

GEOGRAPHY AND THE NARRATIVE SHAPE OF NUMBERS 13

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THE STORIES OF THE BIBLE are filled with geographical information. The Scriptures refer often to details of topography, geology, hydrology, climate, land use, and urbanization. Noted biblical geographer George Adam Smith challenges people to read the Bible with geographical awareness. "In the Bible, you see the details which are so characteristic of every Eastern landscape, the chaff and rolling thorns blown before the wind, the dirt cast out on the streets; the broken vessel by the well; the forsaken house; the dusty grave. Let us pay attention to all these, and we shall surely feel ourselves in the atmosphere and scenery in which David fought, and Elisha went and Malachi saw the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings."¹

Geography shaped the events of biblical history. Attention to "narrative geography" recognizes that biblical writers used geography not only to provide the setting of events but also to achieve strategic, literary ends. As Shimon Bar-Efrat has observed, "Places in the narrative are not merely geographical facts, but are to be regarded as literary elements in which fundamental significance is embodied."²

This article addresses the strategic use of geography in Numbers 13, with attention to what may be called the narrative-geographical shaping of the story. Throughout Numbers 13 Moses used, reused, and nuanced geographical elements in patterns designed to impact the reader. Geographical references were noted to

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¹ George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 7th ed. (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896), 99-100.

² Shimon Bar-Efrat, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1984), 194. Tremper Longman III makes a similar observation (*Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 94-95).

generate expectations, to raise or lower the tension of the plot, and to mold the reader's view of the characters.

Moses identified and instructed twelve men to explore the new land and report back to him. The report they brought back (exclusive of Joshua and Caleb) was negative. The report carefully and deceitfully used geography to argue that the Israelites could not enter the Promised Land. This became a watershed moment in Israel's history, for it inspired a rebellion that lasted forty years.

PREPARATION FOR THE REPORT

LITERARY NAMING OF THE SPIES

Two types of naming were used to introduce the spies. They were characterized first as a group and then as individuals.

Moses was instructed to send on this mission men who met specific standards. Each was to be a "leader" (נָשִׂיא, Num. 13:2). As a group, they are called "men" (אֲנָשִׁים, v. 3)³ and "heads of the sons of Israel." These are designations for significant tribal leaders.⁴ In Genesis 42:9, Joseph accused his brothers of being "military scouts" (מְרַגְלִים) who had come to spy out the land. When Joshua sent men into Jericho (Josh. 2:1), he called them מְרַגְלִים. But the men chosen here by Moses were not these "military scouts"; they were influential men whose report could sway the community.

This more general form of characterization gives way to a lengthy list in which the spies are named individually. In formulaic fashion the twelve are designated by tribe, proper name, and paternal association (13:4-15). The reason this list was organized this way remains under discussion.⁵ But the fact that these men were identified in such a list has import for their characterization.⁶ It

³ Within Jewish tradition even the designation אֲנָשִׁים suggests that these were men of honor. This is the meaning of this designation in Genesis 34:20; Exodus 17:9; Judges 8:15-17; 1 Samuel 17:12; and 2 Samuel 1:11 (A. M. Silberman, *Numbers, Chumash with Rashi's Commentary* [Jerusalem: Silberman, 1934], 62; and H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah, Numbers* [New York: Soncino, 1983], 676).

⁴ Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:804.

⁵ Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 232.

⁶ Robert Alter has noted that such lists are often ignored within literary analysis. In reality they may be effectively employed as literary devices. "The coldest catalogue and the driest etiology may be an effective subsidiary instrument of literary expression" ("Introduction to the Old Testament," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and F. Kermode [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987], 16).

grants them "a sense of importance and dignity."⁷ Thus by both general designation and personal introduction, the reader is led to view these men as esteemed and honored leaders of the community. Thus the reader anticipates that the report the twelve gave will be both persuasive and honorable.

THE SEARCH DEFINITION

The reader is further prepared to hear the spies' report by noting Moses' instructions for the reconnaissance mission. In defining that search Moses pointed out a considerable amount of geographical features. He provided the geographical boundaries of the search, the season in which the search was conducted, and the specific geographical questions the group were to answer.

