is the one with the training, opportunity, motivation, and opportunity to produce the book.⁴

The book of Numbers expands the historical account of Exodus and Leviticus by describing what happened between Sinai and the desert of Moab. Events recorded in the book cover a period of almost thirty-eight years. The arrival of the people at Sinai is recorded in Exodus 19:1, followed by the organization of the people and the institution of the law and sacrificial system. This section runs from Exodus 19, including the whole of Leviticus, to Numbers 10:11, which reports the departure from the wilderness of Sinai.

The end of Numbers can be linked to the book of Deuteronomy to show the flow of the story of Israel in the Pentateuch. The integration of Numbers to the rest of the Pentateuch is still a matter of debate by scholars who cannot explain the accumulation of various materials in the book. Philip Budd argues that "the book appears to lack the kind of information the historian of the second millennium

⁴ Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," in The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 667-68.

requires."⁵ He adds that "the trouble is that for the modern historian this material is extraordinarily hard to penetrate."⁶ Budd's assertion is influenced by his belief in the late compilation of various traditions which form the Pentateuch. He actually affirms that

The view adopted here is that as recognizable entities the priestly revisions of tradition belong essentially with that influential movement in Judaism which originated in Babylon in exilic times, and which effected a resettlement in Palestine from the late sixth century onward.⁷

It is obvious that what Budd suggests is a matter of prejudice or bias the writer carries as he approaches the book. Any reader who comes to the book as it is, in its canonical context, will find that the materials of the book of Numbers fit together with the shape of the Pentateuch within the framework of the scripture as a whole. Gordon Wenham affirms that

The material in Numbers cannot be understood apart from what precedes it in Exodus and Leviticus. The three middle books of the Pentateuch hang closely together, with Genesis forming the prologue, and Deuteronomy the epilogue to the collection.⁸

⁵Philip J. Budd, Numbers, Word Biblical Commentary 5 (Waco, TX: Word Books Publishers, 1984), xxvi-vii.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., vii.

⁸Gordon J. Wenham, Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 15-16.

The study of the structure can help understand the unity and organization of the book of Numbers.

Structure of the Book

As stated before, the book of Numbers contains a variety of materials that make it hard to reach a consensus on a single structure of the book. On the one hand we have scholars who think that it is impossible to find any coherent structure in the Book. Among them is Noth. He writes: "From the point of view of its contents, the book lacks unity, and it is difficult to see any pattern in its construction."⁹ On the other hand, many authors identify a logical organization in the book of Numbers and propose a clear structure.

Despite the disagreement, there are some markers including geographical, chronological and numerical notations upon which one can build the structure of the book. Based on the geographical notations, the majority of scholars divide the book into three major sections corresponding to three locations recorded in the book namely, Sinai, Kadesh, and Moab. Those who suggest this structure seem to be unanimous with the limitation of the

⁹Noth, Numbers, 1. This view of lack of unity in the book of numbers is shared by other writers such as Gray who rejects the present boundaries of the book as a literal unit of the Pentateuch but concludes that "the book is a section somewhat mechanically cut out of the whole of which it forms a part; the result is that it possesses no unity of subject" (Numbers, xxii-xxiv).

first section (1:1-10:10). The disagreement resides in the end of the second section and the beginning of the third.¹⁰ Raymond Brown has five sections in his commentary,¹¹ and others have more. But the most striking structure is given by Olson. He rejects the traditional use of the chronological and geographical notations, or traditional historical themes, as the basis for deriving the structure of the book. He advocates that the two censuses constitute the unifying theme upon which the structure of the book is based in the following words.

It is true that the census lists do not constitute the bulk of the book, but it is our contention that the two sets of census lists provide the key to the book's major structure. Numbers may thus be considered an appropriate title for the book. The census lists in Numbers 1 and 26 serve to divide the book of Numbers into two separate generations of God's holy people on the march. One generation ends in failure and death in the wilderness (Numbers 1-25). A second generation arises whose end is not yet determined but whose perspective is one which is poised on the edge of the promised land (Numbers 26-36). This overarching framework of the two census lists in Numbers provides the unifying theme for the

¹⁰I. L. Jensen, Numbers: Journey To God's Rest-land (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 15; Gray, Numbers, xxvi-xxix; T. R. Ashley, The Book of Numbers, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 2. Olson, The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New, 32. He observes that 33 out of the 48 commentaries he had studied adopted a three-sections outline, and 37 have the same division of the section I.

¹¹Raymond Brown, The Message of Numbers, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), 17.

book in its present form: 'the death of the old and the birth of the new.'¹²

Olson's structure seems to capture better the theological theme of the book of Numbers and reduces the number of sections to two. It takes into account the fact that in Numbers, almost the whole generation of those who were twenty years old and above when they left Egypt died during the journey. The new generation constituted by their children and those who were born in the wilderness entered the Promised Land. Olson's new approach would classify the period of this study in what he calls 'The Death of the Old' section—mainly subdivision B of this section entitled "The Cycle of Rebellion, Death and Deliverance of the Holy People of Israel with Elements of Hope but Ultimate Failure and Death--11:1-25:18."¹³ However, this study is conducted with the traditional geographical framework in mind. The section covered by this study (Num. 11-21) deals with what happened during the wilderness journey, covering the period between the departure from Sinai and the arrival at the wilderness of Moab.

¹²Olson, The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New, 83.

¹³Ibid., 118-20.

Exposition of Numbers 11-21

The focus of the study of this section will be on the rebellion of the people and its consequences – how it affected or challenged Moses' leadership. Any reader of Numbers notices that all the complaints we find in the book were not of the same nature. They arise from various circumstances and were directed towards different persons. It is not easy to make a clear distinction between the reasons of their murmuring and the persons targeted because of the complexity of the situation in the wilderness. This study will attempt to classify these complaints under three major groups. The first group of texts deals with the complaints/rebellions caused by the hardship in the wilderness, namely Numbers 11:1-3, 11:4-35, 20:2-13, and 21:4-9. The second group of texts is related to the rebellion against Moses and/or Aaron's leadership. These include Numbers 12:1-16, 16:1-35, and 16:41-17:13. The last set of texts report the rebellion against God (see Numbers 14:1-25). There will obviously be some overlaps between these divisions because of the complexity of the motives of murmuring.

1. Complaints Against the Hardship in the Wilderness

It is obvious that a person who decides to walk in the wilderness should expect to encounter hardship, since the

place is generally inhospitable.¹⁴ The situation was even tougher during the time of the Exodus than today. At that time people could not benefit from technology and did not have all the facilities developed by modern scientists to face hardships.

a) Taberah (11:1-3)

This is the first mention of rebellion in Numbers, after a section of ten chapters dealing with meticulous preparations for a peaceful and orderly walk. The incident occurred only three days into their march, as the repetition of what happened a year before (Exod. 15:22-27). Then, after their deliverance from the Red Sea, the people walked three days and came to Marah where they complained because the water was bitter and yet they were greatly thirsty.

Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp (Num. 11:1 NIV)

¹⁴S. Talmon, "מִדְבָּר" in The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, 12 vols., eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 8:87-118. He notes: "The term *midbar* refers to arid or semiarid regions whose scarcity of water makes them unsuitable for agriculture and farming settlements. This desolate area is yet in the primeval state of chaos (Dt. 32:10) or was reduced to such chaos as divine punishment for human transgressions (Isa. 64:9[10]; Jer. 22:6; Hos. 2:5[3]; Zeph. 2:13; Mal. 1:3). It evokes fear and revulsion"(p. 91).

The opening וַיִּהְיֶה of this section marks a change of discourse and also of thought. If one can trace a continuum of events from Exodus up to this point, one will realize that the one year stay at Sinai had been peaceful, after the early complaints that followed the departure from Egypt: bitter water at Marah (Exod. 15:22-27), lack of food (Exod. 16), and lack of water (Exod. 17:1-7). Now the people had gone back again to the murmuring behavior of the past.

The verb כִּמְחָאֲנִים (hithpolel, ptc mp אֲנִי + pref-כִּי 'complained') is rare, used only twice in the OT, here and in Lamentations 3:39. Gary V. Smith comments that "this root describes unjustified complaining that is a resentful vocal reaction to a hardship or judgment sent by God (Num 11:1)."¹⁵ The כִּי prefix attached to the participle has led to two different interpretations. When it is taken in its classical form as a preposition, the sentence is translated, "the people were as those complaining."¹⁶ This

¹⁵Gary V. Smith, "אֲנִי," in New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Carlisle: Paternoster Publishing, 1997), 1:462.

¹⁶Gray, Numbers, 99. The NASB translator has adopted the same view as he writes "Now the people became like those who complain." Baruch A. Levine, Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible, 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 320. He interprets it differently, he thinks that the prefix כִּי may have temporal force: "as the people grieved." So does New King James version "when the people complained."

translation seems to weaken the effect of the Israelites attitude. If the complaining was not real, how can we explain the quick and rough kindling of God's anger upon them? I agree with Ronald J. Williams who considers the prefix ק as "asseverative, expressing identity."¹⁷ The idea expressed here is that 'the people were truly complaining.' The use of the participle indicates a duration in that attitude.¹⁸ The Jerusalem Bible captures the idea as it reads "Now the people set up a lament."

The reason of their complaint is not clearly stated. It depends on how רע is understood. This word has very wide range of meanings.¹⁹ Those who, like Gray,²⁰ take רע as following the participle render it by 'adversity', 'misfortune', 'evil things', and 'hardships.' Therefore, they conclude that the people were complaining about hardships or misfortune. The editors of the BHS propose to read רעב 'hunger' instead of 'evil/misfortune'. There is no

¹⁷Ronald J. Williams, Hebrew Syntax: An Outline (Toronto: University Press, 1968), 50.

¹⁸Page H. Kelly, Biblical Hebrew: An introductory Grammar (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 200. He observes that participles used as verbs "describe continuous action in the time of the context, which may be either past, present, or future."

¹⁹Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 947-49.

²⁰Gray, Numbers, 99. Many English versions have followed this interpretation : NIV, NASB, and NRSV.

reason why the reader should change 'misfortune' to 'hunger', unless the editors of the BHS want to conform this passage to other texts in which hunger was the cause of murmuring.

