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The Murmuring Tradition: A Paradigm for every age

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Introduction

The people of Israel had no qualms about themselves in recording in their sacred traditions their father's long history of murmuring. So much did they realise the normative value of this tradition, they narrated the related events with frankness and sincerity, characteristic of a people, set on a course of living, aggressive and meliorative at the same time. The tradition is not talking about the muttering, the indistinct low sound of whispering, the clamor of the marching crowd, as the word usually means rather with the support of a series of stories the narrative tradition in Exodus and Numbers deals with the complaint and rebellion so characteristic of the "wilderness wandering"—an expression that refers to Israel's journey in the desert during the period in between the Exodus from Egypt and their entry into Canaan from the east, across the Jordan.

The traditions of the wilderness wandering speak both of fidelity and rebellion in the wilderness. Some of the Israelites remembered the desert period as one of deep faithfulness of Israel to Yahweh¹, and of God's mighty works. This observance is at variance with the narrative motive of several passages in Exodus and Numbers, where the emphasis largely falls on the acts of faithlessness, discontent and dissension, a motif that is very firmly embedded in the substance of the narrative section². Ezekiel 20.13 also regarded the wilderness period as the time of Israel's great apostasy, and Ps. 106.13-33 as repeated failure. In several other places too the period is treated as inexpedient example: a stubborn and rebellious generation in spite of Yahweh's miraculous and gracious

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leading (Ps. 78.5-8; 95.8ff; II Chro. 30.8). In the later Israelite community there existed, therefore, at least two views regarding the life of the wilderness period.

In relation to the content of the narrative section Walter Harrelson asks, if there were no additional stories to tell of the guidance of Yahweh during the wilderness period; "what happened to the record of Israel's marvellous faithfulness and obedience to the God of the covenant during this period" about which the prophets spoke (Amos. 5.25; Hos. 2.15, 1.10, 10.11, 11.1-4; Jer. 2.2-3, 31.2 etc).³ Absence of such emphasis here in Exodus and Numbers is remarkable. It might be that the narrator had certain definite purposes in dealing with the negative aspect of the people's life in the wilderness-rebellion, failure of faith, and withdrawal syndrome-besides his several other motives.

It is noted that this negative tradition does not seem to have received much attention among biblical students, having been overshadowed by other positive, victory traditions.⁴ So we attempt to study this negative aspect of the tradition and its theological implications by selecting the stories related to murmuring from Ex. 15.22- chapter 17 and Numb. 11-21. Our task is neither merely historical nor literary, though both should influence our study, we are here at a theological task. We do not intend to look into the intricate problems of the text: various layers of tradition and the process of tradition building, the meaning at various stages etc. For our purpose it is not very useful to atomise the text and do a source analysis.⁵ It is better to see the text in its present shape as given to us, which is set to carry meaning and evoke response. We proceed by analysing the structure of the narrative, and then study some of the responses the stories may evoke.

A. The Structure of the Narrative

The events related to Israel's wilderness wanderings are spread from the book of Exodus to Deuteronomy. These events occur at various places of encampment, covering a period '40' years. The first account, in Ex. 15.22ff, opens with the Israelites encampment in the wilderness of Shur, immediately after their glorious victory at the Red sea. The next scene was Elim⁶,

before they went on to set up the camp in the wilderness of Sin (15.27; 16.1ff). The fourth camp was set up in the wilderness of Sinai, and before they reached here there elapsed a period of three months (19.1-2). The Sinai pericope extends from Ex. 19 to Numb. 10.10. Leaving Sinai, one year and one month after the Exodus from Egypt they made their way to the wilderness of Paran (Numb. 10.12)⁷. Apparently it was in the wilderness of Kadesh (13.26) that they spent the major portion of the forty years before entering into the land of Canaan (II). The last encampment was in the plains of Moab (22.1). We notice some fast movements, shifting of places etc. between Kadesh and Moab in Numb. 20:22 to 21.35.

There is some material seemingly unattached to the wilderness theme found in between, like the Book of the Covenant in Ex. 21-23, the concluding of the covenant at Sinai in Chp. 24, and instructions and traditions related to the tabernacle in Chapters 25-40. This is followed by a variety of legal prescriptions in Leviticus, and the census list and cultic law in Numb. 1.1-10.10. Numbers Chapters 22-24 is the Balaam cycle. Though the wilderness wandering is formally concluded with the death of Moses in Dty. 31, the section from Numb. 24 may be taken as preparation for the entry into the promised land. Notwithstanding their apparent uncohesiveness with the wilderness theme these materials can be viewed as part of the development of the theme of sojourn by their power to elicit the theme. If it is said that this single theme is dominant in the material found in between Ex. 15.22 and Numb. 21.35 and immediately after, it only reflects the quantum of influence it can exert on the reader who reads through this narrative section.

