Numbers - Commentaries by John Thomas Mawson

Answers to Correspondents, Numbers 26:64-65; Hebrews 3:19; Jude 5

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F.K.M. writes —

I shall be glad of a little help in regard to the above-mentioned scriptures.

In Hebrews 3:19 we read “so we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.” Similarly Jude 5 states “that the Lord having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not.”

From these scriptures it is quite clear that unbelief prevented their entrance into “the land.” My difficulty, however, is this: Are we to view the company referred to as true believers or only professors? If the former, do we understand them to represent worldly believers who never rise to their heavenly standing? If, however, on the other hand, they are simply “professors,” how are we to reconcile this with the fact that they are under the shelter of the blood, and delivered from the power of the enemy?

In reply to this question we would point out that the people of Israel are viewed (typically) in Scripture in a double aspect: first as one whole as a people sheltered by blood in Egypt, redeemed by power at the Red Sea, divinely guided in the wilderness, and finally brought in victorious strength into their possession in the promised land (compare Psa. 78:51-55). When thus viewed, their history typifies that of the believer, and the very fact that all the men of war perished ere they crossed the brook Zered (Deut. 2:14-15) becomes luminous with meaning, for though the link of identity between the Israel who came out of Egypt and the Israel who entered the land is clearly maintained in Caleb and Joshua (Num. 26:64, 65), yet the constitution of the host was otherwise entirely changed; and so in the case of the believer, he enters the glory in the likeness and beauty of Christ, an utterly changed man morally from what he was when, typically speaking, he was “in Egypt,” and yet he remains in identity the same person.

The second aspect in which the people of Israel are viewed in Scripture, is that which takes them up in detail as a people outwardly set in relation with God, but the reality of whose profession would be, and was, tested in the path of faith. It is this aspect which is so prominent in the epistles addressed to those who have professed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; and undoubtedly the destruction spoken of in such scriptures as those quoted is typical not of God’s governmental ways with true believers (which are brought out in other passages), but of the eternal destruction which awaits those who, whilst in the outward profession of Christ’s name, are not really and truly believers. If this distinction of aspect be observed, difficulty disappears.

We would remark in conclusion that it is important to notice that the rest spoken of in Hebrews 3 and 4 is distinctly future (cf. 4:9, 10): it is not simply the spiritual rest which is ours today, but looks on to the end of all the present period of testing, labor, and trial, and when this is seen the parallel in Hebrews 3:18,19 becomes unmistakable.