When **עָוָן** is attached to the second part of the sentence, which seems to be the case here, it is rendered as 'offense.'²¹ It is more likely that the people entertained an attitude of lament and ingratitude during the journey, which called upon them the anger of the Lord. There was no specific request. Thus they did not come to Moses as in other occasions, but their complaint went into the ears or the hearing of the Lord. The BHS reports that some manuscripts prefer "in the eyes of Yahweh" to stress that their behavior was an offense to God's care. More so when this occurs shortly after entering into a covenant with the Lord at Sinai. The striking feature of this rebellion, unlike other murmurings recorded in Exodus and that which follows in Numbers 11:4ff, is the prompt reaction of God in judgment. It seems that before the covenant at Sinai (in the light of the murmuring in Exodus 15-17) God was slow to punish the people because they acted by ignorance. One should remember that they had lived in Egypt for almost four hundred years. But after entering

²¹BDB, 947-49. Allen, Numbers, 787. He reads "Now the people became truly murmurous, an offense to the Lord's ears." NKJV reads "it displeased the Lord" and JB has "which was offensive to Yahweh's ears."

into covenant with Yahweh at Sinai, some of their actions were considered as acts of rebellion, therefore, inviting punishment. The pattern of God's swift punishment to those who have knowledge or have been warned before is well established in the book of Numbers as well as in the whole Pentateuch. The punishment of Moses and Aaron illustrates well this assertion, as we shall see it later in this study. This can explain the swift judgment at Taberah when the fire of Yahweh burned and consumed the outskirts of the camp. Gray argues that "His judgment may have been the lightning or other electrical phenomena."²²

But God's judgment is not fireworks to scare people. This should remind us of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), or of Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). The volcanic eruption that consumed half of the city of Goma, in Eastern Congo and killed many people, in January 2002 is an example of a consuming fire. Though some inhabitants interpreted it as God's judgment, there is no proof in this regard. Anyhow I think that Taberah was such a scaring experience similar to what happened in Goma. It is not recorded how many lives perished in the Taberah incident, but it was such a warning to the people of Israel that Moses decided to name the place **תַּבֵּעֵרָה** from the root **בער** 'to burn', after the incident (v. 3).

²²Gray, Numbers, 99.

Despite their rebellion, God was merciful to his people in lighting the fire at the outskirts of the camp. The loss would have been great if the fire had burst in the middle of the camp. This text reveals God's character that His mercy and blessing go along with his judgment and punishment.

How did this incident affect Moses' leadership?

The people realized that they have done wrong, instead of facing God's wrath for themselves because they deserved it, they cried out to Moses for help. Moses was therefore called to deal with the real fire in the camp and also with the fire of God's anger which was kindled. He could have left the people to pay for their sin, but as a good leader, Moses chose to intercede with Yahweh for them. The verb וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל (Hithpa'el, waw consec, imperfect 3ms, פלל) indicates the role of mediation Moses played here and in other similar occasions on behalf of the Israelites.²³ Moses understood that it was his responsibility to plead with God so that the lives of his people might be spared. He did what Ajith Fernando recommends in the following statement:

²³E. A. Speiser "The stem *PLL* in Hebrew, Journal of Biblical Literature 87 (1963): 301-6. He argues that "one of the attested meaning of the hithpael is 'to seek what the simple stem designates' we need look no further than *hithannen* a common analogue of hithpael, which conveys the undisputed meaning "to ask for/seek grace, kindness; to plead." On this basis the hithpael becomes automatically "to seek consideration," whether the specific nuance be to pray, to plead, or to intercede (p. 305)

"A leader's first task is not to keep the machinery of the organization moving and fulfilling its goals but to help those under him to live and serve in obedience to the will of God."²⁴ The striking challenge to Moses' leadership, as underscored in this event, was the burden of standing in the gap for a people whose behavior is one of rebellion against Yahweh, which causes His anger to be aroused against them repeatedly. But Moses' leadership depended on the survival of the people he led out of Egypt. Their destruction would mean his failure.

The 'Taberah' story is set at the beginning of this section as an introduction to a series of incidents we propose to investigate in this study. The first verse, as translated in the Jerusalem Bible "Now the people set up a lament which was offensive to Yahweh's ears, and he heard it", seems to be a general statement summarizing the attitude of the people during the wilderness journey. The lack of specific reason of complaint in this text indicates that they had developed a mentality or spirit of complaining and this displeased the Lord. James Philip affirms that

This murmuring, we are meant to understand, became a continuing characteristic and had a cumulative effect. It was not merely that the people murmured once, or twice. They developed a murmuring, complaining spirit, and it was this that came to a climax at Kadesh

²⁴Ajith Fernando, Leadership Lifestyle: A Study of 1 Timothy (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1985), 15.

Barnea, when they failed at a critical time of opportunity.²⁵

What we need to underscore here is that whenever the people cried for food or water in the wilderness God provided without bringing punishment upon them (see Exod. 15:25; 16:12; 17:6). But when complaint became an act of rebellion against God's provision and plan, it entails divine judgment. The huge task of Moses was to protect and plead for his people in any circumstance.

The people of God today should learn from the Taberah story how to make their requests known to God without falling into rebellion. The manner of expressing one's feeling and needs before God matters a lot. God in his infinite mercy satisfies every need brought to him in a spirit of expectation and reverence. But he punishes any rebellion and murmuring spirit which cast a doubt on his readiness to rescue and help his people.

b) At Kibroth-Hattaavah (11:4-35)

The second passage of this chapter is attached to the first one without transition as to show a continuity of what we have called 'a murmuring spirit'. The story is different because the problem is specified as being the lust for an Egyptian diet. Verses 4-6 give the context of the problem.

²⁵James Philip, Numbers, in the Communicator's Commentary, 4 (Waco, TX: Word Book Publisher, 1987), 133.

4 And the rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, "who will give us meat to eat?
 5 We remember that fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic,
 6. but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna. (NASB)

The story continues with more events: The sending of quail, Moses' grievance and the appointment of seventy elders, and finally the plague which followed the eating of quail. All these events will be considered as having happened at Kibroth-Hattaavah.

The text gives two groups of people – one set against the other. The first group is described as **הַאִסְפָּסָף** — a term found only here in the OT from the root **אסף** 'to gather.' The repetition of the root may signify a mixture of people of different tribes. J. Philip speaks of a 'riff-raff.'²⁶ The rabble is more likely the non-Israelite 'mixed multitude' **עַרְבֵי רֶבֶב** which followed Israel from Egypt (Exod. 12:38). The second group is constituted by the sons of Israel, **בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**. The rabble is accused of starting the disaffection which quickly spread to the whole camp. Allen comments "Those who did not know the Lord and his mercies too easily incited those who know him to rebel against him."²⁷ One cannot minimize the effect of mixing believers

²⁶Philip, Numbers, 136.

²⁷Allen, Numbers, 790.

with non-believers, but we cannot affirm, in this text, that all the evil came from the rabble. On several occasions the Israelites had rebelled against the Lord without external incitement. The cause given in this text is not the lack of food as in Exodus 16:1-3, but the people despised God's provision of manna and felt a lust for Egyptian food. The verb **הִתְאַוּ** (hithp pf 3cp of **אָוָה** 'desire') followed by its cognate name **תְּאַוָה** is used emphatically and may be translated as "They exceedingly desired", "they craved a craving."²⁸ It has a negative connotation with regard to their lust. Allen says: "The verb can be used for positive and proper desires but is especially fitting for feeling of (improper) lusts and bodily appetites."²⁹ This root has given the name to this place (v. 35) **קְבֵרוֹת הַתְּאַוָה** 'graves of craving' as we saw with 'Taberah.' The rabble were joined by the sons of Israel in this murmuring and the writer notes that 'they wept again' **וַיָּשְׁבוּ וַיִּבְכוּ גַם**. The paraphrased rendering could be 'they also returned to their former weeping.' Though they knew that at Taberah God was angry with them and punished the

²⁸Günter Mayer, "אָוָה," in Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, 12 Vols., eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing co., 1979), 1:134-37. Mayer observes that "the *ta'avah* is an expression of man's self-assertiveness. It manifests itself as guilty rebellion against God, which must be punished" (p. 137).

²⁹Allen, Numbers, 790.

people by fire, they could not stop provoking his anger by unjustified complaint. There is no record of weeping before but the word can stand for the recurring complaint. They wanted meat, but the list of things they craved for had fish and a variety of vegetables they had enjoyed in Egypt. J. L. Du Bois comments that "appetites quickly revolt against plain and simple food."³⁰ A traveler does not need fine food with all ingredients in it. A take-away sandwich and drink suffice for the trip, and God had provided enough of it. He was even able to provide enough meat as reported in verse 31:

Now there went forth a wind from the Lord, and it brought quail from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits deep on the surface of the ground (NASB).

Moses was deeply shocked by this attitude because the people had forgotten so quickly the terrible conditions of their slavery in Egypt—horror, misery and ill-treatment. Thus for a meal they are ready to return to Egypt which they covet as if it were paradise for them. We read "Moses heard the people weeping throughout their family, each man at the doorway of his tent" (v. 11). They even asked "Why did we ever leave Egypt?" (v. 20). Keddie comments that "old miseries are so easily reborn

³⁰Lauriston J. Du Bois, Numbers, in Beacon Bible Commentary, 1. (Kansas City, MI: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1969), 427.

as rosy memories, when deeper discontent needs to be justified."³¹ Moses was so overwhelmed and discouraged by the rebellion of his people, that he could not bear it any more. In his plea to God, he used strong arguments that some scholars reprove.

B. Maarsingh speaking about Moses' plea says "he leveled a series of reproaches at the Lord - reproaches so severe that we might well marvel that they should have been included in the biblical record, so close do they come to outright blasphemy."³² The reproaches alluded to by Maarsingh include the following:

So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you afflicted your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that you have laid the burden of all these on me? Did I beget them, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a guardian carries a nursing child,' to the land which You swore to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all these people? For they weep all over me, saying, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now- if I have found favor in Your sight - and do not let me see my wretchedness!" (11:11-15 NKJV)

It is not easy to understand the situation of a leader, who like a father, has worked unselfishly at the expense of his own life for the good of his people. And yet what

³¹Gordon J. Keddie, According to Promise: The Message of the Book of Numbers, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1992), 83.

³²B. Maarsingh, Numbers, 39.

he harvests is thanklessness and even the attempt to thwart God's provision for a land which flows with milk and honey and a return to Egypt. His prayer was that he may be released from bearing, like a mother, the people. Even if it is a relief of death, Moses would prefer it. It appears, Yahweh understood the trouble and feeling of Moses and answered him without condemnation. It is written that not only was Moses displeased by the murmuring of the Israelites, but God was also exceedingly angry. In verse 10 we read **וַיִּחַרְאֲפֵי יְהוָה מְאֹד** 'the anger of the Lord was greatly kindled.' The writer shows us that God gave priority first to answering Moses' petition before addressing the craving of the people. Moses was asked to gather seventy elders of Israel to be empowered by God to help him carry the burden (vv. 16-17). Readers wonder if these are the same elders suggested by Jethro (Exod. 18), the seventy who went with Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24) or are they a different group of people. It does not matter whether they were the same people or not. The occasion here is quite different. These people were to be endowed with the Spirit of God to enable them to accomplish their task. This had not happened before. The curiosity raised by this story is, why should God take a portion of the Spirit from Moses instead of giving each one of them his own share from above? On the day of

Pentecost the Spirit in the form of tongues of fire rested upon each of the disciples. Without opening a debate on 'one in many', let us say that this ceremony has much to do with the carrying out of one mission. Elders were called to work together with Moses for the same goal. What a symbolism if they can be known as sharing the same spirit. Those who received a share from the spirit of Moses were already known as elders, but this endowment qualify them to carry the burden with Moses. There is a sense of identity in sharing the same spirit. Paul speaks of the Spirit of Jesus given to believers for their adoption. When one receives the Spirit of the Son he becomes son of God (Gal. 4:6-7). Therefore, anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ is not a son/daughter of God (Rom. 8:9).