In the larger structure of the Pentateuchal narrative, the wilderness theme "forms a frame round the Sinai theme, and in its turn is framed by the two marching themes of the Exodus from Egypt and the Entry into the Promised land".⁸ So we find a clear pattern in the arrangement of the traditions which may be graphically given as follows:

Marching Out (Wilderness theme/SINAI/Wilderness theme)
 (Exodus from Egypt)
 Marching In (Entry into the Promised Land)

Right on the surface it is obvious that various theological motives are presented and developed in the narrative theme of sojourn, and a study of it must necessarily take into account the fact that this theme cannot be treated independently of the remainder of the Pentateuch, rather be seen in its relationship to the theological structure and themes of Pentateuch like Exodus from Egypt, Covenant at Sinai and, Guidance into the Promised Land etc. A brief study like this will try to single out only a certain dominant feature of the sub-theme, the tradition of murmuring, which falls under the basic theme, guidance in the wilderness.

B. The Duration of the Wandering

We have noted the complexity of the material falling under the rubric of the "wilderness wandering" arising due to the intermingling of the various written sources and strata. There can be even parallel variant traditions among these materials. B.S. Childs says, "the presence of striking doublets (cf. Meribah. Ex. 17/ Num. 20; manna. Ex.16/ Num. 11) indicates that the present arrangement of the tradition reflects a complex history of traditional and literary development"⁹. In its final form different tradition complexes have been combined into a unit giving its present order. Therefore the traditional view of 40 years sojourn is difficult to account for by following the events as described. It is noted that a literary-critical source analysis can even reduce the time to a shorter period, even as short as two years¹⁰. However the witness of the narrative should be listened to.

From Egypt the people reportedly travelled to the vicinity of Mount Sinai and before the events in the wilderness of Sinai completed there elapsed a period of one year and one month (Numb. 10.11, 12). Walter Harrelson notes "according to the priests, the events related in the book of Exodus have covered exactly one year" and "the legislation contained in Leviticus was promulgated in one month"¹¹. After this a great part of the time was spent in the wilderness of Kadesh. Though the wandering in its strict sense is completed at Kadesh (Numb. 21.35), the plain of Moab is a purposeful interlude to give a

definite final orientation in the disciplines of Yahweh. The Mosaic speeches of Deuteronomy are said to have taken place in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month (Dt. 1.3). Two months, arguably, have been taken for this event.¹² So including a last few months of the year that was spent in the plains of Moab, the total period of sojourn in the wilderness is traditionally reckoned to be forty years (Numb. 14.33ff; Amos 5.25). However, the writers show no interest to provide a detailed account of the time divisions rather they are only concerned to hold on to the tradition of a forty years sojourn.

C. Origin of the Tradition

Though our present interest is not to establish the origin of the tradition it might be of benefit if some of the opinions current among the scholars are summarised here.

Martin Noth suggests that the theme "guidance in the wilderness" had its origin in the circle of the southern group of tribes in Palestine. These tribes were familiar with the southern wilderness region, the springs etc. There were perhaps local traditions associated to various stations along the wilderness routes which the tribes were familiar with.¹³ But the murmuring theme was originally not part of the theme "guidance in the wilderness", he thinks. He insists that the fact that the murmuring theme "constantly appears in practically the same form shows that in most cases it represents an element that only subsequently entered into the individual narratives".¹⁴ On the basis of Numb. 11.1-3 which is a name etiology he argues that the story speaks only of a divine punishment and, the punishable action, the "complaining of the people", did not arise out of the etymology. This narrative motif is external to the name etiology and is added later. Such is true with the following stories as well. Now, where did the "complaining" derive from? He thinks this narrative element is primarily derived from the name etiology of Numb. 11.4-35, Kibbroth hattavah, which means 'Graves of craving'. From this beginning it seems to have spread to reshape the theme, "guidance in the wilderness".

Noth argues that it was the same group of tribes, that gave shape to the wilderness theme, shaped the stories of Abraham and Isaac. There is no wonder then both share some commonalities: when the latter insists on trust and faith the former illustrates the lack of it.

George Coats, on the other hand, proposes that the theme originated within the cult of Jerusalem during the period of the divided kingdom "as a polemic against the northern Israelites to be the bearers of the true Yahwistic covenant"¹⁵. In the Jerusalem cult probably they worked on an already well known positive wilderness tradition. He thought this was the reason why the prophets from the north, such as Hosea and Jeremiah, "seem to know only the positive wilderness tradition, while Ezekiel and many of the psalms reflect the negative tradition"¹⁶. Even if the possibility of the later cultic use of the theme is granted, we might say that, not everything had its origin in the cult; much was arguably transferred into the cult from elsewhere.

There is yet a different position taken by Ivan Engnell who views the tradition of wilderness wandering as originally a transitional religious rite (rite de passage) through which the people are ushered into the stage of messianic future¹⁷. Basic to this rite ran obviously the belief that God's help was greatly essential for the transition.

