

## Plagues in the Wilderness: Justice, Retribution or Slaughter? Natural or Supernatural?

### **Numbers 11 (after leaving Sinai/Horeb)**

4And the ruffraff that was in their midst felt a sharp craving, and the Israelites, too, again wept and said, "Who will feed us meat?"

31And a wind moved onward from the LORD and swept up quail from the sea and left them over the camp, about a day's journey in every direction all round the camp and about two cubits deep on the ground. 32And the people arose all that day and all that night and all the next day and gathered the quail. The most sparing gathered ten homers\*, and they laid them out for themselves round about the camp. 33The meat was still between their teeth, it had not yet been chewed, when the LORD's wrath flared against the people, and the LORD struck a very great blow against the people. 34And the name of the place was called Kibroth-Hattaavah, for there the people buried the ones who had been craving.

### Discussion points

There may be a natural cause to quail gathering: flocks of migratory quail from the sea do cross over the Sinai, where, exhausted from their flight, they are easy to trap.

\*Ten homers would be about 6 gallons.

Maimonides and others believe that gluttony is sinful. Maimonides, a physician, ate sparingly believing this was for good health.

It appears that God set a trap for those who were complaining about the lack of meat. He first offered to provide and then killed them for partaking. The medieval commentators rationalize that it was only the complainers and gluttons that were killed. What do we think about God's actions?

### **Numbers 17 (the day after the Korach rebellion)**

7And it happened when the community assembled against Moses and against Aaron, that they turned to the Tent of Meeting, and, look, the cloud had covered it

and the LORD's glory appeared. 8And Moses, and Aaron with him, came before the Tent of Meeting.

9And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 10“Lift yourselves up from the midst of this community and I will put an end to them in an instant.” And they fell on their faces. 11And Moses said to Aaron, “Take the fire-pan and place fire upon it from the altar and put in incense and carry it quickly to the community and atone for them, for the fury has gone out from before the LORD, the scourge has begun.”

12And Aaron took as Moses had spoken, and he ran into the midst of the assembly, and, look, the scourge had begun against the people, and he put in incense and atoned for the people. 13And he stood between the dead and the living, and the scourge was held back. 14And those who died by the scourge came to fourteen thousand and seven hundred, besides those who died because of Korah.

### Discussion points

Throughout history viral and bacterial plagues have mutated from animals to affect humans and were spread to humans from infected animals. These diseases more easily manifest and spread when humans and animals live with each other. Such was the case in the wilderness. Would it be possible, unlikely or likely that the plagues in Numbers were naturally caused?

What are the similarities and differences between Aaron's action and our situation with COVID-19?

### **Numbers 25 (after the story of Balak and Balaam)**

1And Israel stayed at Shittim, and the people began to go whoring with the daughters of Moab. 2And they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. 3And Israel clung to Baal Peor, and the LORD's wrath flared against Israel.....

7And Phinehas son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest saw, and he rose from the midst of the community and took a spear in his hand. 8And he came after the man of Israel into the alcove and stabbed the two of them, the man of Israel and the woman, in her alcove, and the scourge was held back from the Israelites. 9And those who died in the scourge came to twenty-four thousand.

### Discussion points

Some 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century commentators such as Nachmanides and Abravanel are of the opinion that this massive death of Israelites occurred in a few hours. Maimonides, however, believes that God does not intervene to change the laws of nature.

If the deaths were from natural causes, what might be plausible causes and timing?

Do you believe that people should be rewarded for murder while defending God's edicts?

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From "Crime and Punishment" by Rabbi Abigail N. Sosland, (pp. 458-460) in The Observant Life

Reward and punishment are intrinsic to the Bible beginning with the expulsion from Eden and continuing through Moses' final words to Israel, "See, this day I set before you a blessing and a curse: a blessing if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you today and a curse if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God..." (Deuteronomy 11:26-28). Abigail Sosland suggests that "our most basic theories of good, evil, and justice derive directly from Scripture, and it is for the most part through the contemplation of biblical texts that Western cultures have come to understand the values and reasonableness of punishment for wrongdoing." Secular notions of justice are directly linked with the belief that there is such a thing as right and wrong - and that begins I believe with the belief in a God who demands justice.

And yet the issue is not so simple. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Did the notion of a just God who demands certain behavior precede the laws of the Bible or did the laws of the Bible and the sense of justice give birth to a God in this image? Where does one draw the line between justice and retribution? Should God be engaging in slaughter to accomplish retribution?