In African tradition this event can be easily understood because it fits the succession of power from one leader to another. In many African communities, the founding father of the community received his authority through divine and supernatural attributes. He is, therefore, in contact with the god/gods for the prosperity of his people. Those qualities have to be passed down to his successors, by an act of transfer of authority - spitting on the successor, handing a stool, knife, animal skin, or any object supposedly given by a divinity as a symbol of the nation's might. Richard Hull describes such

an identification of a successor with his predecessor in these terms:

In the Kingdom of Kongo in West Central Africa, successive Kings sought to acquire their predecessor's charisma by assuming his name and title and emulating his personal mannerism. In essence, they became their predecessor's 'brother,' despite a possibly distant family relationship.³³

It appears that the spirit coming upon a person (accompanied with prophecy) as a mark of leadership inaugurated in this text had been applied to several judges and kings. Moses was happy with this corporate leadership. When they reported that two people in the camp were prophesying, Moses refused to be jealous of sharing his leadership with other in this bold statement: "Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them" (11:29 NKJV).

After dealing with Moses, the Lord turned to the people and promised to answer their prayer. He asked him to tell the people "Therefore the Lord will give you meat and you shall eat. You shall eat not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor twenty days, but for a whole month" (11:18b-20a). The answer was beyond what Moses, the friend of God, could believe. Surely, before reporting the message he questioned God if he really meant to feed the

³³Richard W. Hull, Munyakare: African Civilization Before the Bantuuree (New York: John Wiley & Son, inc., 1972), 133.

people with meat for a full month. His argument was simple: "The people among whom I am are 600,000 on foot, yet You have said, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month'" (v.21) He concluded that there were not enough flocks, herds, and fish from the sea to satisfy the appetite of such a great population. Moses had moved from faith to human logic, and on this ground nobody can understand God's mighty deeds. Gray raises a question on the exodus account that the people left Egypt with "large droves of livestock" (Exod. 12:38 NIV). He wonders why a people rich in flocks should cry out for flesh and why Moses felt that it was impossible to provide enough meat to feed the people.³⁴ It is possible that after one year in the wilderness the flock had decreased and we know that pastoral people cannot decimate a whole flock for meat because it is part of their daily life.

God reminded his servant by asking him, "Has the Lord's arm been shortened? Now you shall see whether what I say will happen to you or not" (v. 23). This question was sufficient to renew Moses' trust. He became convinced that God was able to perform a miracle and thus took a step to make a public announcement: "So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord" (v. 24a).

³⁴Gray, Numbers, 103.

The Lord's answer came wrapped with mercy and judgment. Their craving for meat would be satisfied, but that same meat would carry divine judgment because of their rebellion. God is merciful and just all the time and he cannot change his character. He told them you shall eat "until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you" (v. 20). However, judgment came while they were still eating:

But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the lord was aroused against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague. So they called the name of that place Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving (vv. 33-34).

The sentence "they buried the people who had yielded to craving" has raised some questions. Were the people affected by the plague only those who craved – namely the rabble? The context shows that the people of Israel were punished **וַיִּךְ יְהוָה בְּעַם מִכָּה רַבָּה מְאֹד** "And Yahweh smote the people (Israel) with a great smiting" (v. 33b).

One can learn human limitations from this passage. Despite all the moral, spiritual, and intellectual qualities Moses displayed in the exercise of his leadership, he remained a human being – weak and limited. He was prone to break under the pressure of the people. It is easy to criticize Moses or any spiritual leader saying

that a person of faith should remain unshakable. But the reality is that, instead of making their work more difficult, leaders need help and understanding like any mortal being. Moses was appointed to lead an ungrateful people expressing needs, legitimate sometimes, but unjustified in the circumstances of the wilderness they were in. He was overwhelmed by his responsibility that he sought relief in death. "If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my wretchedness (רע)" [11:15 NKJV]. It is interesting to see that God did not rebuke Moses' complaint even though he came to the point of seeing death as a solution. The reason was that he did not challenge God's character like the people did. He was simply depressed by his loneliness in leadership and his inadequacy to find food for the people. Many of God's servants in the Bible had gone through the same experience: Elijah (1 Kings 19) and Jeremiah (Jer. 15 & 20). What should be credited to Moses' account in this story is that he went before the Lord with his burdens. He did not rebel or quit the job, but he expressed all his feelings and emotions to Yahweh. The result is that he was not punished. In fact God seems to be very cooperative with him and proposed to empower more people to lighten his burden. This shows that God does not judge on the basis

of appearances, but he goes deep into the heart to find the motivation behind each act. Moses, in this chapter complained because of the burdens of his responsibility and wanted God to appoint helpers, but the people were craving for meat. The result was that God punished the people but spared Moses. Though God rebuked him for his doubt of God's mighty power to provide enough meat to all the people for such a long period, it was a fatherly admonition without negative overtones. It is not recorded that Moses prayed to stop the plague. Obviously, God told him that he would answer the prayer of the faithless Israelites with a limited measure of discipline.

The point is that there is not much one can do to educate the masses not to rebel against God. There is always a core of 'rabble' able to rally the people into revolt, even among Christians. What matters most is the attitude of the leader as he faces the discontent of the people. Two major laws of spiritual leadership can be drawn from this story.

First, the leader should remain dependent on God and ready to share his emotions and feelings with Him alone. It is of no help to engage into argument with a discontented people. They will not even listen, because the leader is the first accused whenever a misfortune strikes the community—even in the case of a natural calamity. The leader is supposed to have a solution for

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everything. Therefore, the leader should find refuge in the Lord for guidance and appropriate solution. In this regard, his own experience with the Lord counts. That is what Paul meant when he refused to give a position of leadership in the Church to a new convert (1 Tim. 3:6).

Secondly, the burden of leadership will be light for those who know how to build a leadership team. This story shows us how to go about it. First the team should be composed of members from among the community, so that they may be accepted and they can identify themselves with their people. The second requirement for being a member of a leadership team is to be endowed by God with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This is an indispensable enablement without which one cannot stand in ministry. We have seen that judges, prophets and kings in the early monarchy had this special mark from Yahweh—His Spirit was upon them. Several times this empowerment was manifested with prophesying. The NT has kept both these requirements for the Church's ministry. The early Church was instructed: "Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task" (Acts 6:3 NRSV [emphasis mine]).

Things are not quite straight in African Christianity because in some Churches the leadership is held by people of questionable faith and members are recruited on the basis of criteria that are not biblical. The Kibroth-

Hattaavah story should be taken as a case study for leadership in crisis.

c) The Sin of Moses and Aaron (20:2-13)

Chapter 20 brings us to the end of the wilderness wandering when the people were ready to march towards the conquest of the Promised Land (chap. 21). The old generation is almost gone. This is illustrated in the opening verse of the present chapter by the death of Miriam the prophetess and the death of Aaron in the concluding verses of the chapter (vv. 22-29). There were two events recorded in the chapter: The refusal of Edom to give passage to Israel through its territory and the sin which disqualified Moses and Aaron from entering Canaan. The structure of the chapter can be outlined as follows:

- The Death of Miriam (v. 1)
- The Sin of Moses and Aaron (vv. 2-13)
- Inhospitability of Edom (vv. 14-21)
- The Death of Aaron (vv. 22-29)³⁵

The writer introduces us to the heart of the problem in this chapter by these words: "Miriam died and was buried. Now there was no water for the community" (20:1c-2a NIV). What he means is that the old generation which left Egypt is dead—symbolized by the death of Miriam. Their children were to face the same problems they had faced during the journey. The lack of water came first

³⁵Allen, Numbers, 865.

like it happened forty years earlier (Exod. 15 and 17). Unfortunately, the new generation was not different from their fathers. The same cause produced the same effect. They also threatened Moses and Aaron to give them water to drink. The need which comes first in the desert is always water. We read **וַיִּקְהֻלוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן** 'They assembled against Moses and Aaron' (Num. 20:2). The root **קהל** is usually positive, from which derives the term 'assembly, community', and carries the idea of rebellion when followed by the preposition **על** (Num. 16:3; 17:7 BHS). The people shouted at their leaders whom they accused of bringing them to the desert for their death (20:4). They would have preferred to remain in Egypt where they had water and fruits. The recurring murmur is linked with water and food. They said that it would have been better for them to die with the others (v.3; an allusion to those of the old generation who died during the journey); or to remain in Egypt (v. 5). Whenever the people encountered a problem in the wilderness, they tended to minimize the horror of the slavery in Egypt, and this was an offense to the Lord who rescued them from bondage. It was also painful to Moses, whom God used to implement the deliverance. How often Moses and Aaron have heard such insulting discourse from the people during the thirty-eight years of the journey! One would have thought that

they were already used to it. But the rest of the story tells us that they were hurt as before.

The first reaction of Moses and Aaron was the strategy which had always helped them in such a situation, namely not to argue with the people but to seek first the advice of Yahweh. The appropriate place for this encounter was the 'tent of meeting' (v. 6).

Curiously, on this occasion God responded with amazing grace. There was no condemnation or rebuke, no fire to consume the rebellious people. Had God found the people's claim legitimate? It seems so because he took positively their request. However, Moses and Aaron did not expect tenderness and gentle words from the Lord towards his people after their assault on them. God willingly decided to provide water and meet the need of their thirst. Moses was commanded to take the rod, appear before the congregation with Aaron, and speak to the rock to bring forth water. The execution of God's instruction was not done well this time. Consequently, it was the turn of Moses and Aaron to receive a severe rebuke from the Lord. He prevented them from entering the Promised Land. What went wrong? What was the real sin of Moses and Aaron? Scholars do not agree on the real nature of the sin of Moses and Aaron. Some interpreters have concluded that it

is impossible to know what the sin was on the basis of Numbers 20:8-11, because "the story is mutilated."³⁶

The following table gives us the divergence between God's instruction and its execution by Moses and Aaron.