The present chronological sequence of the stories need not be taken seriously: the individual narratives are independent of one another¹⁸, and there were varying traditions of the same events too¹⁹. Apparently the writer had no intention of presenting a connected history of the wilderness wanderings. If such a desire had been there, the matter would have been set in a much more orderly and complete fashion²⁰. Here we also note that a smooth connection is not found between the narrative exposition of the theme "guidance into the arable land" and the narrative of the "the Exodus from Egypt". The gap is only partially covered up by the stories of the wilderness journey added later from an entirely different context²¹.

We recognise that the tradition building process had been very complex²². There were possibly several traditions of the sojourn, and various elements that had never been originally

attached to one another were brought together to form the present narrative. We cannot definitely say what was the motive giving shape and colour to this narrative. When the great narrators narrated they must have done with various aims at different contexts, and the listeners responded "with fresh approval and enthusiasm" at every time²³. Whatever might be the various motives intended and responses aroused we might focus our attention to one of these motives compellingly felt: the unfaithfulness of the people, their discontent and dissension, their murmuring, and God's responses to it.

D. The Distribution of the stories

The stories related to Israel's murmuring in the wilderness are spread in the book of Exodus and Numbers. The comparatively brief section in Exodus contains three etiological stories: the story of the water of Marah (15.22-25a); the story of manna (Chp. 16); the story of the water at Massah and Meribah (17.1-7). The section in Numbers consists of stories like murmuring at Taberah (Numb. 11.1-3); the craving at Kibroth-hattavah (11.4-35); the revolt of Miriam and Aaron (12.1-16); the failure to enter the promised land (13.1-14. 45); the sin of Moses at Meribah (20.1-13); the fiery serpents (21.4-9). Each of these stories explains the central theme of murmuring in its variety of manifestations.

The first group of stories in Exodus, appears before the great event of the covenant, and the giving of the covenantal laws at Sinai, and the second group of stories in Numbers is placed after Sinai²⁴. Can we assume a definite theological intention behind such a narrative structure? However, the repeated demand made on following the law as the conditional formula for the occupation of Canaan alludes to the relationship the narrator constructed between the themes of murmuring, Sinai, and the occupation of the land. By breaking up these murmuring stories and inserting the Sinai events in between the editor achieves his purpose. Seemingly it was the tendency for a recurring fit of murmuring, which the narrator possibly experienced in his own time, and its abiding effects, that

constrained him to assign this strategic place for an elaborate treatment of the theme. As a people conscious of the meaning of history and their identity it was essential for them to recall to their memory, time and again, in a powerful way, their reversals in the past, if they should establish themselves as a people of God. The murmuring tradition set in its present narrative framework serves that purpose.

E. The Stories of Murmuring before Sinai

In the first story of water at Marah, the murmuring of the people was not responded to with any acrimony either by Moses or by God. On the contrary Moses immediately "cried to the Lord", and the Lord informed him of the remedy. Following Lord's direction Moses threw a certain tree into the water, and the water became sweet. This event of people's complaint, Moses' prayer, and God's remedy was immediately followed by God giving "a statue and an ordinance". Then God proceeds to say on what ground should the people expect the blessings of God to follow: "if you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians" (15.26).

In the second story also the people's complaint was immediately followed by God's resolve to give bread from heaven, without proceeding to punish them. This provision of bread, made after stipulating two restrictions, was intended to "prove them", in God's own words, "whether they will walk in my law or not" (16.4). On the face of the rejection of the restrictions, God asks, "how long do you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws?" This question vindicates once again the immediate urgency attached to following the laws in the narrative.

In the case of the third story of the search for water and the people's murmuring, the writer concludes with a question that betrayed the people's total lack of faith: "Is the Lord among us or not?" Concerning the people's response to the laws, though nothing is told here, the question they raised expresses

sufficiently their stubbornness to follow their own dictates hoping to force God to act on their behalf.

If, after the first murmuring God had showed them, with the help of "a statute and an ordinance", how to journey with God in obedience, and, if after the second incident God wanted people to prove their fidelity expressing his concern over their unwillingness to walk in the law, in the third story it was the people who took turn wanting to test God's fidelity. The weight the writer is laying on God's law, and its catalytic role in the making of the people, are very clear here. A careful reading of these three stories may show that the gradual fading of the demand of God into his silence is a preparation for a further treatment of the murmuring fits and God's severe response to this, after giving a detailed account of the event of covenant and law-giving at Sinai.

F. The Stories of Murmuring after Sinai

The first incident taking place at Taberah (Numb. 11.1-3) stands as an introduction to this section. The story does not give either the reason for murmuring or the reason for the divine fire, except to state a very general reason of murmuring as the cause of the divine anger. But this etiological story has set the trend that is to be taken in the illustrative incidents that follow.

This etiological narrative might explain why a certain place in the wilderness gets a certain name. A small heap of ruins, probably the remains of a fire must have aroused the curiosity of the people, at which, they conjectured it as the consequence of God's wrath against their fathers' murmuring in the wilderness. When people stopped believing in God any longer and began complaining and rebelling, God sent his divine fire to burn among them. This is how, the tradition maintained, the place received the name burning, 'teberah'. It stands as a signal of God's burning anger against the faithlessness of the people²⁵.