The search area. The search area is defined both by Moses' direct speech and by the narrator's summary of the search. In 13:17 the reader is allowed to listen in as Moses told the spies where they were to go. In 13:2 the reader learns that the spies would reconnoiter "the land of Canaan." But Moses became more specific by telling the spies to search the Negeb (נֶגֶב) and the hill country (הַר), two regions within the land of Canaan. "As a regional-geographical term, Negeb refers to a limited strip of land extending 10 miles north and 10 miles south of Beersheba and running east to west from the mountain ridge overlooking the Rift Valley to near the dunes along the Mediterranean Sea."⁸

Moses was also interested in the hill country. The word הַר in the Book of Numbers is most often employed in the proper names of prominent mountains such as Mount Sinai (3:1, הַר סִינַי). But here it is clearly a regional designation, for it is set in contrast to the coastal plain and the Jordan Valley (13:29). The rising terrain of the hill country runs from the Negeb through Judea, Samaria, and into the highlands of Galilee.⁹

When the narrator described the trip itself, he spoke of the search area in a different way. Verse 21 refers to the trip's southern departure point and its northern terminating point. The spies explored the land from the Wilderness of Zin to Lebo-Hamath. The Wilderness of Zin is the northern portion of the Wilderness of Paran, specifically the area around Kadesh-barnea.¹⁰ Lebo is asso-

⁷ Allen, "Numbers," 2:805.

⁸ Carl Rasmussen, *The Zondervan Atlas of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 49.

⁹ Ashley, however, says the Negeb refers only to the hill country of Judah (*The Book of Numbers*, 236).

¹⁰ J. Simons, *The Geographical and Topographical Texts of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 256.

ciated with the Lebweh near one source of the Orontes River in the Beqa' Valley.¹¹ Thus the exploration of the spies is said to follow the watershed of the central mountain spine.¹²

The narrator's language for the search area differs from the language Moses used. Why did the narrator not simply summarize the search with identical language? Noth says this signals multiple authorship.¹³ But within this unified literary unit a different explanation is to be preferred. The language of the narrator allows for the possibility that the spies did not adhere closely to Moses' instructions. The search he asked for may have been different from the one he received. Replication of Moses' language would certainly have signaled obedience. The shift in language adds tension to the plot, thereby urging the reader to look for further evidence that will either vindicate or implicate the spies.

One last difference between Moses' description and the narrator's summary bears mentioning. Moses did not identify any specific city he wanted the spies to visit, but the narrator stated that they stopped in Hebron (vv. 22-23). There they cut grapes from the Wadi Eshcol just north of Hebron.¹⁴

The search season. In verse 20 the narrator wrote that "the time was the time of the first-ripe grapes." While the grape harvest itself would occur over the summer months, the first ripe grapes are harvested in July.¹⁵ Since the entire exploration took forty days (v. 25), this exploration took place during the summer season.

The search questions. Moses then defined the search itself with a set of questions (vv. 18-20). Knowing the search area and the

¹¹ "Many scholars assumed that Lebo-Hamath should be translated as 'the entrance to Hamath.' However, there is really no doubt that Lebo was an important city on the border of the kingdom of Hamath and is to be identified with Lebweh" (Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967], 72).

¹² Nelson Glueck, *The River Jordan* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 112.

¹³ Martin Noth assumes that the different descriptions are associated with different authors. J and E limit the search to the Negeb and Judah, and P allows the search to extend to the entire nation (*Numbers: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968], 101).

¹⁴ Edward Robinson argues for this location of Wadi Eshcol based on the name of one of the four kings from the Hebron area who accompanied Abraham (Gen. 14:24; *Biblical Researches in Palestine and the Adjacent Regions 1838 and 1852* [Jerusalem: Universitas Booksellers, 1970], 1:214). This nineteenth-century observation about the location of Eshcols supported by a fourth-century Christian pilgrim text (Jerome, "The Pilgrimage of Holy Paula," in *Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society* [New York: AMS, 1971], 1:9).

¹⁵ Carl Ritter, *The Comparative Geography of Palestine and the Sinai tic Peninsula* (New York: Greenwood, 1968), 3:297.

search season, the geographically informed reader begins to anticipate how the answers to those questions might sound.

