

THE PENTECOSTAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NUMBERS 11

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ABSTRACT

Numbers 11 describes a very significant interconnectedness of the Spirit of God and leadership/ministry of God's people and prophetic activity. This is established as the LORD answered the first great need of Moses in leading the people of Israel on the journey through the wilderness of the Promised Land with a special demonstration of his Spirit. The empowering of the 70 elders accompanied by a prophetic experience foreshadowed the Acts 2—Pentecost event. Therefore, Number 11 should be considered as the foundational Charismatic/Pentecostal passage in the Old Testament.

Introduction

Numbers 11 describes a very significant interconnectedness of the Spirit of God and leadership/ministry of God's people and prophetic activity. It is the first expanded reference to the Spirit of God in the Old Testament. Contained in it is the only wish expressed by Moses, perhaps the only wish in the Old Testament for God's people's spiritual endowment: 'I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!' (v. 29, NIV). The result is that Numbers 11 should be viewed as the foundational Charismatic/Pentecostal passage in the Old Testament, even though commentators, in general, have given little attention to it.

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Context of Crisis

Within the book of Numbers the context of ch. 11 is God's response to his people's response to the first specific trial on their journey from Sinai, through the wilderness, to the land he promised them. Thus, ch. 11 appears in a context that deals with the pressures of fulfilling God's mission in the world. Numbers 1–10 gives the LORD's instructions on organization and holiness to prepare his people to follow him on the journey to the place of their mission. Chapter 10 concludes with Moses' prayerful expression of faith, repeated at the start and end of each day's march, that the LORD would lead them in victory, scattering their enemies and dwelling among them. Then, Numbers 11 begins with the negative response of God's people to the first hardships, *ra'*, as they began their journey. The people complained over their adversity and the LORD consumed with fire some of them on the edges of the camp, but Moses interceded for them. Then, the people wept over having only the manna to eat. The text explains how the manna was provided and met their need, implying that they were rejecting a wonderful, supernatural, provision of the LORD. God's response was anger, which meant that he was about to deal with their sin, firmly. The text says that Moses was displeased with the situation, or literally that it was 'an adversity or hardship in his eyes', using the same word, *ra'*, as was used for what the people complained about in v. 1. His pitiful complaint to God, which follows, uses this root in terms of both the verb (in v. 11, 'to bring trouble on') and the noun (in v. 15, 'ruin' NIV). This strongly suggests that Moses was doing the same thing the people had done—complaining about hardship the LORD had allowed him to experience. Thus, Moses was having the same problem of trust in the LORD that the people were having; the only difference is that his complaint focused on a different cause. Unlike them, Moses may have appreciated the manna, but he could not take the pressure of providing for their needs/greed as their leader. The people had implied that if he did not meet their demands they would not continue the journey. Moses seemed to be experiencing a common trap of leadership in which leaders focus on themselves rather than God and begin to think they are supposed to be the source of the provisions for the people, and of the success of the mission. The result is an overwhelming sense of burden. Moses even expressed incredulity that the LORD could provide enough meat for the people, (vv. 21–22). All of this was in sharp contrast with the faith expressed at the beginning of the march, recorded at the end of ch. 10 (vv. 35–36), as well as back in

10.29, where Moses said to his father-in-law, ‘the LORD has promised good things to Israel’ NIV.¹ The fact that this first trial was over food and internal rebellion may have caught Moses by surprise and he may have been unprepared to respond properly because he would more likely have been anticipating attacks from without and probably expected to see more of the dramatic and powerful acts of God like the ones that he and the people had just experienced in the Exodus. It is interesting that the first revelation of Pentecostal-like understanding of empowering of the Holy Spirit deals with mundane matters of people problems over basic daily needs, here perceived as a crisis.

God’s patient answer to Moses, his chosen leader, was to provide more leaders to help him, by empowering them with the same spirit—the LORD’s Spirit²—that was on Moses, to help carry the burden. The LORD did not even respond to Moses’ request to be put to death. Between the instructions and the fulfillment God also dealt with the people’s desire for meat. In response to Moses’ incredulity about such a large provision, the LORD affirmed that he had the power to do anything and that Moses would come to see it. However, God would punish the people’s unbelieving rejection of himself. In contrast to the LORD’s provision of the Spirit, **רוח**, to meet Moses’ need, a wind, **רוח**, from the LORD brought the quail that provided the meat and the judgment on the people (vv. 31-34). The Spirit is involved in God’s supernatural intervention to meet human needs and to punish sinful greed.