In verses 4-35 two traditions concerning Israel's life in the wilderness have been interwoven. One deals with the appointment of seventy elders to provide Moses with help in

governing the people. The second one is a name etiology. The first incident occasioned when Moses experienced severe strain in governing the covenant community. As a measure of equipping the seventy for leadership they were endowed with the spirit of Yahweh. When the two among the seventy, who did not come out before Yahweh to receive the spirit but remained in the camp, also prophesied, Joshua, the associate of Moses, wanted Moses to forbid them. The reply of Moses carries the judgement on the question of effective leadership in enabling a crowd to realise its goal. He seems to say that Yahweh's spirit might be the common possession of all Israel, and all Israel "should share fully in Yahweh's power and guidance" (Numb. 1.29)²⁶. A covenant community cannot afford to have a section of the people unruly in their behaviour and yet succeed in pursuing the promises of God. It is necessary that the entire people should possess the spirit of Yahweh if shalom is to be enjoyed.

The second story is related to the place called Kibbroth-hattaavah. It is yet another memorial of the wilderness experience. The name of the place here means "the grave of those who craved". The tradition developed centered around certain ancient graves found in the wilderness in which were believed to have been buried the cravers among the wilderness community, who, having become sated with manna, began to crave for meat during their journey. Their problem was far more than lack of food, the food of their choice-meat. Interestingly "their happy memories of Egyptian fare are chiefly of the vegetables"²⁷, which heighten the glare of their craving. It is an eloquent betrayal of the common human nature that has a yearning for more and more comforts, disproportionate to one's need, and even regardless of the evil associations of the comforts that are sought after. It is only befitting to this nature that they thought better to surrender this freedom and get back to the former state, if God was unable to provide and if life under freedom entailed such struggle.

The narrator's didactic concerns are found disclosed in verses 21-23. He employs in the census finding, the fantastic figure, "six hundred thousand on foot", an incredibly large number to speak of the wilderness community at that time, and gradually

develops the notion of faith in the miraculous power of God in sustaining a huge number of people, when the resources were very meagre in the wilderness. At the end of a series of questions concerning the possibility of feeding such a great crowd, comes a question from God, "Is the Lord's hand shortened?" (11.23) The question carries an implicit negative answer. Even for such a great number of people Yahweh can provide. With this question the narrative, at its climax, is set to register a strong faith in God.

The series of stories that follow also reveals one after another various dangers inherent in humans that restrict the pursuits of the people. In the story of the revolt of Miriam and Aaron (12. 1ff) it was their wounded pride that created tension. Moses' own brother and sister found themselves unable to appreciate the prominent position Moses enjoyed among the people, which they themselves could not assume. In Chp. 13 the subject is the people's confidence in their ability to possess the land after conquering its inhabitants. Here in spite of the leaders, Joshua and Caleb, urging the people to be strong in Yahweh's presence people failed to show resolve. The majority began to grow weary and show the impatience of a faithless mob. In Chp. 16 it was Korah's rebellion, who having been disgusted with a bankrupt hegemony, tried to displace the leadership that caused only hardships for the people. There is yet another incident of failure of faith, both of Moses and people, caused by the lack of water, Chp. 20, which eventually resulted in another uprising against the alleged ineffective leadership of Moses. The entire responsibility is thrown on Moses who is rejected along with his God. Having been subjected to a variety of hardships they no longer "can see the enterprise with eyes of faith as the work of the Lord"²⁸. The last story (21.4-9), in this series, once again repeats the usual complaint, of lack of food and water with increased bitterness, to which God sends fiery serpents to kill several of the unfaithful murmurers.

G. Defining the theological Issues

The theological motives that are presented in this narrative section are numerous. We shall try to look at few of the important issues raised.

1. Complaint as a common element

A common element in these stories is people's recurring spate of murmuring combined with their inability to follow Yahweh relentlessly. This marks the character of an indifferent people hesitating to face temporal realities with a firm commitment to the purpose of God.

One might ask if there is anything wrong in making complaints. In fact a large number of complaints are found in the book of Psalms. They were not complaints directed against God so much as a cry to God for bringing about a change in the condition of the complainant. It is their right to make an appeal to the one who holds the destiny. They are far less than accusations against God; in no way are they attempts to tear God from their lives. On the contrary by their complaints the petitioners further express faith in God. Complaint made to God is, in fact, a need, a requirement, a mark of growth. The complaints are ill-founded only when they deny the good purposes of God of freedom. Whereas the complaints of the wilderness community are indicative of the failure of the people to exercise faith in God. More than a failure of confidence in the goodness of God, it is the failure to live an integrated life-style set in complete worshipful obedience to God.