First, Moses asked for information on population density (v. 18).¹⁶ The archaeological record for the pre-Israelite period reveals what they may have seen. Mazar notes that the Late Bronze period (1550-1200 B.C.) testifies to a declining population in the hill country.¹⁷ Aharoni offers this summary of the Canaanite period: "The valleys were intensely settled, with strong and important kingdoms on the coastal plain and the Shephelah, in the Jezreel and Jordan valleys. Among the hill regions only the most northern enjoyed a dense settlement. . . . Most of the hill regions were only thinly settled, and appreciable areas were forested with thick scrub that was a formidable obstacle to settlement and agriculture. The southern and highest part of Upper Galilee and nearly all of Lower Galilee, except for the lateral valleys and the southern highlands, were not occupied."¹⁸ Given the search area designated by Moses, the spies would have encountered land that was sparsely settled.

The second question Moses asked pertained to the hydrology of the land (v. 19). "Is the land in which they live good or bad?" While this vocabulary is somewhat general, rabbinic commentators¹⁹ distinguish it from the subsequent question about soil fertility (v. 20).²⁰ Moses' inquiry is no doubt related to the oppressive conditions the Israelites experienced in the Wilderness of Zin. Since that region receives less than two inches of precipitation each year, the Israelites constantly faced the shortage of water there.

In the Negeb the spies would have experienced a climate and

¹⁶ Rashi sees the matter of population density at the heart of this verse (A. M. Silbermann, *Chumash with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary*, vol. 4: *Bamidbar* [Jerusalem: Silbermann, 1934], 62). It is possible to see two questions reflected in this verse. But in support of one question is the point that the first pair of words, "strong or weak," is further explained by the following pair of words, "few or many." The word "strong" can have a variety of nuances. It can result from iron chariots (Josh. 17:18), numbers (Judg. 18:26), or the Lord Himself (Deut. 34:12). Moses was interested in the strength of numbers here. The chiasmic arrangement of the adjectives adds support to this view.

¹⁷ Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology and the Land of the Bible 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 239.

¹⁸ Yohanan Aharoni, *The Archaeology of the Land of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 158. Aharoni bases his observation on the El-Amarna texts.

¹⁹ Rashi understands this use of **טוֹב** ("good") to be associated with hydrology (Silbermann, *Chumash with Targum Onkelos*, 4:62). Ibn Ezra understands it as a reference to climate (Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary [New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990], 102).

²⁰ Charles A. Briggs understands this use of **טוֹב** as a reference to fertility (*The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* [LaFayette, IN: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1980], #2296, 3b).

hydrology that was nearly as austere as the wilderness of their wanderings. The region is generally an "environment adverse to human activity or extensive settlement."²¹ Rainfall provides the only water, and it is scant (eight to twelve inches each year). This allows for a barley harvest only once every three or four years.²²

By contrast, the climate and hydrology of the hill country was much more favorable. "The relative abundance of rain and scores of springs in the highlands of Judah immeasurably outweigh the miserly showers and mean handful of springs in the Negeb."²³ The central mountain range receives between twenty and forty inches of rainfall annually.²⁴ Further the geologic makeup of that region allows for the preservation of water in numerous springs.²⁵ Given their experience in the Wilderness of Zin, one would expect the spies to report favorably with regard to the water resources.

A third question Moses asked pertained to urban construction: "Do the inhabitants live in open camps or in fortified cities?" (v. 19, author's paraphrase). Another look at the archaeological record shapes the answer the reader expects the spies to give. Bright observes that the hill country was a "patchwork of petty states, none of any great size."²⁶ Mazar adds that the most amazing archaeological feature of the hill country during this period is "the almost total lack of fortifications."²⁷ The strongholds that existed were Egyptian military and administrative ones "along the northern Sinai, the northern Negev, the coastal plain and the Beth-Shan Valley."²⁸ Thus one would expect the spies to report that, in general, the indigenous population lived in vulnerable, open settlements.

The agricultural quality of the region was the subject of Moses' fourth question (v. 20). The soil of the Negeb is a fine, wind-blown soil called loess soil.²⁹ "When it rains, the surface of the loess soil becomes relatively impermeable, so that instead of seeping into the

²¹ Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Bible Atlas* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 36.

²² Rasmussen, *The Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, 50.