God's command	Moses' action
v.8 Take the rod	v.9 So Moses took the rod before the Lord
You and your brother Aaron assembly the congregation	v.10 Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock.
-no command	He said to them, " Listen now, you rebels;
You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock	Shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?
Speak to the rock	v.11 Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod
Let the congregation and their beasts drink.	the congregation and their beasts drank.

NB: the text (NKJV) is rearranged to fit our purpose and the bold shows what is different from the initial command.

This table shows clearly that God's instructions were almost entirely followed with few divergences. But it was enough for God to punish his servants. God's instructions

³⁶Gray, Numbers, 261-62. He summarizes his doubt in these words: "It is possible that Moses struck the rock and refused to speak to it through lack of faith in Yahweh's power; it is possible that he struck it twice, because he thought a single stroke would be insufficient. But if it is difficult to discover Moses' sin, it is more difficult to discover Aaron's, for he did not strike the rock either once or twice, and, indeed, all that the story says of him is that he assisted Moses to assemble the people at the rock." Other scholars have defined Moses' sin as anger, disobedience, or self-centeredness (Budd, 218-19; Wenham, 150-51; John Sturdy, Numbers, The Cambridge Bible Commentary [Cambridge: University Press, 1976], 140).

were to be fully executed, when the execution is partial the Bible calls it sin. Without entering the endless debate of the nature of that sin, God himself defined what they did in verse 12: "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel." From this verse, the sin of Moses and Aaron is twofold—mistrust and lack of sanctifying God before the people. It is not easy to understand what God meant by this, mainly when both Moses and Aaron fell under God's judgment. It appears clearly that there was a change of God's command. Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses struck it twice. The temptation was great for Moses who was asked to take his rod as at Rephidim where he was told: "Take in your hand your rod. . . and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink" (Exod. 17:5-6). One of the questions which remains without an answer is: Why did God command Moses to take the same rod if he did not have to use it? I think that the people were not aware of the change of the instruction, because they knew that in such an occasion Moses had in the past used his staff to bring forth water. If it is so, then striking the rock has nothing to do with treating Yahweh holy in the sight of Israel. Moreover, Moses seemed to have acted alone. Thus why should Aaron be involved in that sin?

What I find remarkable in this story is that Moses was asked to speak to the rock but he decided to speak to the people. His speech was harsh—an outpouring of anger and frustration. Really, the speech he uttered before the rock was out of place. If this speech was agreed upon by both Moses and Aaron, then the punishment of both of them could be understood. In this speech the people of God is called "you rebels" and yet God asked kindly "let the congregation and their beasts drink." By the question "shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" Moses and Aaron put aside the source of water—who is God—and took his place. They were not the ones to bring forth water, God was. They have also changed God's grace and willingness to quench his people's thirst, into rebuke and insult. God wants to be honored and receive all the glory from his people as he cheerfully provides for their needs. Moses and Aaron did not give praise to the Lord as on other occasions when they assured people that God would do it. On several occasions the Bible testifies that Moses and Aaron did everything as God commanded. But in this chapter they had rebelled against God's word (20:24). Many reasons could be adduced to explain the change of Moses' character. I think of two important factors.

First, Moses and Aaron had just lost their beloved sister (v. 1). They deserved compassion and comfort from the people for this great sorrow. Instead they are

threatened bitterly by insensitive persons who were seeking their own satisfaction.

Second, there was an accumulation of frustration and bitterness for over thirty-eight years of wilderness wandering, so that even the meekest person could end up exploding. He had patience with the old generation and was expecting a new spirit with the young generation but the people remained as rebellious as ever. As human beings we would give him indulgence because he had sound reasons. But God saw it differently and the judgment was so severe that we ask ourselves if there was more to it over and above our superficial understanding.

Should one conclude that Moses' leadership was a failure because he was refused to enter Canaan? Such a hasty conclusion would contradict the biblical facts. Moses continued to serve and lead the Israelites until his death. The book of Numbers reports the death of Miriam and Aaron, but Moses remained active till the end of the book. He led the 'new generation' in conquering the Transjordan region and established the people who should live on that territory. He conducted a second census in preparation of occupying Canaan. He reminded the people of the law. He took time to mentor Joshua, his successor, and when his time to leave this world arrived, he presented him before the people. The Bible declares: "Moses took Joshua and made him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole

assembly. Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him" (Num. 27:22-23). The book of Deuteronomy portrays the last days of Moses with a very positive note. It says that before handing the leadership over to Joshua, Moses acknowledged that his time was over. "I am now a hundred and twenty years old and I am no longer able to lead you"(Deut. 31:1). His song and the blessings he pronounced upon Israel are full of predictions to prove that he left as a conqueror. When he died he had the special grace of being buried by God himself (Deut. 34:5). Even though on the day of his death he saw Canaan from a mountain without entering it, but on the mountain of transfiguration Moses was there in the Promised Land, talking to Elijah and Jesus (Matt. 17:3). Without raising the debate on this text, we affirm that Moses did not fail in his leadership nor was he rejected from being God's chosen leader of Israel.

A lesson one can learn from this incident is that God requires more from the leaders than from the people being led. Therefore, to take upon oneself the position of leadership is almost sacrificing one's life. This can explain the reluctance observed by all those God called to ministry in the Bible. They knew what the Bible declares: "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required, and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more" (1 Pet. 2:48). Moses is one to whom

much was given because he had known God in a special way unlike anyone else, and for this reason, more was required from him. The Church should learn that any disobedience on the side of leaders is magnified and invites severe punishment because they should sanctify the Name of God by their life and conduct. Moses' disqualification to enter Canaan is a reminder for all leaders who want to minister to the world as God's messengers. There is no code of conduct which one could follow without the possibility of failing. It is a matter of humility and letting the Holy Spirit lead the path.

d) The snake of bronze(21:4-9)

The Israelites had started their march towards Canaan. They passed their first test of the battle of conquest as they destroyed Arad (vv. 1-3). They renamed the city **חֶרְמָה**, 'Hormah', meaning 'destruction' in memorial of their victory. The name comes from the root **חרם**, 'to devote, ban, or exterminate.' This root reminds us of 'herem' in the book of Joshua (6:12), where the city of Jericho with everything in it was to be devoted to Yahweh. One could think that after such a victory the Israelites would joyfully and confidently pursue their journey. But one should not forget that Israel was inclined to murmuring. As soon as they were set for the next step, they reverted to their rebellious spirit. Matthew Henry

argues that "those that are of a fretful spirit will always find something or other to make them uneasy."³⁷

The first reason for their frustration was that 'they became impatient on the way' literally 'their soul became short', from the root קצר 'be short or come short.'³⁸ The people may have been depressed because they were not allowed to go through Edomite territory. They had to make a long detour from Hor, going south in the direction of the Red Sea so that they might find a way on the eastern frontier of Edom (v. 4). This change of the itinerary was physically exhausting. They expressed their stress by 'speaking against God and against Moses [דבר ב] (v. 5). They repeated, in their anger, their preference of the slavery in Egypt and despised the deliverance God had given them: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" This accusation was a real blasphemy to God's mighty acts of deliverance. The oppression of Egyptian slavery appeared more bearable to the people of Israel than facing the lack of water and food on the march towards the Promised Land.

In previous stories when the people complained to the Lord for food and water, God's anger would bring judgment

³⁷Matthew Henry, "Numbers," in Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1999), 218.

³⁸ BDB, 894.

but at the end their need was satisfied. This time things were different, because there was no food or water supply provided—even after their repentance. How should we understand their complaint "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread and no water?" (v. 5b). This complaint should be considered as a statement describing the general situation in the desert, but not the real need of the moment. It is true that they could not bake their own bread as they used to do in Egypt, but God had abundant provision of manna for the entire nation every day. And water was given according to their need. The true reason of this murmuring is given in the last part of the sentence

וַנִּפְשְׁנוּ קִצָּה בְלֶחֶם הַקֶּלֶקֶל "and our soul abhors this worthless food".

The disaffection is stressed by: (1) קִצָּה (qal pf 3fs קִיץ to loathe, abhor).³⁹ In verse 4 their soul was 'short', but now their soul is fed up with manna and they cannot bear it any more. They would have preferred to go hungry rather than having this kind of food. Why? (2) The word הַקֶּלֶקֶל occurs only here and may be derived from two different Hebrew roots.⁴⁰ If we relate it to the adjective קל 'light',

³⁹Walter Baumgartner and Ludwig Koehler, The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, trans. and ed. M. J. E. Richardson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 3:1089. "קִיץ" with ק of person and of thing, to feel disgust, repugnance for.

⁴⁰BDB, 886-87; Wenham, Numbers, 157.

then the people meant that manna was a light meal unable to satisfy their appetite. It was good for babies. If it is a derivation of the root קלל 'to despise', then they were treating manna as a worthless meal, good to be thrown into a rubbish bin. Whatever may be the root from which the word comes, the rendering is the same. The people of Israel despised God's blessing, treating it as nothing. Therefore, they had provoked God's anger and the response was (הַנְּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרָפִים) 'fiery serpents' (v. 6). They are named after the burning effect of their poison (שָׂרַף 'to burn' same root with 'Seraphim').⁴¹

When the people saw that many were killed, they repented, asking Moses to intercede with Yahweh on their behalf. They acknowledged "we have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you" (v. 7). As usual Moses was challenged either to sympathize with the misfortune of the rebellious and murmuring people and intercede for them or sending them off because again and again they repeated the same mistake despite God's mercy and discipline. The Bible declares that as soon as the people asked Moses "'pray for us', Moses prayed for the people" (v. 7c). One wonders if this repentance was sincere, because many times in the past the Israelites had repented, only to fall back

⁴¹BDB, 977.

to the same mistake. Humanly speaking, it would be hard to trust such a people again. But God, who has asked us to forgive 'seventy times seven' set himself as the example (Matt. 18:21). God heard Moses' prayer and offered the solution. He ordered him to "make for you a fiery serpent" (v. 8). Some manuscripts add here 'of bronze'. Moses made a serpent of bronze, the two words are almost similar in Hebrew (שֶׁנָּה 'serpent'; נְחֹשֶׁת 'bronze'). The instruction was that it be held up on a staff, so that whoever looked at it would live. This story has been interpreted in different ways by scholars. Some have seen behind this symbol the superstitious beliefs and magical practices of the Ancient Near East and Egypt. The fact that later on it was destroyed as leading the people to idolatry has strengthened the position of those who consider the bronze serpent as borrowed from Canaanite or Egyptian mythology.⁴²

We believe that this story is not a myth because Jesus used it to illustrate his saving ministry. He spoke of it as a genuine biblical fact. He called whoever is dying in sin to look at the cross for his life (John 3:14-16). This illustration should convince us that we are not

⁴² Karen Randolph Joines, "The Bronze Serpent in the Israelite Cult" Journal of Biblical Literature 87 (1968):245-56. She argues that "there is reason to believe that Moses carried a bronze serpent, but as a means of sympathetic magic to repel serpents, a motif he received from the Egyptians" (p. 256).

dealing with an Ancient Near Eastern myth, but a historical fact. Wenham's comment on this story is an interesting answer to the skeptic:

If this is the right way to interpret the story of the copper snake, it is clear how our Lord could use it as an apt picture of his own saving ministry. Men dying in sin are saved by the dead body of a man suspended on the cross. Just as physical contact was impossible between the bitten by snake and the copper snake, so sinners are unable to touch the life-giving body of Christ. Yet in both situations the sufferers must appropriate God's healing power themselves, by looking at the copper snake or 'believing in the Son of man' (Jn. 3:15).⁴³

Moses' task in this story was not easy. What do you do when people despise God's grace, abhor the food they earlier appreciated (Exod. 16:31), and then accuse God and Moses of seeking their death in the wilderness?

