

# OpenTheo

## April 17th: Numbers 13 & Mark 11:1-26

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The twelve spies. The triumphal entry.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Numbers 13. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them.

So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the Lord, all of them men who were heads of the people of Israel. And these were their names. From the tribe of Reuben, Shemua the son of Zakkir.

From the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat the son of Horei. From the tribe of Judah, Caleb the son of Jephaneh. From the tribe of Issachar, Igal the son of Joseph.

From the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea the son of Nan. From the tribe of Benjamin, Poltai the son of Refu. From the tribe of Zebulun, Gadiel the son of Sodai.

From the tribe of Joseph, that is from the tribe of Manasseh, Gadai the son of Susai. From the tribe of Dan, Amiel the son of Gamalai. From the tribe of Asher, Sethar the son of Michael.

From the tribe of Naphtali, Nabai the son of Vapsai. From the tribe of Gad, Gul the son of Makai. These were the names of the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land.

And Moses called Hoshea the son of Nan, Joshua. Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, Go up into the Negev, and go up into the hill country, and see what the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it be of good courage, and bring some of the fruit of the land. Now the time was the season of the first ripe grapes.

So they went up and spied out the land, from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, near Lebo-Hemath. They went up into the Negev and came to Hebron. Ahai-man, Shishai, and Talmai, the descendants of Anak, were there.

Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt. And they came to the valley of Eshkol, and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them. They also brought some pomegranates and figs.

That place was called the valley of Eshkol, because of the cluster that the people of Israel cut down from there. At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. And they came to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation of the Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh.

They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.

However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of Negev.

The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country, and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the Jordan. But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it. Then the men who had gone up with him said, We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.

So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, The land through which we have gone to spy it out is a land that devours its

inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak who came from the Nephilim, and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them. In Numbers chapter 13, less than two years after leaving Egypt, Israel is near the borders of the promised land, and spies are sent in to spy it out.

This is perhaps the crisis moment in the wider story of the Exodus, maybe even more significant than that of the golden calf. Will the people take hold of the promise of the land, or will they shrink back in unbelief? The spies are chosen and they all lead men, standing for each of the tribes. This is a representative task, not just a function that any group of men could perform.

The men chosen to be the spies, however, are a rather different set of men from the leaders of the tribes mentioned earlier in chapters 1 to 2 and chapter 7. Perhaps the earlier lists are generally older men, while the spies need to be younger and more energetic leaders. We encounter Caleb here for the first time. Caleb is an important character from the tribe of Judah.

He's a Kenizzite, and the Kenizzites seem to have descended from Edom, yet there might be indications that as a group of people they were incorporated into the tribe of Caleb seems to have been some sort of prince among the tribe of Judah, and as the tribe that would later become the source of the kings, this is a significant position that he's occupying. We're also told in this list that Joshua was originally called Hoshea. He was renamed Joshua by Moses.

Joshua was the right-hand man of Moses in many ways. He's the one who ascended with Moses up the mountain, presumably not all the way, but he was privy to a lot more than any of the other leaders of the people. The fact that Moses renamed him suggests some sort of father-son type relationship between the two.

The task of the spies is to report on the quality of the land, its inhabitants, its wealth, and the character and fortification of their settlements. They are to go up into the Negev, the southern desert region, and from there all the way up into the hill country in the north and the region of Galilee. In Judges chapter 18 we have another account of spying out a land as the Danites go up into the north, and that is a description of what people want to see when they spy out a land.

It's a land that is free for the taking, a land where people are not fortified, they're not prepared for enemies, but here it seems to be quite the opposite. The spying out of the land occurs at the time of the first ripe grapes, around mid-July, about two months after they had left Sinai. Deuteronomy chapter 1 verse 2 speaks of an 11-day journey from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea from where they spied out the land.

They spy out the entire land from the wilderness of Zin in the south to Rehob in the

north, around the northern border described in chapter 34 verse 8. The length of the land is about 250 miles and they took 40 days to explore it all. At Hebron, about halfway up the length of the land, they encountered giants, the descendants of Anak. After Abraham had spied out the entirety of the land in Genesis chapter 13, he had settled in Hebron.