²³ Glueck, *The River Jordan*, 138.

²⁴ Rasmussen, *The Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 119.

²⁷ Mazar, *Archaeology and the Land of the Bible*, 243. This was true at Hebron where a Middle Bronze II fortified city was not in use in Late Bronze or during Iron (Avi Ofer, "Hebron," in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Investigation*, 2:608-9).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁹ Rasmussen, *The Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, 49.

ground much of the water rapidly runs off into the wadis, creating miniature badlands' formations."³⁰ The hydrology and geology create a poor agricultural environment.

But as the spies moved farther north, they saw more green. As nineteenth-century explorer Edward Robinson moved north of Beersheba, he wrote, "The hills, we could see, began to 'be covered with shrubs; and these increased as we advanced and were intermingled with evergreens and prickly oaks, arbutus and other dwarf trees and bushes."³¹ During the Canaanite Period, the hill country was covered with considerable forests.³² But under those forests lay an increasing bed of rich, red, moisture-absorbing soil.³³ The hill country had potential for agricultural development.

Aware of the search area, the search season, and the search parameters, the reader begins to expect that Moses' questions will be answered in a certain way. The reader does not expect the spies to convey much enthusiasm about the Negeb, but one does expect them to celebrate what they observed in the hill country. The spies are expected to speak about a sparsely populated land, a land with water resources, unfortified settlements, and rich agricultural potential. In short, one expects the spies to return and to say that Israel could easily conquer the land.

THE SEARCH REPORT

After forty days the spies returned and offered their report. Just as Moses had carefully used geography to frame the nature of the search, so the spies carefully misused geography to erode the people's enthusiasm. Their less-than-objective report was simply, "We can't do it!" They led the Israelites to this conclusion through careful naming of the land, through their answers to Moses' questions, and through unsolicited information they added to their report.

NAMING THE LAND

The sensitive reader will note that the spies referred to the land with standard language that is carefully chosen and strategically

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and the Adjacent Regions 1838 and 1852*, 1:212.

³² Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, 27. The significant deforestation and accompanying erosion of the hill country did not occur until after it had been cleared for agriculture by the influx of Israelites (Arie Issar, *Water Shall Flow from the Rock; Hydrology and Climate in the Lands of the Bible* [New York: Springer, 1990], 132).

³³ Beitzel, *The Moody Bible Atlas*, 44.

altered for rhetorical impact.

From the beginning the reader is expecting to hear a positive report. After all, the spies had gone to the Promised Land. Within the Pentateuch the words "land of Canaan" are employed thirty-three times before this chapter. This expression is securely attached to God's promise to the patriarchs and is typically used with the expression "which the Lord has promised to give you."³⁴ This is the land to which the Lord had sent them. But when the spies spoke of this very special land, they made a subtle but significant shift in the language they used. It was no longer the land to which the Lord sent them; it was "the land to which you sent us" (v. 27).

The spies also referred to the land as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (v. 27). This expression is used fifteen times in the Pentateuch. It is language by which God Himself described this land (Exod. 3:8, 17). In almost every case it is associated with God's promise to give Israel the land. This reuse of language would have motivated the people in a positive way. But the spies again made a strategic shift that diminished the impact of this phrase. Within the space of five verses, the land that "flows" with milk and honey became the land that "devours" its inhabitants (v. 32).³⁵

A further note of discord was struck as the spies described the breadth of their search. Moses had asked for a report on the Negeb and the hill country. But they spoke about the Negeb, the hill country, the coastal plain, and the Jordan Valley.³⁶ Thus the spies reported on places Moses had not asked about, places that would have a significant impact on the answers to Moses' questions.

Conspicuous by its absence is mention of the spies' stop in the city of Hebron. Hebron was closely associated with the patriarchs and the promise of the land that was given to them (Gen. 13:18; 23:2, 9; 35:27). But the spies made no mention of it, though it was the burial place of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "They averted their glance from the tombs of the fathers, and they neglected the promise of God."³⁷ The spies repeatedly took language that had the

³⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), 119.

³⁵ Based on the paralleling of the feminine singular participles *נָבַת* and *אֲכָלָהּ*, Philip J. Budd understands "devours" as a reference to the land's infertility (*Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1984], 145).