The situation could be even exacerbated by the fact that they came to beg Moses to pray for them and yet he himself was under judgment—he had been refused entrance into Canaan due to a sin they had provoked. But Moses showed his greatness of spirit by transcending his own misfortune and by interceding with God to spare the life of the Israelites. What a lesson for many leaders today who are hurt by the behavior of their congregation. Sometimes they have been the object of personal criticism, or have lost their position in the Church because of false accusations. They become bitter and are unable to offer any

⁴³Wenham, Numbers, 158.

service or to help solve problems arising in the Church. People are quick to excuse themselves because they have been morally or spiritually wounded and therefore have the right to show disinterest in all the affairs of the Church. The model of spiritual leadership painted by Moses in this story is that a leader should be able to stretch his capacity of forgiving to the extent that even in such an extreme case, he will be able to control his own feeling and continue serving the community that hurts him. Moses had transcended his own situation and could fit in the category of charismatic leaders as given by Bernard M. Bass:

The leader with Charisma attains a generalized influence which is transformational. It transcends the immediate situation and ordinary exchanges of compliance with promises of rational reward or threats of immediate punishment.⁴⁴

What Bass means is that a leader with charisma is capable of self-sacrifice, unquestionable loyalty and devotion that impacts his followers. We should notice that this charisma is an endowment from God. May God help us to have such endowed leaders in the African Church.

2. Rebellion Against the Leadership of Israel

All the complaints studied in this book are, in one way or another, a challenge to Moses' leadership. Whatever

⁴⁴Bernard M. Bass, Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 39-40.

may be the cause that induced the murmuring, people tended to condemn the leadership. In this section, the study will concentrate on texts that deal with a direct leadership struggle among the Israelites.

a) Miriam and Aaron reject Moses' supremacy
(12:1-16)

Up to this point Moses had been threatened by people in need of water and food supplies, but the rebellion reported in this text comes from the members of Moses own family. Miriam and Aaron, blood relatives of Moses, opposed him in order to undermine his leadership. It reads "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses" (v. 1). The form **דבר** is used here and in verse 8 to express hostility. The same form has a positive sense in verses 2 and 6. The two forms are identical, the reader should take the context into account to distinguish them. The order of names in this clause has raised some question because in verses 4 and 5 Aaron is mentioned before Miriam. Many commentators think that Miriam might be the principal instigator of the rebellion, with support from Aaron. Reasons for this assertion include: Her name comes first in agreement with the verb, the issue of Moses' wife would be more Miriam's concern than Aaron's, and she was the one to be punished.⁴⁵ The initial attack on Moses concerns his Cushite wife.

⁴⁵ Allen, Numbers, 797.

Several interpretations of the Hebrew כּוּשׁ have been given to identify the nationality of the woman. The word can translate three distinct districts or peoples.⁴⁶ (1) Ethiopia (the usual use of the word as rendered by the LXX); (2) A district east of Babylon (Cassites); (3) North Arabian people referred to by some OT passages (2 Chron. 14:9; 16:8, Hab. 3:7). If this latter is admitted, then the Cushite refers to Moses' wife Zipporah, the Midianite. This verse raises a problem of racism or tribalism which has been used before launching into the real attack against Moses' position. It is common in African Christianity to see leaders suffering from racial or tribal discrimination. Several have lost their position or have been killed because of this. This reminds us of Kenneth Kaunda, the former president of Zambia, who was refused in 1996 to become a presidential candidate because he was accused of coming from Malawi and yet he was among the father of the independence of Zambia and had, in the past, ruled over Zambia for twenty seven years.⁴⁷

Is it fair to accuse Moses for not practicing the Hebrew endogamy?—a man who was brought up in Pharaoh's

⁴⁶Gray, Numbers, 121; Ashley, Numbers, 223-24; and Philip, Numbers, 144-45.

⁴⁷Gregory Mthembu-Salter, "Zambia: Recent History," in Africa South Sahara 2000, 29th ed. (London: Europa Publications, 1999), 1160-61.

palace, cut off from his Hebrew roots and later on became a refugee in the Midian territory. We read that Zipporah was given to him as a gift because of his loyalty in keeping Jethro's flocks. Other interpretations about Zipporah's death and Moses' remarriage to an Ethiopian wife have no biblical evidence.⁴⁸ In his book Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament, David T. Adamo cites the Cushite wife of Moses as one of the Africans recorded in the Bible. He vehemently defends the African origin of Kush and Kushite.⁴⁹ This study will not launch into that debate in order to remain close to the Scriptures.

Verse 2 shows that Moses' marriage to a Cushite woman was a pretext but the real reason for this contest lies in the special relationship Moses had with the Lord. The heart of their resentment is revealed in the following questions: Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not also spoken through us? (12:2). It is interesting to notice the use of **דבר נ** in this sentence, with the preposition **בְּ** introducing the agent of God's word and not

⁴⁸John J. Owens, Numbers, 119. He notices that "among the many legends about Tharbis the daughter of Kirkanos, king of Ethiopia, is one that tells that Moses married the queen of Ethiopia and ruled that country for 40 years."

⁴⁹David T. Adamo, Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament (San Francisco: Christian Universities Press, 1998), 14. He argues that "in Old Testament, *Kush* and *Kushite* are used to refer to Africa and Africans in terms of a particular geographical location, and as names of persons who came from Africa or whose ancestors are of African origin."

hostile speech as in verse 1. One also notes the emphatic use of the two words for 'only,' אֵין; וְלֹא to question the uniqueness of Moses. The answer to the rhetorical questions asked by Miriam and Aaron should be "of course God has". They were right because Miriam is called 'the prophetess' (Exod. 15:20) and Aaron was the high priest—the mediator between Yahweh and his people. The bitter criticism of Miriam and Aaron went swiftly into the ears of Yahweh "and the Lord heard it" (v. 2c). We can imagine how disturbing it can be when a colleague or an assistant joins the enemy camp to destroy one's image. Unfortunately, it happens many times that enemies are recruited from among close relatives. The narrator does not tell us how Moses reacted to this hurtful attack from his siblings, but he only describes him as 'the meekest (very humble man) than anyone else on the face of the earth' (v. 3). The word עָנָו 'meek' (qere עָנִי calls the reader to pronounce the last syllable) has been used by some critics to reject Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. They believe that no humble person could make such a comment about himself. To avoid the difficulty, some scholars have chosen 'miserable' as a possible rendering of the root עָנָה 'to be bowed down.'⁵⁰ But it is not strange to find such

⁵⁰BDB, 776.

an expression in the Bible. Jesus spoke of himself saying "I am gentle and humble in heart" (Matt. 11:29). Whatever rendering one prefers, the narrator wants to tell us that Moses did not seek to vindicate himself. He, most likely, let the criticism go without reaction.

However, God's reaction came without delay (פְּתָאִים). The three of them were called to the tent, but it was Miriam and Aaron who were summoned to answer the charge they brought against Moses in God's presence. God's vindication was twofold. First, He confirmed the uniqueness of Moses position in His sight. Aaron, Miriam, and all the prophets could enjoy having visions and dreams, but with Moses Yahweh spoke "mouth to mouth". Moses had even the privilege of seeing God's form or likeness (תְּמוּנָה).⁵¹ Secondly, He rebuked them: "why are not you afraid to speak against my servant, against Moses?" (v. 8). In his anger the Lord left them: "Yahweh departed, and the cloud departed from over the tent" (vv. 9-10), leaving the two grumblers to carry the weight of their guilt. Miriam was stricken with leprosy and would be cut off from other Israelites. The text concludes with the repentance of Aaron who recognized Moses' leading position over them by calling him אֲדֹנָי, 'my lord.' He confessed that they had

⁵¹Ibid., 568.

acted foolishly (v. 11) and pleaded for the healing of their sister. Moses, in his role of intercessor, prayed to the Lord who granted forgiveness and healing, but Miriam had to spend seven days outside the camp in shame before joining the people.

* The revolt of Miriam and Aaron is of great application in the African context. Churches are torn apart by all kinds of strife and division because of the struggle for leadership. The attitude of Moses in this revolt should inspire all those who are facing opposition that they do not need to fight to protect their seat, because God who has established them will vindicate them. If leaders and those who are led can apply the lesson taught in this story, the Church will be saved from many strifes and divisions.

b) The Revolt of Korah and his group (16:1-35)

The rebellion of Miriam and Aaron was just a prelude to a bigger rebellion against God's appointed leadership. The story seems to treat together two different movements because of their common goal—to overthrow the authority ordained by God. The narrator has helped us with the genealogy of the leaders of the 'gang.' The first movement is led by Korah a Levite (v. 1a) who contested the fact that the priesthood was given to the descendants of Aaron

alone among all the Levites. The second group consisted of Dathan, Abiram and On (v. 1b), from Reuben, the oldest son of Jacob. The name of Korah is mentioned first throughout this chapter as the chief leader of the revolt. The rendering of the NIV "became insolent" deriving the verb לַקַּח from the root יָקַח, 'to be bold/insolent'⁵² instead of לָקַח 'to take' describes well the attitude of Korah. The author may have captured the insolence of the whole group through Korah—the head of the rebellion. He rallied 250 honorable men (אֲנָשֵׁי־שֵׁם 'men of a name'), chosen among the leaders of the assembly. They probably came from the tribe of Levi because Moses asked them to bring their censers to the tent to challenge the priesthood of Aaron. In verse 17 we read: "Each man is to take his censer and incense in it—250 censers in all—and present it before the Lord." The two movements—Korah with the Levites and the Reubenites—rose together against Moses and Aaron.