God’s Answer—His Spirit

The actual event of God providing the answer to Moses’ need involved Moses gathering 70 elders he knew to be leaders of the people. God’s way of relieving the pressure Moses felt was to work through other people. This democratization of God’s work and the ministry of the Spirit has been an

1. This has been insightfully observed by Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), pp. 105-106.

2. Ashley does a good job of discussing the issue of whether vv. 17 and 25-26 intend Moses’ spirit or God’s Spirit; see Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 211. It is clear that Moses understood it the latter way, in v. 29, and that throughout the Old Testament God is understood to put his Spirit on leaders to accomplish his purposes.

important belief of Pentecostals and is taught in the New Testament (1 Cor. 14:26-31). The 70 chosen were already recognized as leaders by the rest of the people. Moses brought them to the LORD at the Tent of Meeting to receive their newly delegated authority and responsibility under him. Then the LORD showed his authorization with a visible supernatural sign of his Spirit coming upon them in the experience of prophecy.³

The significance of the reference to the Spirit here is great. The only previous statement by God about the work of his Spirit in people appears in the book of Exodus (28.3; 31.3; 35.31). There, Bezalel, the craftsman/foreman over the construction of the Tabernacle, was filled with God's Spirit to enable him to carry out that ministry, including teaching others. Joseph was also said to have the Spirit of God in him, giving him wisdom for his leadership function, back in Gen. 41.38. These along with the few other Pentateuchal references to God's Spirit suggest that the idea of the word for spirit, רוּחַ, understood by the original recipients of Numbers 11, as used of God, may be summarized as: God's active, wind-like, presence which gives vitality to all to fulfill their God-given functions, especially providing wisdom to people placed in critical leadership positions. This is also seen later in Num. 27.18 where Joshua would become the successor to Moses, as the one in whom the Spirit resides.

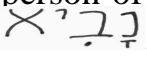
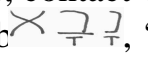
Here, in Num. 11.25, God put the Spirit that was on Moses on the 70 and they prophesied. This suggests, as others have observed through the centuries, the image of lighting 70 lamps from one flame so that Moses' power was not at all diminished—importantly, however, being derived from the one flame, the other 70 flames would always be considered sub-ordinate. It is very interesting that nothing was said about the work of the Spirit in Moses before this point. However, here, God indicates that Moses had had the Spirit upon him for his leadership ministry all along. This suggests that in the Old Testament context the reader was expected to assume that a leader chosen by God was empowered and motivated by God's Spirit. (This is confirmed by various passages such as 1 Sam. 16.13.) There was a special experience of the presence of God in wisdom and power provided to God's chosen leaders.⁴ The description of this

3. See Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20* (AB, 4A; New York: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 339-40, 343; and Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 383.

4. It is helpful to note that the O.T. writers' use of the word 'anointing' would have referred to all this.

event in Numbers 11 seems to be intended as a paradigm/prototype of what should be expected for all God-ordained leadership.⁵

Connection with the Prophetic

Furthermore, here in Num. 11.25, the connection is clearly made between the Spirit and the prophetic. Those on whom the Spirit comes to rest demonstrate the gift of prophesy.⁶ As the Old Testament shows elsewhere a prophet is a person of the Spirit (compare 1 Sam. 10.10; Hos. 9.7). The term prophet, , is first used in the Scriptures in reference to Abraham in the context of Abimelech's need to have him intercede for him. Exodus 7.1 describes a prophet as a spokesperson for another, particularly for one in authority. Thus, to prophesy meant to convey communication between God and people as one in privileged, intimate, contact with God. In the Numbers 11 usage, there is another twist. The verb , 'to prophesy', is not in its usual form but in an uncommon form, the hitpael stem. This form of the verb was used of visible physical demonstrations of some kind, involving prophetic speech with no mention of the content. Instead it was the whole observable experience that testified to contact with God's presence, (as in 1 Sam. 10.5-6, 10; 18.10; 19.20-24; 1 Kgs 18.29). The choice of this form of the verb in Numbers 11 strongly suggests that God used a visible, Spirit-empowering, prophetic event to publicly confirm his authorization of power upon,⁸ and intimate involvement in these leaders' ministries. What specifically happened is impossible to know, but Johns suggests, 'It may be that prostration was one characteristic aspect, if the description in Numbers 24.4c, 16 is significant: "falling down" (cf. 1 Sam. 19.20)⁹. To Wenham and Walton the experience sounds much like that of the 120 at Pentecost in Acts 2. Wenham even goes so far as to say, 'As with Saul, the prophecy described here was probably an unintelligible ecstatic utterance, what the New

5. Wilf Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 110.

6. Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 111.

7. Milgrom, *Numbers*, pp. 380, 383; and Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, p. 214.

8. John H. Walton and Victor H. Matthews *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 186.

9. Donald A. Johns, 'Pentateuch', in S.M. Burgess, G.B. McGee and H. Alexander (eds.), *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 687.

Testament terms speaking in tongues...'¹⁰ This seems to be a viable possibility here in Numbers 11; however, the clear point is that some kind of observable prophetic experience was a known sign of divine empowering with the Spirit for ministry.