2. The Period of Forty Years

Purportedly the time span of forty years for the wilderness wandering is imposed as a measure of punishment (Numb. 14.26-39). There is no indication of a genuine, lasting repentance among the people or a transformation of their nature taking place, before the end of the punishment period. So the possession of the land subsequent to the forty years sojourn is not the natural result of people's renewal. There seems to be therefore, a theological interest in the number forty. In the first place the period of forty is regarded as a period of punishment for the faithlessness. Secondly, the number forty, being a full number stands for completion, and thus it might indicate that the entire people was infected by this nature of failure of faith and murmuring that followed. This nature had completely taken hold of the community,

without exception, big or small, all were infected by this nature of failure of faith. As a result their nature had been subjected to a thorough treatment that lasted for forty full years, before they were given to possess the land and to begin a settled living.

3. The Misleading Presuppositions of Freedom

i) A Failing Faith

The faith of the newly emerged victorious group started crumbling immediately after they set on their journey, and further shaken to the root when series of hurdles came their way. Everyone was enthusiastic when they got out of the Egyptian bondage. There was a deep sense of realisation that, had it not been for the power of Yahweh they would never have been freed. The whole experience of freedom indeed served to develop confidence in the power of Yahweh to bring about further deliverance. But that faith started diminishing when they were forced into the hard realities of life. Now they had to face the responsibilities of free living, with all the problems of food, water, power, leadership, and the art of maximisation of resources and actualisation of plans. These questions of subsistence, politics and spirituality they now had to handle on their own. The new society that had just emerged did not immediately possess all the necessary resources to deal with such problems. They had not really begun to experience the meaning of their new life of freedom when they began to doubt and ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?" In their mind, resources should be a proof of Yahweh's presence. They have repeatedly failed to handle the issues with conviction that God can still save.

ii) A Deficient Theology

Close on the heels of faith (confidence) is their theology: they found their theology was deficient. The Yahweh of the Exodus experience was understood to be one who provides victory and success. Having learned of him as the God of victory, people in their innocence thought Yahweh would

invariably be the same for all times. It was difficult to conceive of God demanding a journey that was arduous and laborious, through toil and pain and unrequited service, toward the land of promise. Hence their confusion when confronted by the numerous perplexing realities of human living: needs, wants, and craving; jealousy, hatred, and disappointments; droughts, epidemics, and landslides. Before such realities their religion did not seem to work, their theology of victory did not provide the answer. They could cope with God as long as he was moving fast, but it was highly difficult to understand a slow moving God. It is hardly a matter of surprise that in the face of this abject disappointment they lost their faith.

This is the saddest part of the human predicament that freedom achieved is rendered incapable of accomplishing the desired human good. When freedom was achieved first they started complaining to God, on the second course of action they turned back from following the Lord (Numb. 14.43). As a consequence the people had to pay a huge penalty by spending forty years in the wilderness, and suffer the death of the whole generation that rebelled against Yahweh. This is a signal warning for people in every age that freedom secured is incapable of serving its purpose unless the freed people remain faithful to the Lord of freedom.

H. The Theological Implications

Having studied the narrative and looked into some of the theological issues it raises, we now briefly expound their hermeneutical implications.

1. The purpose of Freedom

The narrative in Exodus clearly highlights the implications of freedom. The freedom is meant for the service of the God of freedom. Whenever this essential aspect is sidelined anarchy creeps in. "Let my people go that they may serve me in the wilderness", this is what Yahweh said categorically and repeatedly as the intention of freedom in Exodus chapters 7 to 10 (7.16; 8.1,20; 9.1,13; 10.3,7). Service of God is the noble

pursuit of freedom. The repetition of the phrase conveys the urgency of appropriating this motif as the signal mark of the Exodus community. This underlying factor was supposed to have been the centrifugal force shaping the community in all its future ventures.

The idea "to serve", apparently had a wider meaning beyond the offering of "sacrifices and burnt offerings" (11.25), for which permission was sought initially (cf. 3.18, 5.1, 3, 8; 8. 25, 28). In one sense an act of worship or devotion is a service rendered to God. However, the subsequent request people made to Pharaoh is illustrative of the depth of meaning inherent in the idea of service. They insisted, "our cattle also must go with us; not a hoof shall be left behind, for we must take of them to serve the Lord our God" (Ex. 11.26). In the service of God not only people but their entire possession is involved. The word 'bd is more properly slave than servant (Gen. 9.25; Ex. 21.2; Dt. 5.15 etc.). An 'bd will minister unto the Lord as slave in the service of the master. The master is the legitimate owner of the possessions of the slave. He exercises no authority on it independent of the master. In the context of the covenant, however, 'bd expresses the relationship of the weaker to the stronger party in the covenant to whom is his allegiance and devotion, and whom he looks for protection and steadfast love²⁹. Seen in accordance with this relationship, serving God is not a sentimental idea. It is not an emotional feeling independent of the material resources one possesses or on which one has some kind of power. It is the total response, of man to God's goodness, made with all that he possesses. Such a service rendered to God with the total whole is the intention of the freedom.