It was in the Hebron area that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had all sojourned and it was near there that the patriarchs were buried, so it was naturally a very significant site for them. The spies bring back word of the land and fruit from the land, grapes and pomegranates and figs. They confirm the words of the Lord's promise insofar as the land is indeed flowing with milk and honey.

However, they bring back a bad report concerning the people of the land who are powerful and live in well-fortified cities. There are several different groups of people entrenched in the land, each seemingly mastering their own region, so the Anakim, the Malachites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites and the Canaanites. It's a land where no single people group has been able to gain mastery, as it has quite varied terrain and several powerful groups, each controlling a specific tract of land within it.

While the land may be fruitful, getting and retaining a foothold within the land, where there are so many warlike and fortified groups, none of which have been able to achieve dominance, seems near impossible. God had originally determined to take Israel the longer way to avoid such a response, recognising that it would be understandable for them to retreat when faced with the prospect of war. Exodus chapter 13 verse 17, when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although it was near.

For God said, lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt. However, many events had intervened between this and the point that we're at now, and by this point the people should have known enough to trust the Lord. What was lacking was the faith and the courage to grasp at the possibility of the full realisation of their liberation.

As long as they were in the wilderness, the job was only half done and their position was precarious. Caleb, at this point, tries to persuade the people that they can indeed take the land, yet is immediately opposed by the other spies, who claim that they cannot take the land and give a bad report of the land itself, claiming that it devours its inhabitants. They also speak of the giants of the land, of the sons of Anak, who are associated with the Nephilim, a group mentioned in Genesis chapter 6 verse 4. As a consequence of their bad report, their claim that the land devoured its inhabitants, they would end up being devoured by the wilderness.

Joshua chapter 14 verses 6 to 15 relates an interesting epilogue to this account, highlighting the way that Caleb is blessed because of his faithfulness at this point, at a

later point in history. Then the people of Judah came to Joshua at Gilgal, and Caleb, the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite, said to him, You know what the Lord said to Moses, the man of God, in Kadesh Barnea concerning you and me? I was forty years old when Moses, the servant of the Lord, sent me from Kadesh Barnea to spy out the land, and I brought him word again, as it was in my heart. But my brothers who went up with me made the heart of the people melt, yet I wholly followed the Lord my God.

And Moses swore on that day, saying, Surely the land on which your foot has trodden shall be an inheritance for you and your children forever, because you have wholly followed the Lord my God. And now, behold, the Lord has kept me alive, just as he said, these forty-five years, since the time that the Lord spoke this word to Moses, while Israel walked in the wilderness. And now, behold, I am this day eighty-five years old.

I am still as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me, my strength now as my strength was then, for war and for going and coming. So now give me this hill country of which the Lord spoke on that day. For you heard on that day how the Anakim were there, with great fortified cities.

It may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall drive them out, just as the Lord said. Then Joshua blessed him, and he gave Hebron to Caleb the son of Jephunneh for an inheritance. Therefore Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day, because he wholly followed the Lord the God of Israel.

Now the name of Hebron formerly was Kiriath Arba. Arba was the greatest man among the Anakim, and the land had rest from war. Here we see that the courageous faith of Caleb leads him to claim the land that was seen to be the greatest cause for turning back.

He has the faith to go in and take the land of the Anakim for himself. There may be another part of scripture in the background here as well. In Genesis chapter 37 we have another account in scripture of a bad report.

It's the only other time that we find it within the Pentateuch, and it's Joseph bringing back a bad report of his brothers to their father. Then later on in that chapter Joseph is sent on another mission of reconnaissance. Israel said to Joseph, are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.

And he said to him, here I am. So he said to him, go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word. So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem.

A number of things that might remind us of the story we've just read, the valley of Hebron, the sending and bringing word. As in the story of Numbers chapter 13, the story of Genesis chapter 37 ends in tragedy. There's weeping, tearing of clothes, just as we

see as a result of the spying out of the land and the bad report that's brought back in the following chapter.