An Observable Sign

Thus, there is an important parallel in Numbers 11 to the Pentecostal understanding of Acts 2 in the recognition of a visible sign that God's Spirit was working in the individuals. A divinely initiated, prophetic-speech event in both passages was clearly presented as evidence to the observers that the Spirit was working in those chosen for a ministry function, as Stronstad has also pointed out.¹¹ Numbers 11 strongly supports a concept of initial observable evidence of the empowering of a believer to fulfill God's purpose for him or her as a witness for the Lord. The public demonstration was, in Numbers, as specifically stated in v. 25, a one-time occurrence for the purpose of seeing a divine sign. However, Levine makes a good point that, 'Their ecstasy was a passing experience, but their status, and presumably their new competence, were permanent'.¹²

Connection with Acts 2

The connection between Numbers 11 and Acts 2 is more than just the description of a visible, prophetic event of the Spirit. Moses expressed the totally unique wish that God would make all his people prophets and put his Spirit on all of them. This is precisely what Joel later predicted would happen (Joel 2.28-29) and Peter announced as being fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2.16-21). Hildebrandt and Stronstad, therefore, see Moses' wish for the Spirit-gift for all as 'programmatically' for the Scriptural revelation of God's plan for all who receive him.¹³ Further support for this can be seen in the occurrence of the two in the camp prophesying. They were listed among the 70 elders but did not go to the Tent of Meeting. God still put his Spirit on them, which

10. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 109; Walton and Matthews, *Genesis–Deuteronomy* p. 186.

11. Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), p. 22.

12. Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, p. 340.

13. Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology*, p. 17; Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 110.

elicited the concern of Joshua, to which Moses responded with the wish. This strongly suggests that God wanted to show the sovereignty of the Spirit and he wanted this empowering experience to move beyond any leadership establishment to the general population. Thus, Numbers 11 provided for the leaders of Israel what God wants for all his people, all who will receive him. This is then what he provides in the 'last days' through Christ, according to Joel 2 and Acts 2. Just as Numbers 11 involved empowering for ministry and facilitating the purpose of God for his people under the old covenant, so the Acts 2 event empowered the people of God in the New Testament to be his witnesses. As the elders of Israel were shown to have prophetic intimacy with God, so all God's people, after the coming of the Messiah, were to be so intimate with God that they would be the 'prophethood' of all believers, as well as the priesthood of all believers. Thus, the Pentecostal doctrine of an experience of the Spirit after salvation to empower for witness and service/ministry finds strong support in this foundational, Pentateuchal passage.

Connection with Holiness

Although the work of the Spirit in Numbers 11 emphasizes empowerment for ministry, it is also part of the context of continuing fellowship with the holy God for people who accept a relationship with him. The work of the Spirit in God's people enables them to live holy lives separated from sin and dedicated to him, in harmony with him. Faith and obedience are keys and are motivated by the Spirit. The grumbling, murmuring and complaining seen repeatedly in Numbers are not produced by those who are yielding to the work of the Spirit of God. A good specific example is Caleb, who was said to have a 'different spirit' and to follow the LORD wholeheartedly (14.24). God's Spirit also deals with sin, as seen in 11.31-34, which, again, demonstrates the logical connection between God's Spirit and his holiness.

Major Pentecostal Themes

Thus, Numbers 11 reflects the major themes of the book of Numbers as well as Pentecostalism, such as: the centrality of the LORD and his salvation; the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life and ministry of the Church, especially empowering for witness and mission to the world; democratization of the Spirit and his gifts and God using all kinds of people as he wills; seeing God's further desires for his people in the precedents of his past acts; freedom of worship in timing, location and outward expression; the

supernatural breaking into daily life situations of basic needs and especially into crisis situations; God's enabling of people to deal with and overcome the pressures and temptations of life; holiness; life as a journey of faith with the personal leading of the Lord; and the forward-looking, hopeful, eschatological view of history in the plan of God.

Significance and Implications

The significance of Numbers 11, then, is that what it describes and where it comes at this early point in God's revelation make it foundational to the pneumatology of the whole Bible. Furthermore, it is both paradigmatic or normative for leaders of God's people as well as programmatic for the people of God looking ahead to the New Testament age. The implications begin with God's desire for an intimate relationship with all who will receive him—a relationship that involves an ongoing empowering by his Spirit so that his people can speak for him, be his witnesses and fulfill his purpose in the world. When people seek God for this spiritual empowerment he provides an experience of prophetic speech that is observable by others. All God's people are to be priests and prophets for him. For every specific function to which God calls people to in his kingdom they can expect the enabling of the Spirit to fulfill it. When faced with hardships and challenges, in the journey he leads his people on in life, they need to look to him and the supernatural work of his Spirit and not to their own resources and abilities. Seeing God work supernaturally in his people helps the believer keep perspective and faith. It seems to be a result of the Spirit-event of Numbers 11 that Moses resumed his patient intercession for the people. Ashley suggests, 'Perhaps the experience of the shared Spirit is ever the antidote for the weary, harried, threatened leader'.¹⁴ It is also important to expect that divine provision will often come through other people empowered by his Spirit. Leaders must not expect to control the work of the Spirit among God's people. God's goal is the empowering *of all* who will receive him rather than consolidating power and gifts in one or even a few leaders. For all the above reasons, Numbers 11 has great significance for Christians today.

14. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, p. 217.