2. The conditions of Freedom

The blessing of freedom was strictly conditional. The Lord says, "if you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord Your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians" (Ex. 15.26). Further he says, "If you will obey my

voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples" (19.5). Freedom that is secured will not serve its purpose unless the freed people are prepared to "diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord" (Ex. 15.26).

The narrator seems to have a definite interest in presenting both the law, as an indispensable element in the making of the people, and the struggle in the wilderness as consequent upon the rejection of the law of God. No sooner than the first murmuring occurred the law was presented (the commandments and statutes, Ex. 15.26) as the condition and guarantee of the people's well-being. Again there appears the presentation of the Sinai Covenant in detail before the narration of the second series of murmuring stories and God's punishments, obviously indicating the narrator's accent on the law. If we have interpreted correctly the phraseology of murmuring, especially the vocable *lun*, it may point beyond mere discontent and grumbling to outright rebellion³⁰. To make God so angry, their rebellion must have reached to the point of thoroughgoing apostasy³¹. God did not require a very "advanced, sophisticated religious perception" from his people, but a simple life style of worshipful obedience to him³².

Freedom calls for a worshipful obedience to the God of freedom, but, contrary to that expectation, people thought to handle the task of actualising the promise by themselves. This is the beginning of failure. How could a stubborn people be blessed who consistently try to keep God at bay? God is not one to supply a compromise package to save a death situation. God's politics is different. He is a jealous God. He is jealous in preserving his holiness. He will not subscribe to the common perception of 'some how' reaching the set target. On the contrary God says, "go up to a land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you in the way, for you are a stiff-necked people" (Ex. 33.3). "The God of the Bible is not a wishy-washy God. He is a God of love, but of a love that burns"³³. For a moment people seem to have realised it would entail disaster if God would not go with them. So for a while they mourned of themselves (33;4-6). Reaching for a landmark without God is a foolish exercise.

Realising this Moses says to God, "if thy presence will not go with me, do not carry us up from here" (33.15).

How do we understand this statement of Moses which is described as "a masterpiece of a speech"³⁴. Is Moses asking for a guide in the wilderness journey, such as the presence of an angel who would go before them (14.19; 23.20, etc.), or the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night? (13.21-22; 14.19b, etc). Is God's presence considered here a mere guarantee of help or an external mark of identity and distinction among other peoples? These questions do seem included among Moses' concerns. B.S. Childs thinks the issue is "whether God will again accompany his people in such a way as to make them again distinct from all other peoples"³⁵ Moses' words seem to be much more poignant and emotionally attached to the question of the spiritual power and direction the people should receive by the presence of God. The fullness of God in his function as protector and leader is sought to continue to be Israel's strength and safety³⁶. "Moses was rather for dying where he stood, than to go one step without his God"³⁷. Here is a great leader who knew the parameters in working for the nation's destiny.

No human achievement is paramount to what is achieved small or little while travelling with God. Whatever grandeur, riches, power and standards achieved in the individual and community life, in commerce, in economy, in jurisprudence and even in worship must be in harmony with the nature of God's law. The distinction of the people of God lay in God going with them, far more than in possessing the land in class and style. Is it not highly anomolous and sacrilegious if we define our identity and stake claims of distinction with the help of acquired material splendour entranced to forget that what is acquired is transient like moon's disc in waters?³⁸ It requires a greater sadhana to consistently confess and live on a God centered identity. In every endeavour God should be the source of inspiration that the material targets set to achieve. If the church in India can unequivocally say, "if thy presence will not go with me, do not carry us up from here," she has truly found her identity. A high point in Moses' confession is reached when he said, "is it not in thy going with

us, so that we are distinct" (Ex. 33.16). There is an urgent plea in confession to reverse "the terrible prospect of Absence"³⁹. This great absence would turn to be the unmaking of the people, practically a cancellation of all that has been achieved as a people. No people, no matter how religious they are, can be a people of God without the presence of God⁴⁰.

No edifice built upon the wreckage of divine-human relationship will remain to aid us provide shalom. No success will issue from something that is wrong, and never a right result from fraudulence. The church should constantly be on guard against its over and undue enthusiasm to create new forms of living while showing gross disregard to the fundamental principles of human brotherhood and spiritual living.

For the church to be a liberating church it ought to be free of corrupt practices. A corrupt church has no right to exist. To be the salt of the earth it needs people who are upright in character, who have nothing to hide and can unashamedly stand before any investigating agency, and whose life is a witness. The life of the church is the primary witness. The witnessing church should struggle its best in penitence and surrender, to render itself pure, holy and blameless, as a priest to the world. An often heard judgement is that such is the ideal church, but the actual church is far from this ideal and it can only be like this. If there is no struggle to grow towards the ideal, growing in maturity by being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ the church is nothing better than a stinking corpse. It is not only a challenge but a demand before every member of the Indian church to be in this struggle at the cost of our false pretensions, while being spent for the dignity of others.