The verb קוּם לִפְנֵי carries the same idea of revolt as the other verbs found in the book [דָּבַר בְּ (12:1) and קָהַל עַל (20:2)]. 'They rose up against Moses or they confronted him.' The Levites claimed that "all the congregation are holy and the Lord is with them, why should Moses and Aaron be given special responsibility?" (16:3). They were

⁵²Allen, Numbers, 835. He notes that the root יָקַח is not attested as an Hebrew word but is borrowed from Arabic.

quoting Exodus 19:6 "you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." But they had forgotten that there is a condition to becoming a 'holy nation' given in verse 5 "if you obey my voice and keep my covenant." What they were doing was disobedience, which disqualified them from being holy, because they were rejecting God's chosen leaders. After consulting God in prayer (16:4), Moses challenged them that they were not holy and therefore unqualified to do the priestly work. Moses told them, "if you are not contented with your present assigned work, then take censers and burn incense before Yahweh, and let us see if he will approve your priesthood" (vv. 5-6 paraphrase mine). He warned them that rejecting Aaron's priesthood was rebellion against God who appointed him. "Therefore it is against Yahweh that you and all your congregation have gathered together. What is Aaron that you murmur against him?" (16:11).

Things were even worse for the group led by Abiram and Dathan (On is not mentioned as the story progresses). They refused to have any contact with Moses, whom they qualified as an usurper of power. They repeated twice their refusal to answer Moses' summon, "No we will not come" using the verb **נָעַלָה**, Qal impf 1cp from **עָלָה** 'go up' (vv. 12, 14). Were they unhappy to lose their first born right and be led by Levi, the younger son? Nothing is

clearly stated about the motive that thrust their resentment against God's appointed authority. They asked Moses "Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you should keep acting like a prince over us?" (16:13 NKJV). The verb rendered as 'acting as a prince comes from the root שָׁרַר (hithpael) 'to be lord.' They accused Moses of trying to kill them in the wilderness, and transferred God's promise of Canaan -a country flowing with milk and honey-to oppressive Egypt (16:12-14). The attitude of Dathan and his group displeased Moses greatly, he became angry and showed his humanity in this prayer to God: "Pay no attention to their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, and I have not harmed any of them" (v. 15). He, therefore, asked God to treat the rebels as they deserved since all their allegations towards him were false. God was ready to wipe out all the congregation as he told Moses: "Separate yourselves from this congregation, so that I may consume them in a moment" (v.20). When Moses realized that God had decided to destroy the whole nation, he came back to his role of leader and defender of Israel. He interceded with God for them. But the evil was so great that it required discipline. God is merciful but also just, he does not let sinners go unpunished. He wanted to teach the congregation

a lesson by punishing the offenders. According to Moses' wish, the judgment should be by an extraordinary act to convince the people that it came from God. The three instigators of the revolt Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were swallowed alive with all their belongings into the ground (16:31-34). It was horrible that God had chosen to practice 'herem' upon his own people, destroying women, children, and everything belonging to the three leaders of the rebellion. From this judgment, leaders should learn to be more considerate because they bear more responsibility and are likely to be severely punished. The gang of 250 men were consumed by fire as they tried to burn the incense. Their families were spared to mark the difference between the judgment of leaders and that of the rest of Israel.

The Korah-Dathan rebellion was a serious attack on Moses leadership. But his character in handling this revolt, despite some human weakness, can be emulated by the African Church today. His first reaction to Korah's complaint was to seek God's advice and thus "he fell on his face"(v. 4). Then, he told them that if leadership comes from the Lord, let God himself confirm whoever he chooses. Therefore, any revolt against God-appointed leadership is rebellion against the Lord. The case of Dathan and Abiram was pushed to the limit of tolerance. Not only did Moses try to have a talk with them and they

refused, but he took some elders among the people and went to meet them in their tent. Although Moses wished that Dathan and Abiram be disciplined, he prayed to God to preserve the nation when he understood that God was going to extend his judgment to all, including the innocent ones: "O God . . . shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?" (16:22). The knowledge that one receives from God should make the person patient and long-suffering, because after all God will vindicate his chosen one and therefore does not need to avenge or defend his position. If this principle is understood, we could be spared from many divisions and conflicts in the Church.

c) The Congregation Smitten by a Plague
[16:41-17:13 (17:6-28 BHS)]⁵³

One could think that after the severe punishment of the two groups of rebels, the people would be seized by fear and become obedient. This expectation ignores the inclination towards sin imbedded in the Israelites. Just one day after the correction, the whole congregation murmured, *לִן*,⁵⁴ against Moses. They accused Moses of having

⁵³The division in this study follows the English version.

⁵⁴Gary V. Smith, "לִן," in New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, 2:780-82. This verb and its cognate nouns are mainly found in the wilderness narrative in Exod. 15-17 and Num. 14-17. Only two occurrences are recorded outside the wilderness, Josh. 9:18

caused the death of God's people: "You have killed the men of Yahweh" (v. 41). The death of the three leaders of the revolt and the 250 representatives of the assembly was considered as a failure in Moses and Aaron, whose leadership had precipitated the death of others in order to strengthen their position. The congregation assembled in opposition to Moses and Aaron (קהל על), but Moses and Aaron found their refuge in the presence of the Lord (Tent of meeting-אהל מועד). God reacted as He did in 16:26. His glory covered the tent and He announced his intention of destroying the whole congregation. The people started dying of a plague. Consequently, Moses and Aaron had to intercede for healing. Aaron was asked to stand between the dead and the living with his censer to stop the plague, even though the plague had already killed 14,700. After the judgment the Lord wanted once more to teach the people that He is the one who appoints leaders and that to fight for leadership is to rebel against the Lord. To bring an end to the recurring fight for leadership positions, God decided to use representative staffs to settle the matter of priesthood. Each tribe was to bring its staff with their

and Ps. 59:15. It means to grumble, complain, and murmur. The word describes hostile complaining, strong words of discontentment, angry rejection or verbal attack of a dissatisfied people. The Bible reports that God heard this complaining and saw it as an act of rebellion. Other synonyms are used in the book of Numbers such as אָנָן Hithpo. complain, murmur (11.1).

name on it. God said that the staff that sprouts, blossoms, and bears fruit would indicate God's choice of the priesthood. In the presence of all, Moses brought from the presence of the Lord the staff of Aaron that had sprouted, blossomed and bore fruit. The staff was kept in the sanctuary to be a memorial for future generations who would question Aaron's priesthood. The Israelites were filled with fear when they realized they had offended God by opposing God's chosen priests. They asked, "Are we going to die?"(17:12). If this fear was sincere then it would silence them once for all.

Is God still interested in solving battles for leadership in our Churches? Yes He does, since the Church is His, and He cannot change. Is there any visible and convincing sign—like the sprouting, blossoming and bearing of fruit—taking place in the Church in order to help people settle disputes of leadership? This is a very crucial question today and I think that we do not have a straight answer because there is no equivalence today with the miracle of Aaron's staff. What happened in this story was a unique experience which has never been repeated. However, the demonstration of God's power has been displayed in many ways throughout all the generations. I am convinced that in some cases of extreme rivalry for leadership, the Church can ask for God's intervention, and by an unmistakable sign He may show the one He has chosen. In the normal run of the

Church, the story of the budded staff, symbolizes the spiritual maturity of a Christian called to leadership position. I consider the sprouting, blossoming and bearing fruit as three stages of growth of a tree. To settle any dispute about leadership, the Church should discern the person in whom the Spirit has worked and deposited his grace enough to produce Christian character and action. Even though full spiritual maturity is never reached in this world, nevertheless, the progression towards Christian maturity can be discernable. Jesus himself told us that "you will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). If we lay aside our worldly mechanisms of choosing the leaders and settle our differences, and seek God's advice through prayer and meditation of his word, it will be better with us. This would keep people from challenging or opposing God's choice lest they invite judgment and God's correction. The death of more than ten thousand people in this passage should be considered as a real warning to those who dispute or challenge God's appointed servants. They should learn to keep their hands off and meditate on what the Psalmist says, "Do not touch my anointed ones, and do my prophets no harm" (Ps. 105:15 NIV).

3. Rebellion Against Yahweh: The People refuse to enter Canaan (14:1-25)

God was the ultimate target of all the murmurings against Moses and Aaron. They were his appointed servants

and in opposing them the people wanted to express their disaffection of God's plan and rescue. But nowhere is the people's rebellion against God clearer than in the reaction to the spies' report. We have selected this text to illustrate the rebellion of the Israelites against Yahweh. The idea of sending spies to explore the land was a good one, but the report of this expedition was not.

It is strange how people are more attracted towards the pessimistic rather than towards the optimistic view. The spies' report gave both views—pessimistic and optimistic. In 13:27 we read the positive report as follows: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit." The next verse gives a negative view, "Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large, we even saw descendants of Anak there." The first part of the report did not catch people's attention, even though it was accompanied with material proof. Caleb and Joshua stuck to the optimistic view and expressed their faith in God's provision to give them victory: "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it" (13:30). But the ten fearful spies dwelt in the discouraging portion of the report. It begins with the phrase of doubt **כִּי אָמַרְתִּים** "except that, but" (13:28). They confessed their lack of faith saying, "We

cannot attack those people; they are stronger than we are" (13:31). Again "We were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight" (13:33). The congregation unfortunately leaned on the side of the majority. The choice seemed easy to make between ten and two. This story confirms what we already know, that the majority is not always right. The lack of faith of the ten infected the congregation, whose loyalty to God had been questionable throughout the wilderness journey. In 15:1-2, the narrator uses different words to express the idea that the whole congregation participated in this revolt (כָּל־הָעֵדָה, 'the whole congregation'; כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, 'all the children of Israel'; הָעָם, 'the people').⁵⁵

The whole assembly raised their voices and wept that night to express their discontent (14:1). Although the text mentions the murmuring (לִזְנוֹן) against Moses and Aaron, the principal accused in this story is Yahweh. They said: "Why did Yahweh bring us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims?" (14:3a). The assumption was that they had been drawn in this adventure against their will, and now they wondered why God decided to involve them in an escapade that was

⁵⁵Ashley, *Numbers*, 245. He argues that "by the use of these designations he emphasizes that all the people were, indeed, involved in the rebellion that is to follow."

bound to fail. They had forgotten that Yahweh acted on the basis of their cry.

The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod.2:23-24)

The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. . . (Exod. 3:7-8).

They have forgotten the song of victory they sang on the banks of the Red Sea when Pharaoh's army drowned into the sea saying:

In your unfailing love you will lead
The people you have redeemed.
In your strength you will guide them
To your holy dwelling (Exod. 15:13).