³⁶ The last two collocations are unique in the Hebrew Bible but are clearly a reference to the topographical zones west of the Jordan River. Beitzel identifies these as the coastal plain, the central mountain spine, and the Jordan rift valley (Beitzel, *The Moody Bible Atlas*, 27). Aharoni views the last reference as the northern Jordan Valley (Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, 68).

³⁷ Allen, "Numbers," 2:810.

power to excite enthusiasm and turned it into language that generated doubt.

ANSWERS TO MOSES' FOUR QUESTIONS

In their report the spies answered each of Moses' four questions in some fashion. But the order in which they gave their answers differs from the order in which Moses asked the questions. Since the most logical way in which to present their report would have been to follow the order of Moses' questions, the reordering of information raises questions. Moses asked about the population density, hydrology, urbanization, and agricultural quality. But the spies' answers were in this order: hydrology, agricultural potential, urbanization, and population density.

The ten spies first answered Moses' question about hydrology (Num. 13:27). Here the spies resorted to abbreviated language that speaks of the land's rainfall dependence. They simply agreed that it is a land that "flows with milk and honey." The brevity of their answer neglects the water resources in the hill country.

Then the spies answered Moses' question about the agricultural potential of the land by showing the large cluster of grapes they gathered from the Wadi Eshcol: "This is its fruit" (v. 27). It had been a long time since the Israelites had seen fresh fruit. This would have been a great incentive to enter the land. But the spies did not speak at any length about the cluster of grapes or the pomegranates and figs that they had found. Instead, they proceeded to answer Moses' questions about urbanization and population density. Rashi presumes that the spies used the large cluster of grapes to support their argument that the land was heavily fortified and highly populated.³⁸

In answering Moses' question about the extent of urbanization, the spies reported that they encountered cities that were "fortified and very large" (v. 28). As noted earlier, the archaeological record of the hill country at that time indicates only small settlements with almost total lack of fortification. In essence they were saying they believed the Israelites could not conquer the land.

In answering Moses' questions about the population, the spies reported, "Amalek is living in the land of the Negev, and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites are living in the hill country, and the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of the Jordan" (v. 29). Thus the sparsely populated hill country was a place, the spies were suggesting, where there was no room to re-

³⁸ Rashi criticizes the selection of "large fruit" as part of the spies' strategy to discourage the people (Silbermann, *Numbers, Chumash with Rashi's Commentary*, 64).

ceive newcomers. In their report the spies deceitfully distorted what they saw. Their answers were designed to lead Israel to only one conclusion: "We can't possibly possess the land!"

A STRATEGIC ADDITION

The spies made a strategic addition to the report. The most frequently mentioned item in their report was the physical size of the indigenous people. This is noteworthy because Moses had not asked about the people's physical size. Interspersed among the answers to Moses' other questions is a recurring reference to the "strength" of the people who lived in the land they explored.

The spies said the people were "strong" (יָצִי, v. 28). Moses had not used that word in his questions. He did ask, however, if the people were קָטָן. The spies affirmed that the people were "too strong [קָטָן] for us" (v. 31). The spies also said that "the descendants of Anak" were living in the land (v. 28). Later the spies spoke about "men of great size" (v. 32). And they added, "There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim);³⁹ and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight" (v. 33). This unsolicited information, which built throughout the report, led to the conclusion of the majority of the spies, "We are not able to go up against the people" (v. 31).

CONCLUSION

The use, reuse, and nuancing of geographical references generates expectations about the spies' report, influences the tension of the plot, and molds the reader's view of the spies. These men who at the beginning of the chapter were seen as honorable leaders became untrustworthy manipulators of the truth. They played with the name of the land, simply calling it "the land where you sent us." They fabricated evidence when answering Moses' questions. And they added uninvited, incendiary information to the report. The geography indicates that their report is not what the reader expects it to be. They convinced the Israelites that taking the land was impossible (14:1-4). Ironically the very people who, along with the ten spies, thought they could not enter the Promised Land and conquer it, did not enter it. They died in the wilderness (vv. 22-23, 29, 32-37) because of their lack of confidence in the Lord.

³⁹ This was a class of very tall men, legendary in size, whose memory lingered long in the minds of the Hebrews (George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: Clark, 1903], 141).

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