

# A HISTORY OF DIVISION

## Israel in the wilderness, *Numbers 14:1-4*

Movies occasionally produce characters whose identity becomes reduced to a memorable line. Consider, for example, the line, “I’ll be back” from movie Terminator. Arnold Schwarzenegger voiced the line in his role as a robot from the future sent back in time to perform a mission and the now-iconic phrase captured his unfeeling commitment to accomplishing that task. God similarly reduces Israel’s identity in the story of their exodus from Egypt. Rather than using a phrase, however, God focuses on the nation’s responses to His activity in its life – they constantly grumbled against Him. We will consider Israel’s complaints recorded in the books of Exodus and Numbers, what insights it offers us into their relationship with God, and how their story offers us perspective on our own lives.

### “How long will this people despise me?”<sup>1</sup>

- Exodus opens in a triumphant way – God, in faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham, determined to rescue the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt (*Exodus 2:24-25; Deuteronomy 7:7-8*).
- Israel’s rescue followed a careful plan designed to reveal God’s unique sovereignty to the nation (*Exodus 6:7*).
- God’s effort to reveal Himself to Israel peaked when He descended onto “Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” and invited them into a covenant relationship with Him as His “treasured possession” (*Exodus 19:1-20*).
- Israel, however, “stood far off” and refused to draw near to God (*Exodus 20:18-21*).
- The nation’s rejection of God at Mount Sinai revealed a mistrust that expressed itself in their repeated complaints. Consider:
  - Exodus 14:10-12 – Israel **complained** it would have been better for them to remain in Egypt than to be brought into the wilderness by God to die.
  - Exodus 15:22-24 – the people **grumbled** against Moses because of the lack of water.
  - Exodus 16:1-12 – the people **grumbled** because they were hungry, pining for the ‘abundant’ food they claimed to have had in Egypt.
  - Exodus 17:1-2 – the people **grumbled** about the lack of water and accused Moses of trying to kill them.
  - Numbers 11:1-15 – the people **grumbled** about their misfortunes, complaining that the food God gave them could not compare to the food they had in Egypt.
  - Numbers 14:1-10; Deuteronomy 1:26-33 – the people **grumbled** about the fertile land of Canaan God promised to give them and planned to return to Egypt.
  - Numbers 16:1-11 – Korah **grumbled** against the leadership of Moses and Aaron

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 14:11. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.



- Numbers 16:41-42 – the people **grumbled** against Moses and Aaron about the way God dealt with Korah’s rebellion.
- Numbers 17:1-13 – the people **complained** that God was planning to kill them.
- Numbers 20:1-13 – like their parents, the second generation of Israelites **grumbled** against Moses and God, accusing the two of trying to kill them.
- The passages detailing Israel’s pattern of complaining reveal a few things. Consider:
  - The Israelites’ complaints defined their relationship with God (*cf. Numbers 14:20*).
  - Israel’s complaints reveal they preferred their oppressive slave masters in Egypt over God (*Exodus 14:10-12; 16:1-12; Numbers 11:1-15; 14:1-10*).
  - The mistrust that motivated the Israelites’ complaints twisted their perspective – they claimed their slavery food was better than the Eden-like food God gave them (*cf. Numbers 11:1-7*).
  - Despite the nation’s mistrust and constant complaints, God nevertheless remained faithful (*cf. Exodus 34:5-6; Deuteronomy 29:5*).
  - God’s enduring faithfulness does not exclude punishment for hardhearted resistance to Him; He sentenced the complaining generation of Israelites to death in the wilderness while maintaining His promises to Abraham (*Numbers 14:11-35*).

## Applications

The carefully crafted narrative of Israel’s experience in the wilderness offers insight into God’s identity and His purposes for Israel through the tension that defined their relationship. But, Paul wrote, the narrative also contains a practical purpose; their experiences serve as an example and “were written down for our instruction” (*1 Corinthians 10:1-11*). Consider, therefore, the following lessons we can take from the story of Israel’s complaints and apply to our focus on “Bonding:

*We tend to prefer slavery to our world than freedom with God.*

*Refusing a relationship with God creates discontent that expresses itself through complaining and infighting.*

*A trusting relationship with God grants security and peace.*

*God’s faithfulness is greater than our unfaithfulness.*

The movie Terminator reduced Schwarzenegger’s character to the line “I’ll be back”. Exodus and Numbers capture Israel’s disbelief through their “grumbling”. What will be the summary used to define your life?