Instead, they questioned God's ability to protect them and were afraid that they would fall by the sword of the enemy. They also doubted his love and care for their wives: "Our wives and children will be taken as plunder" (Num. 14:3a). The solution to their problem was, in their sight, either dying in the wilderness or going back and remaining forever slaves in Egypt: "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness!"(14:2b). But the wish of death was quickly dismissed by what seemed to them to be the better choice - to return to Egypt. They consulted together and said

"Would not it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" (14:3b). The idea pleased everybody but they could not count on Moses and Aaron to lead them in this return. They knew their devotion and commitment to pursuing God's plan of redemption. Therefore, they decided to spurn God's appointed leadership: "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt" they said (14:4). The spirit of murmuring and rebellion against the hardship of the journey and against Moses which developed during this trip was brought to its climax in this decision. The return to slavery in Egypt meant the rejection of God's liberation, the spurning of the Promised Land and the thwarting of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The rebellion was so awful that Moses and Aaron prostrated themselves in front of the whole Israelite assembly. They knew that God would not tolerate such an offense to his grace. Therefore they pleaded with him for mercy (v. 5). Joshua and Caleb expressed their disappointment by tearing their clothes as a sign of mourning. In their sorrow, Joshua and Caleb tried to bring back the people to their senses, extolling the land flowing with milk and honey, which the people were about to forsake if they returned to Egypt (v. 8). They attempted to persuade the assembly by mentioning that אִם־חָפֵץ בָּנוּ יְהוָה "if God is pleased with us" there is nothing to fear. They assured the people "he will give us victory" if

they stopped rebelling against him (vv. 8-9). Their argument could not convince the rioting mob, instead they threatened them with stoning (v. 10). The mind of the people was set once for all, nobody could bring them back. Thus, God swiftly intervened by appearing at the entrance of the tent to hinder them from harming the righteous (v. 10b). God's verdict towards an obdurate people was severe, "I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them"(v. 12). God spoke of sweeping them all from the surface of the earth and starting a new nation greater and stronger from Moses.

Moses' leadership was once again challenged. Should he let God exercise his just judgment, or plead with him to spare, despite the behavior of the wicked congregation? Moses, the meekest man, chose to intercede in favor of his people. What a man of character he was! In his plea Moses did not try to indulge the people, nor seek his own interest. He was concerned about Yahweh's reputation among the nations. He said "but the Egyptians will hear about it" (v. 13). Again "the nations who have heard of your fame (name in LXX) will say, 'the Lord was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath; so he slaughtered them in the wilderness'" (vv. 15b-16). The news of a people delivered by the mighty hand of their God from the bondage of Egypt had surely spread and nations around were watching them. Moses told God that

killing a rebellious people would not matter, but what mattered was what image of Yahweh would this act display in the sight of the nations. It may ruin Yahweh's reputation. What example of deep intercession is given here by Moses! The priority of his prayer is not meeting the people's needs, but that God's honor may be preserved and his name glorified. Moses also reminded God that His character might be tarnished by the slaughter of the entire nation. "The Lord is slow to anger, rich in love, and forgiving sin and rebellion" (v. 18a). The word 'love' used in this verse translates **חַסֵּד**, 'unfailing love.' But Moses also confessed the justice of the Lord in these words: "Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished, he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (v. 18b). The point of Moses' intercession was summarized as follows: "In accordance with your great love/mercy (**חַסֵּד**), forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now" (v. 19).

God was favorable to Moses' prayer and answered, saying, "I have forgiven them, as you asked" (v. 20). However, forgiveness did not mean exemption from punishment. What appears clearly is that God's covenant was not called off and the rebellious people were not exterminated immediately. They have provoked his wrath,

therefore they were left to reap what they have sown (vv. 21-38). The people were forgiven but because they had repeatedly seen God's glory and yet continued to rebel, they would not enter the Promised Land. All those who were 20 years and above would perish in the wilderness. Only the small children for whom the people feared would see Canaan. The adults had wished to die in the desert. God used their own words for their punishment. The ten spies who gave a bad report and made the entire community rebel against Yahweh were at once smitten to death by a plague, but Caleb and Joshua were spared. The forty days the spies used to explore the country became a numerical paradigm for the suffering, one year for each day. They would wander for forty years in the wilderness until all those over the age of twenty would die, except Joshua and Caleb (vv. 34-35).

They tried to correct their mistake by another act of rebellion but it did not work (vv. 40-45). After they had refused to enter Canaan, God asked them to turn south and continue wandering. They realized the danger of refusing God's command, so they decided, "We will go up to the place the Lord promised" (v. 40). But the Lord and his servant Moses were not with them. They resolved to do so without Moses and without God, and the consequence was disastrous. They were defeated by the coalition of Amalekites and Canaanites.

The story of the spies and the bad report spread by the ten evil men pushed the persistent rebellion of the Israelites to a catastrophic conclusion. Ten influential leaders of the people were killed on the spot; a foolish decision of fighting the Amalekites to conquer the land when God had already given the sentence of forty years of wandering, turned into a tragic defeat; and the delayed journey, where the old generation which left Egypt had to perish are remembered as the fruit of disobedience to God. Only Joshua and Caleb had set an example of defenders of the truth even in the midst of unbelieving and hostile hearers. The image of Moses, the servant of God, pleading with God and interceding in favor of a rebellious people remains a striking feature of spiritual leadership.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Summary

In this study we have examined Israel's rebellion during the wilderness wandering and its challenges to Moses' leadership. The section of our investigation in the book of Numbers (chaps. 11-21) has shown that the journey through such an inhospitable area was not a pleasant one. The situation was exacerbated by the murmuring and rebellion of the people. The people were expecting a prosperous future in the land that Yahweh had promised them, after experiencing the mighty deliverance from the hands of Pharaoh and after entering into covenant with Yahweh at Sinai. But, as soon as they left Sinai they realized that the way to liberty was full of difficulties. On several occasions they expressed the desire of going back to Egypt. The people quickly developed a murmuring spirit which turned into rebellion and threatened Moses' leadership.

In order to understand the nature of the rebellion in the wilderness, we observed three major groups in the text analyzed. In each group we examined the people's attitude

in challenging Moses' leadership and his reaction to the people's attitude. The analysis of related texts in the three groups can be summarized as follows.

First, the lack of food and water remained the major cause of the murmuring during the journey. In some cases, the people had expressed a real need of food and water supplies, since these are in general rare commodities in the wilderness. But in several instances, their demands were beyond the need for basic provisions one could expect during a journey. They longed for fish, meat, fresh vegetables, and all the foods they had enjoyed in Egypt, so much so they described God's supplies (the manna and the quails) as tasteless. Not only were their demands disproportional, but their manner was also provocative and offensive. All those recriminations were voiced against Moses and God. Their attitude had often invited God's anger against them. One would have expected Moses to break down under the heavy demand and acknowledge that he is unable to provide water and food in such an arid environment. On the contrary, Moses turns confidently to God and pleads with him not to destroy the hungry people but to cater for their need. Moses had learned from his encounter with Yahweh at the burning bush that the redeemer of Israel was able to perform any miracle, so that the people might believe that their God was the creator God. The only text that describes Moses as being

outside of his confident temperament is when the people cried for water at Meribah (20:2-13). He displeased God, so that both he and Aaron were punished and kept from entering the Promised Land. We argued that this should not be considered as a failure in Moses' leadership. He continued successfully his journey leading the people and interceding for their needs until the time of his departure. At the age of 120, Moses, as the hero of the deliverance of Israel, rested in the hands of Yahweh.

Second, some complaints about leadership originated from those in leadership position with Moses. They targeted Moses special relationship with God and his supremacy. The battle for leadership was started by his siblings, Aaron and Miriam, who were not happy to see Moses given authority over them. Aaron and Miriam claimed equality with him in God's dealing with them (12:1-16). Another movement of contest was led by the Levite Korah and 250 Israelite leaders. This movement was reinforced by the support of the three Reubenites Dathan, Abiram, and On. They raised a serious riot against God's chosen leaders (16:1-40). They charged Moses and Aaron with usurpation of power over a holy nation, and accused them of unworthy motives (16:3). Later, the grumbling against Moses and Aaron spread to the whole congregation, that is after the punishment of the rebellion of Korah and his 'gang.' They accused Moses of causing the death of God's

people (16:41-17:13). Moses' response to all the complaints and revolts against his position of leadership was not to engage in a contest but to leave the matter in the hands of the Lord who would vindicate his chosen servant and silence the rebels. In each case, God intervened to confirm his appointment and brought punishment to those who rejected God's established authority. It is unfortunate to see that self-ambition is never contented with what one has. It will develop into coveting other people's position and in seeking greater influence and higher position, until the Lord in his sovereignty decides to put an end to the lustful ambition to power.

Third, the development of a murmuring spirit among the Israelites was not limited to grumbling against their leaders. They often grumbled, in general, against the hardship of the journey. However, the ultimate target was Yahweh himself. Eventually, the revolt against Yahweh reached its climax in the 'story of the spies' (chaps. 13-14). The discouraging report of the majority of the spies turned into a revolt against Yahweh. The people refused to go and take the land, instead they wanted to return to Egypt. They accused God of leading them to death. Thus they rejected Moses' leadership and proposed to choose a new leader who would take them back. The two faithful spies are threatened with stoning. Had their plan succeeded, the outcome would have been the cancellation of

God's plan of redemption and his covenant with the patriarchs. There would have been no Israel as God's possession on the Promised Land of Canaan. The offense was so great that God's wrath was kindled against this rebellious community. Would Moses become a shepherd without a flock, since God had decided to wipe out the entire congregation? Moses was not ready to let his flock be destroyed, even though he was promised by God to become the head of a new generation. In his role as shepherd, he pleaded with Yahweh on behalf of his erring flock using every argument to stir up God's mercy. Although the people were sentenced to die in the wilderness, they did obtain forgiveness. There still would be a people of Yahweh to inherit the Promised Land. The immediate destruction was exchanged with a progressive death over forty years. The consequences were disastrous for those aged twenty and above, and they deserved it. Things would even be worse if Moses did not stand in the gap before Yahweh.