3. *Engaging the limited Freedom*

There was a hesitation with the people of Israel that imposes limitations. When it was required of them to establish a living, and launch programmes leading to possession of the land, the wilderness community fell back upon themselves and tried to live on and take the land by themselves. At this critical moment

when they were to exercise the freedom of God's people they shelved the faith they had in God. In the second instance whatever faith they had in God also failed. The weeping and murmuring are indications of their failure of faith in God⁴¹. Now there remained only two alternatives, either to put faith in God or to return to Egypt. To such a disappointed mind there cannot be anything ideal except returning to their former living. They thought at this circumstance the food of slavery was more desirable to the limited provisions of freedom. Mayes expresses their nature very strikingly: "the Old Testament church expressed in tears its preference for slavery to the world, so as to share its paltry pleasures, rather than suffering in the campaign by which the world was to be overcome"⁴². It is never wise to retreat after engaged upon a mission with God.

The compulsion of the human instinct to return to slavish pleasures is a nagging reality. Perhaps the narrator is participating in a vexing problem of the people, among whom such a drive to adapt to slavish pleasures was a nightmare. The freedom has always been at breaking point. We could imagine the fear of the narrator if he anticipated the reversal of the whole course of freedom, the returning of the Egyptian humiliation. There seems to be "always a fatal ease about going the wrong way"⁴³. Though life may seem to be more natural and comfortable living under the standards of slavery to the world, the sufferings of the free children of God ought to be cherished, against all urges of human impulses, more than pleasures that can be enjoyed under the systems of evil.

4. Realisation of Identity

A right understanding of the identity of the people as God's people, provides sobriety and solid ground for action. In the spying account of Numbers 13, the majority of the spies seem to have made an objective assessment of the situation, when they said the land was good and fruitful, but invincible because of the strength of the inhabitants and their cities. It is fatuous of the people who witness greater works of God in the past to wince before hurdles. It is at this point that the narrator cuts

the throat of the fact representing folk. The narrator realised that the fight was not between giants (*nephilim*) and grasshoppers (13.32, 33) as the majority thought, but between *nephilim* and *ami* (My People, Ex. 5.1, etc). The use of the word *nephilim* here connects our thoughts to the similar occurrence in Gen. 6.1-4. There *nephilim* are said to be the product of illegal, immoral union pictured in the conjugation of sons of God and daughters of men. If here in Numbers 13 the word had such an association in the narrator's mind it points not merely to the physical structures, more than that the pronounced contrast focuses the sharp spiritual and moral divide between the two groups of people, and points to the distinct 'my people' identity of the people of God. They are people of God's own possession. So they could indeed count on God. It was in fact an offence to God that they made a low estimate of themselves⁴⁴. The recognition of the identity of the people of God combined with a right response to the purposes of God relativises fear and renders all apprehensions groundless.

5. *Self-Negating Faith*

God's people cannot resist God's purposes for selfish ends, and easy options. Neither should they move faster than God, hurriedly adopting anything which seems momentarily benefitting. If we expect to move with God we ought to adjust to his pace. The anomaly of such a move that is faster than God, is strikingly present in God's words when the spying mission failed themselves (Numb. 14.30ff). God says, "the men of this generation, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, shall certainly not enter Canaan; but your little children, fear for whose fate you made the pretext for your complains, shall be brought thither by Yahweh"⁴⁵. Interestingly, a common excuse people might make is that, it is for the good of the people, our children who constitute the future of God's plan, that we resist God at the moment. To their shame God says even without you I shall carry your children; you cannot borrow a substitute for a faith response you are obligated to make by your life here and now. With our sins God's future is not at

stake. "The future" that he intends to create, if at all there will be such a future, he can create even without us⁴⁶. We are not indispensable for God in the matter of creating his future. On the other hand, we are indispensable as his people who are supposed to make responsible decisions for him.

6. Faith and Rest

A craving for life set in faith is a basic requirement if God is to accompany all through the vicissitudes of life, and such a life enjoys God's rest. Faith in God is not an unfounded optimism, it is unflagging confidence in the goodness of the Lord combined with an obedient, reverential service of love rendered to that goodness. Such a disciplined life of faith has priority in God's expectation of humans, over anything humans can set their minds on.

When victory does come it comes through the might of the army, it is brought about by God with a disciplined people. The census list appears in the book of Numbers illustrates this point very well. The population listed in its total is incredibly large: in Chp. 1.46 it is 603550, and in Chp. 26.51 it is 601730. These figures can hardly represent the population of the wilderness community. We suggest that in all probability the writers were aware of this anomaly and still they used these figures to demonstrate how, though, a massive army with considerable striking abilities, it had to wander for forty years in the wilderness, at the courtyard of the promised land, unable to take possession of the land, due to the faithlessness of the people.