And there might be something more going on here. There are 10 brothers who are bad, and there are 10 spies who are bad. And there are two good brothers, and there are two good spies.

In the story of Genesis chapter 37, Joseph is the one who's betrayed by his brothers, and the ringleader is Judah. Reuben tries to prevent things but fails. Here, in Numbers chapter 13, we see some of these events playing out again, and I wonder whether it's significant that Judah and a descendant of Joseph stand side by side in appealing to the people and seeking to prevent what's about to take place.

Even in the midst of a national tragedy in the making, there may be some small healing of an event in the past taking place. A question to consider, in what way might the grapes of Eshcol give us a helpful way of seeing some aspect of the meaning of the Lord's Supper? Mark chapter 11 verses 1 to 26. Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a cult tied, on which no one has ever sat.

Untie it and bring it to me. If anyone says to you, Why are you doing this? Say, The Lord has need of it, and will send it back here immediately. And they went away and found a cult tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it.

And some of those standing there said to them, What are you doing untying the cult? And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go. And they brought the cult to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields.

And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest! And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry, and seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it.

When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, May no one ever eat fruit from you again? And his disciples heard it. And they came to Jerusalem, and he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was

teaching them and saying to them, Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a den of robbers. And the chief priests and the scribes heard it, and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching.

And when evening came, they went out of the city. As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, Rabbi, look, the fig tree that you cursed has withered.

And Jesus answered them, Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, Be taken up and thrown into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. In Mark chapter 11, Jesus finally arrives in Jerusalem. We've been moving to this point for a number of chapters now.

And now the events of the final week of his life are about to take place. In Genesis chapter 49 verses 10 to 11, Jacob prophesies concerning the tribe of Judah. The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and the obedience of the peoples is his, binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine, and his robe in the blood of grapes.

Later on as we read in the story of 1 Samuel, Saul's rise to the throne of Israel is set in motion by the wandering donkeys of his father Kish. And his quest to locate the lost donkeys leads him to the prophet Samuel, who anoints him with oil and lists a series of signs that will confirm his message to Saul as he travels back. One of these signs is that he will be met by two men declaring that the donkeys have been found.

The association of donkeys and mules with rule and kingship in Israel, which we first see in Genesis chapter 49, is seen throughout its history from Judges in chapter 5 verses 10 and 10 verse 4, 12 verse 14, and then later on in passages such as 2 Samuel chapter 16 verses 1 and 2, where as David escapes from Jerusalem after his son Absalom's coup, Zeba brings two donkeys for the king's household to ride on. In an ironic twist, Absalom the pretender ends up hung from a terebinth tree by his long hair when his mule goes beneath it. Later on we see again in 1 Kings chapter 1 verses 28 to 40, the fraught situation surrounding royal succession as David's death draws near is resolved as Solomon is decisively distinguished as the true heir as he goes in a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on King David's own mule.

So the donkey or the mule is the king's steed. It's associated with peaceful rule, while

the horse was an animal of war. A different sort of triumphal entry occurs in the story of Jehu, who is secretly anointed by Elisha and rides on a carpet of people's garments.

He's not a meek ruler riding on a donkey, but he's a furious charioteer and someone who causes a lot of bloodshed. He kills Joram of Israel, Ahaziah of Judah, he tramples Jezebel under his horse's feet and he cleanses the Temple of Baal in a very bloody manner. When the prophet Zechariah foretells the coming of a new king to restore the people's fortunes, he's identified as riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey and his mode of rule is distinguished from that of the rulers on their great horses and their royal chargers.

Zechariah 9 9-10 reads, Now this passage is not explicitly cited in Mark as it is in Matthew or John, but it is clearly in the background. The coming king is the true bearer of Judah's scepter. He's the one who will establish the kingdom.

He's the greater than Saul, the greater son of David. He will realise the unfulfilled promise of Solomon who fell short of his name and calling to be the prince of peace. He will not be like the warlike Jehu.