From this study, it becomes clear that a murmuring spirit among those who are led constitutes a real challenge and test on the part of the leader. The community will pay a price, sometimes a very high price for their behavior, but the heavy load is carried by the leader. Some of the challenges analyzed in this study can be summarized as follows. Moses was challenged to provide for all the needs felt by the people during the journey,

and many of them were beyond his means. His refuge was in Yahweh who has unlimited resources. The people questioned his appointment and many threatened to overthrow him from his position of leadership. To solve the problem he waited upon the Lord who was ready to vindicate him and confirm by several signs that he is God's chosen servant. There was the tendency expressed by the people towards going back to Egypt as they faced problems. To return to Egypt meant the failure to accomplish the mission of leading Israel out of Egypt and would cast a doubt on Moses' calling. Therefore, Moses had to remain firm, pleading with the people and with God to continue the journey in order to conquer the land. Moses had a personal experience with Yahweh. He knew God's character "slow to anger, abounding in חַסְדִּים 'steadfast love', forgiving iniquity and transgression" (Num. 14:18). He also knew God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham, he has promised to give the land of Canaan to the Israelites, and now they were on their way to that territory. Therefore, when on several occasions, God threatened to destroy the whole nation because of their rebellion Moses would earnestly intercede for forgiveness. The destruction of the people being led means actually the end of the leader. There would not be anyone to lead, thus Moses' adventure would hit a wall and die off.

Where did Moses draw the resources to resist or tackle these multiple challenges? From two main sources. First, from his own character. Moses is described as a meek, compassionate and courageous leader. He was a person who loved his people, but also who reacted strongly against injustice and oppression. Secondly, from his relationship with God. Moses was an unfailing intercessor, always prostrate before the God he first met at the burning bush. These two sources of leadership quality are stressed in each text we have studied.

The African Church Context

The Church of Christ in Africa is working under an environment of frustration because of the multiple problems affecting this continent. Some of these problems seem to be imposed upon the population in the Church from the political and economic crises that face the African continent. The population of Africa, including those in the Church, hoped for better life but they perceive no hope from the present political and economic trend. There is a feeling of deception and unfulfilled dreams. In his book Christianity in Africa, Cecil Northcott expressed the dreams of the early sixties as follows:

It is always dangerous to prophesy about Africa as the continent, in spite of its obvious handicaps, is capable of producing something quite new in politics, citizenship, in government and in the Church. This possibility continues to hold a fascination for the observer in all these fields of African life, and

they are even more fascinating now that Africa has thrown off so much of the tutelage which the colonial powers once provided.¹

This assertion translates the hope carried by Africans as well as by external observers. More than thirty years later José Chipenda deplores that,

The decade of the 1980s found us deeply immersed in predictably recurring crises. Wherever we went we found problems, whatever we did was challenged. Hope fought against hope as the way ahead was not clear. The crises have continued through the 1990s. In some countries, there is war, drought, famine. In all regions unemployment, crime, disease, prostitution are on the increase. It is predictable that if present trends continue, in the decades to come lack of hope and frustration will lead to violence and civil strife in many countries.²

The prediction of Chipenda is accurate, the frustration has continued and in the 21st century several African countries are experiencing violence and civil strife. Among them are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burundi, and Central African Republic. This increasing frustration has turned into a murmuring and rebellious spirit in the people. There is hardly a book written about Africa, be it secular or religious, which does not evoke the wretchedness of this continent. The increasing number of refugees and

¹Cecil Northcott, Christianity in Africa (London: SCM Press LTD, 1963), 117.

²José Chipenda, "The African Church at the Crossroads," in The Church and the Future in Africa: Problems and Promises, ed. J. N. Mugambi (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1997), 26-7.

urban slums on the continent illustrate the break down of our political and economic system. How can a church meet its budget when half of the members are recruited from among the poor? This explains the dependency on Western donors experienced by the African Church. It seems that the way to our liberty has become a wilderness wandering. We hoped to reach quickly our religious, economic and political autonomy, but we are ourselves caught in the net of poverty and misfortune. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, people are asking if it is not wise to go back to "Egypt"—which in our context can be understood as going back to traditional values. But God had told his people Israel about Egypt that "you are not to go back that way again" (Deut 17:16). Politically and culturally we cannot go back to the pre-colonial Africa. One of the philosophies proposed by Mobutu Sese Seko, the late president of Congo, was to return to our ancestral values and reject all Western civilization (in French "Retour a l'authenticité"). But he realized that it was no longer possible to go back to that lost past; thus he was obliged to change that philosophy to something else. One should notice that even that lost past was not Paradise either.

Internally, the Church is facing some structural problems that cannot be blamed to politics and the economy. The most striking problems are division and strife within the assemblies. Many Churches have split

more than once begetting several denominations, often carrying the same doctrine. Several factors have been evoked to cause conflicts in the African Church. Among them are mismanagement, poor leadership, and missionary inheritance. I am convinced that Elie Buconyori in his book Tribalism and Ethnicity points to one of the most important causes of internal conflicts in the African Church. He observes,

Tribalism and ethnicity have become major enemies of the development of the human being in general and the African person in particular. . . Shall the Church make a difference when all other institutions shall get drenched into tribalism and its devastation?³

One would expect the Church to make a difference in dealing with tribal and ethnic clashes. Unfortunately, the Church is caught in the same devastating warfare. In the same book Buconyori quotes a Kenyan magazine reporting on the election of a Roman Catholic bishop in these words:

The election of Rev. Njoroge, a Kikuyu, as a new bishop of Kajiado, a traditionally Maasai area but now heavily populated by Kikuyus, led to the kind of inter-tribal rivalry that one usually sees and expects in political elections.⁴

Some people thought that mainline Churches were facing problems because they could not address African realities and therefore, started what are called the

³Elie A. Buconyori, ed., Tribalism and Ethnicity (Nairobi: The AEA Theological and Christian Education Commission, 1977), 2.

⁴Buconyori, Tribalism and Ethnicity, 9.

African Independent Churches. But they have brought more confusion than solving the problem of the African Church.

John Mbiti argues,

Most of them lay great emphasis on independence from missionary control. It is to be noted, however, that while five thousand of these movements have severed themselves from mission Churches, another one thousand are still attached to mission Churches. Independence is chiefly in terms of organization, leadership, decisions, finance and direction. In other matters they copy mission Churches, and some of them want to be linked with Churches both in Africa and outside.⁵

The effect of external and internal frustrations on the Church has developed a murmuring spirit among believers. Whoever is called to leadership in the Church in Africa, more than in the West, should be prepared to deal with a community living under stress. It is not rare to hear people blaming all those considered as author of their misfortune. They blame colonialism, missionary movement, the Church, Western oppression and exploitation, mismanagement and poor national governance, and finally God, the author of natural calamities that impoverish Africa. The study of the wilderness experience can help the African Church and its leadership to face challenges due to the situation prevailing in the African setting.

Lessons for the African Church

The Church in Africa under the grip of the present misery

⁵John Mbiti, Africa Religions and Philosophy (Nairobi: Afropress LTD, 1983), 235.

and anxiety can learn from the wilderness experience of the Israelites. The most important lesson one can grasp is that under God's chosen leadership people will come out of the wilderness, no matter what the incidents encountered in the journey. Everybody is not seeing Africa as a doomed continent. Apart from the 'prophets of woe' there are people like Caleb and Joshua who convey a message of hope. "The Lord is with us, do not be afraid" (Num 14:9). In his

book Hope for Africa, George Kinoti affirms,

My conviction is based on several facts. First God wills peace and prosperity for the African people just as he did for the Jews and still does for every human being. To that end God has endowed the continent with adequate resources (land, minerals, oil, forests, wildlife and waters).⁶

On the other hand, people should be warned that a murmuring and rebellious attitude is to blaspheme against God and attract punishment upon those who persist in behaving in that manner. My fear is that we might not succeed to change the attitude of the masses. Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb tried to plead with the Israelites to be wise but in vain. Our thesis is that it is up to the leaders to brace up to the challenges. From our study, the following lessons can be drawn.

⁶George Kinoti, Hope for Africa (Nairobi: International Bible Society-Africa, 1997), 69. See also Tokunboh Adeyemo, Is Africa Cursed? (Nairobi: CLMC, 1997). In this book, he has explored the numerous resources found in Africa as God's blessing upon us.

First, those in positions of leadership in the Church should be assured of their calling and maintain a good relationship with God so that whenever they are challenged with respect to their position He might vindicate them. This would secure their leadership, but also help them to stand beyond tribal or people-group lobbies that seek to control the Church. This raises the problem of how and by what criteria leaders in African Churches are chosen. We should abide by biblical standards for leadership in the Church in order to have spiritual leaders able to handle the murmuring and rebellion among our nations as Moses did. The Church must appoint to leadership positions persons who have a real call from God and who are attested by the community. They should be mature Christian with moral and intellectual characteristics required for the task. Only such leaders are fit in God's sight.

Second, leaders should be compassionate and sensitive to the needs of their people. Some of the needs felt by the community are basic for survival—like the food and water in the wilderness. Prayerfully, the leaders should seek ways to meet those needs instead of blaming the economic or political crises African nations are facing. They should be 'problem-solvers' and not 'problem-seekers.' Leaders must follow the holistic mission of God in Jesus Christ. He comforted those who mourned, fed the hungry, and healed the sick. Moses knew the power of God

to provide for the material and physical needs so that he was ready to pray for them. Today the Holy Spirit can empower the Church to meet our physical and material needs. Adeyemo writes,

In essence, the Holy Spirit comes with power: power to proclaim the good news of the kingdom; to heal the sick, to raise the dead; to drive out spirits; to cleanse leprosy; to give peace to the troubled hearts; and to make crooked straight. Oh, how we need a demonstration, and not a definition of this power amongst us today.⁷

If leadership in the African Church displays these concerns, then, most of the murmurings from needy people will be quenched and God will be glorified in our midst.

Third, to deal with a murmuring people, a leader should not be judgmental but one who can identify himself with those he/she leads. How many times had God proposed to destroy the whole assembly and start a new generation with Moses? But Moses always stood with his people, even when they had sinned, to plead with God to spare them. A shepherd who forsakes his flock disqualifies himself from the task. Some leaders in the African Church have betrayed the congregation, working more for political influence than protecting the people of God. They are quick to call upon the police or to take the assembly to court for their own interest. They have failed their wilderness test.

My main point, as I conclude this study, is that

⁷Adeyemo, Is Africa Cursed?, 75-6.

leaders should learn to handle the murmuring attitude in their community. But the model set by Moses, in which all solutions revolve around God's intervention cannot be applied to political leadership. In fact, the constitutions of many African countries express the secularism or religious neutrality of the state. Therefore, Christian leadership should take the challenge of meeting the murmuring and rebellion of our people. Challenges are obvious in Africa and in the Church because our people are suffering. If people see the Church heading towards its future kingdom despite external hardship and internal strife, others will be encouraged to imitate and the continent will be saved from doom. There is an assignment for the Church to help political leadership solve the problems of our continent. We know that political leaders are looking for a model that the Church as salt and light of the world can portray. If the Church can play its role and pursue its divine commission, it will be a source of inspiration for this continent. I am convinced that setting a model that politicians can emulate is the most important task of the African Church. It is my prayer that the leadership in the African Church will lead our people through this wilderness experience until the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

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