Man-power and resources fail to achieve the desired human end if it is divested of 'faith' in God. In God's economy it is faith and obedience that brings victory. To release power and achieve victory there is a principle whose operational channels are not activated by only material that can be objectified and quantified, but controlled by spiritual powers, the order of Yahweh. The vast army is hence under Yahweh's order; the victory should therefore be 'allowed' when obedience is duly given. The army and the people together should be disciplined in the law of God and be prepared for battle.

The faith demanded of the wilderness community is an active faith. When Moses said, "the Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still", he is not asking for complacency and idleness. In the ancient Israelite concept of 'holy war', Yahweh was regarded as the warrior, fighting directly for the people. The duty of the people was to stand still and see what Yahweh would do⁴⁸. Standing still means setting one's mind in absolute trust of God and his promises while engaged in fighting. The divine rest is that which humans enjoy in the thick of their work, not rest in the absence of work. It is like the sower who waits patiently for the germination after sowing. Both in work and leisure God's people ought to enjoy patience and rest.

Is such a faith always bound to bring victory? In God's reckoning there is a priority for the development of a disciplined life style, that makes congruent responses with and within the entire possession, over the success of their temporal plans. He would never hesitate to destroy human constructions to create a faithful people. The repeated pulling down for forty years, and the fact that no progress was made towards the possession of the land till the disappearance of a whole generation is a classic example beside the great example of the tower of Babel. In this respect faith should serve to develop patience, such a mind-set of absolute trust to suffer through the demolition of our agenda when God deals with faulty ways in his holy freedom. So the 'achievement' by itself cannot be regarded as the mark of success, but far from that it is faith and trust and their corollary of fitting responses.

Martin Buber says, "the fact that God is identified with success is the greatest obstacle to a steadfast religious life". With people "there is a permanent passion for success"⁴⁹. This is supposed to be a positive human trait, for sufferings and defeats inherent in humanbeings are certainly to be surmounted. However, the defeats should not become detrimental to this passion to succeed, and passion to succeed should never force to adopt dubious, iniquitous measures to succeed and destroy the rest of the soul either. We should enjoy in the very act of trusting and depending on God regardless of the outcome of all pursuits.

Since we tend to grow impatient at everything both in rest and work, a life-long intensive training we require to learn to walk with God.

Conclusion

The murmuring of the wilderness community functions as a theological construct presenting a type of people that existing in every age or, the potential ignominious nature of every people at all times. Murmuring is a tragic component in a people's promising career. The narrator shows that such a rebellious nature is an ever present one. On a day to day basis people have got to resist the temptation to reject Yahwism and adopt Canaanised models of living that were easier to practice. Hence, focusing the innate rebellious nature of the people the series of stories "illustrate what ought to be done from now on for ever in order to participate in true being"⁵⁰. Hence a persistent call for trust and obedience to the law.

We now come back to the point of the centrality of the law that the arrangement of the narrative structure allows for. There is an untiring effort all through the narrative to bring people closer to the law of God. What is the purpose of God asking the people to abide by the law? Apparently the good fortune of the individual and the nation is the purpose behind the demand. It certainly has a utilitarian value of establishing and sustaining a people of God in the land. To meet the craving for earthly happiness, however, is not the only purpose of the giving of the law. Beyond that, inspite of earthly happiness and even at the exclusion of earthly happiness success and victory, the demand of law is felt. To abide is a categorical imperative, a divine command: it is the mark of the people of God, a fitting response to a loving and liberating God⁵¹. It is the fact that God's will has commanded is the sufficient reason for abiding by the law, and using it as a means of developing a life of absolute trust. The law, at all counts, functions only as a guide in the development of such a human conduct and fulfilling the moral obligation of responding to God's love. It requires therefore a constant struggle to search, identify and

live every possible way of fulfilling the moral obligation in absolute trust.

If the wilderness community was expected to keep on following God by trusting and abiding by the law, for it was he who brought them as a congregation in the wilderness, we too have no other option. The hurdles of day to day living are to be faced only with a child like faith, that provides standards befitting to the freedom of God's children, not by worldly standards, repugnant to the precepts of God. To move with God is to adjust to his pace, rather than trying to move faster than God, with a marked impetuosity trying to adopt anything that appeared to be momentarily benefitting. No measure of labour however committedly undertaken will compensate for wilful disobedience to the standards informed by the law of God. At any count the immoral ways cannot serve to maintain a religious, moral community⁵². At every instance of disobedience a seed of rottenness is implanted.

God demands from his people faith and patience in working with him for the realisation of the promises. Developing a life of faith is never an easy task, a disciplined intense training of a complete forty years, a generation-long training, only will suffice the requirement. As matter of fact the exodus is opened to the wilderness, and the wilderness is a preparation for a settled living, an intensive preparation of a full forty years.

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22. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
24. It is suggested that originally these stories could be Post-Sinai, for these stories themselves seem to presuppose the events at Sinai (Ex. 15.25b-26; cf. G.B. Gray, *Numbers*, ICC., Edinburg, T&T Clark., 1979, p. 98).
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