The chariot and the horse and the conflicts to which they belong will be cut off and the nations will have peace declared to them. Jesus then is engaging in a symbolic action that displays kingship. Throughout Mark's gospel, themes of kingship have been prominent and they really come to the foreground here.

Mark's account differs from Matthew's in the timing of events here as the cleansing of the temple appears to happen on the following day. There are three visits to the temple punctuated by two passages concerning the fig tree. The interspersing of these accounts strongly suggests a connection between the fig tree and the temple.

The fig tree is Jesus' one destructive miracle. The fig tree is seen in leaf. It seems to promise some life but it's not the season for figs.

Jesus might be expecting undeveloped figs though. Jeremiah 8.13 The godly has perished from the earth and there is no one upright among mankind. They all lie in wait for blood and each hunts the other with a net.

Their hands are on what is evil. To do it well, the prince and the judge ask for a bribe and the great man utters the evil desire of his soul. Thus they weave it together.

The best of them is like a briar. The most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day of your watchmen, of your punishment has come.

Now their confusion is at hand. Put no trust in a neighbour. Have no confidence in a friend.

Guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your arms. For the son treats the



father with contempt. The daughter rises up against her mother.

The daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's enemies are the men of his own house. The desire to find figs on this tree seems to be strange as it's out of season and Mark underlines that fact.

The point however is not the fig tree itself. It's what the fig tree represents. The fig tree represents Israel and its temple and its leaders and it's that that Christ has come to inspect.

This is followed by Jesus' cleansing of the temple. In Zechariah 14 verse 21 we're told, Jesus' action is the action of the messianic king. He's the one who's going to set right and restore and reform the worship of God.

He's going to re-establish the temple in its proper manner. And his action with the fig tree interprets the action of the temple. Jesus is inspecting the temple as he inspected the fig tree and the temple will suffer the same judgment.

It will wither and be destroyed in the same way as the fig tree. Jesus' statement concerning the temple is also working with the Old Testament. Isaiah chapter 56 verses 6 to 7, and the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants.

Everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it and holds fast my covenant. These I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar.

For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. And then in Jeremiah chapter 7 verse 11, has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold I myself have seen it declares the Lord. So there are a number of overlapping judgments here.

There's the judgment implied by the fig tree being inspected and no good fruit being found upon it. In the same way the people of Israel, their leaders have been inspected and they have not produced the fruit that is being sought. Then there is also the background of Zechariah chapter 14, the final verse of that book which speaks of the removal of the traders from the house of the Lord.

Beyond that there's also Jeremiah. Jeremiah which speaks about the rebellion of the people and the way that they treated the temple as a sort of talisman to protect them from God's wrath. It was a shelter and a refuge so they could sin and the temple would secure their impunity.

Like robbers retreat to their den after they've committed their crimes, so the people of Israel would retreat to the temple, to the house of God itself and treat that as a place

that protected them from judgment, from being sought out by justice. This is an utter perversion of the true purpose of the temple. It's not to be a place of merchandise, it's not to be a place to avoid the just judgment of God and it's not to be a place that is fruitless.

Rather it's supposed to be the place where the spiritual life of Israel is most evident, where the leaves as it were of this house display the fruit within it. And then it's also to be a place that brings in people from outside, that for all nations it should be seen as a house of prayer. The judgment on the fig tree then is a Jesus' action in the temple.

The fig tree represents Israel and its leaders and their failure to produce fruit. Jeremiah chapter 8 verse 13, chapter 24 verses 1 to 10, Hosea 9, 10 and 16 to 17 all use that sort of symbolism to refer to Israel. The temple and the fig tree are related then.

And then Jesus after this goes into a discussion of prayer, about efficacy in prayer, the importance of faith but also forgiveness. If we want effective prayers we have to come to God with faith and confidence but also in a way that heals the relationships that we have with others, the breached relationships, the bitterness that might exist between us and others. And unless we come to God with the faith to grasp hold of him and the forgiveness to release our neighbour from their debts, we cannot enjoy effectiveness in prayer.

A question to consider, why do you think Mark focuses Jesus' teaching on prayer here rather than elsewhere in his gospel, as the other gospels do?