

Seven Wilderness Rebellions

Numbers 11—21

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[A] General Grumbling		
11:1-3		21:4-9
3 verses And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes (11:1a) fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. (11:1b) Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. (11:2)	<i>Short narrative</i> <i>General complaint</i> <i>Fiery judgment</i> <i>Intercessory prayer</i>	6 verses And the people became impatient on the way. (21:4) Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. (21:6) And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned” ... So Moses prayed for the people. (21:7)
[B] Demand for Food / Water		
11:4-34		20:1-13
⁴Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat ... ⁶But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” (11:4, 6) We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. (11:5)	<i>Demand for food / water</i> <i>Long for Egypt</i>	²Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. ³And the people quarreled with Moses and said ... ⁴“Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle?” (20:2, 4) “And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.” (20:5)

Moses was displeased. ¹¹ Moses said to the LORD, “Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ... ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.” (11:10b-11, 14-15) Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving. (11:34)	<i>Impatience of Moses</i> <i>Placename ascribed</i>	¹⁰ Then Moses ... said to them, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” ¹¹ And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice ... ¹² And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” (20:10-12) These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and through them he showed himself holy. (20:13)
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[C] Rebellion Against Leaders

12		16—17
Miriam and Aaron ... (12:1a) spoke against Moses ... ² And they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (12:1b, 2) And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them (12:9) ¹⁰ When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow ... ¹⁴ But the LORD said to Moses, “If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut outside the camp seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.” (12:10, 14)	<i>A family / clan member</i> <i>Rebels against leadership</i> <i>Righteous anger at rebels</i> <i>Public reaffirmation of leader</i>	Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi ... took men. (16:1) They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them ... Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?” (16:3) And Moses was very angry (16:15) ² “Speak to the people of Israel, and get from them staffs, one for each fathers’ house ... ⁵ And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout. Thus I will make to cease from me the grumblings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you.” (17:2, 5)

[D] The Anti-Exodus

13—14

²⁷ And they told him, “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.
²⁸ However ... We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” (13:27-28a, 31)

² And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! ... Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” ⁴ And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” (14:2-4)

¹¹ And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in

spite of all the signs that I have done among them? ¹² I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.” (14:11-12)

¹³ But Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear of it ... ¹⁵ Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, ¹⁶ ‘It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.’ ¹⁷ And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, ¹⁸ ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.’ ¹⁹ Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.” (14:13, 15-19)

“The central purpose of the narrative [11:4-35] appears to be to show the failure of Moses’ office as mediator for the people. By means of the various parts of this narrative, the kind of leadership exhibited by Moses is placed alongside the role of the Spirit of God. The ideal leadership of God’s people is shown in the example of the seventy elders ... In other words, this narrative shows that Moses longed for a much different type of community than the one formed under the Law at Sinai. He longed for a community led not by a person like himself but a community guided by God’s Spirit [11:29].” (John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 385)