

Numbers 13:17-20

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/num/num-13/numbers-1317-20/>

After appointing the spies from each tribe, Moses then gave them instructions as to where to go and what they were to look for. They were also to bring back a sample of what was grown in the land.

Before Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, he spoke to them (v. 17) his instructions as to where they were to go and what they were to observe. Their journey included going *into the Negev*, and then to *go up into the hill*. The *Negev* (which means “south”) was on the south side of Canaan and was north of Kadesh (where the Israelites were camped) on the southwest side of the Dead Sea.

North of that was the *hill country*, which stretched from Judah on the south (just north of the Negev) to the hills around the Sea of Galilee in the northern part of Canaan.

The route described here was probably Moses’ original plan for the invasion of Canaan. They would leave Kadesh, travel through the *Negev*, and enter the Promised Land from the south. They would then spread out through the lowlands and *hill country* until the entire area was conquered.

During their travels, they were to observe the following:

- First, they needed to *see what the land is like* (v. 18) in terms of its defenses. They were to evaluate *whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many*. This would give Moses an idea of how large an army the people of Canaan could put on the battlefield.
- They also were to see *how is the land in which they live* (v. 19) and determine whether it was *good or bad*, meaning whether the rural areas would be difficult to take over or not. Then, they were to check out *how are the cities in which they live, are they like open camps or with fortifications*. Moses sought to know if the cities had fortified walls (making them more difficult to conquer), or were they nomadic-like camps that would be much easier to overtake.
- In verse 20, Moses told the spies to shift their focus on the quality of the land itself. He wanted to know *how is the land, is it fat or lean* (v. 20), meaning is the land fertile or not.
- He also wanted to know *are there trees in it or not*. Trees would provide lumber with which the people could create shelters for themselves, and perhaps implements of war. Others, such as olive trees, would produce crops. They would also have added to the beauty of the land.
- Moses then urged the spies to *make an effort then to get some of the fruit of the land*. Though some English versions translate *make an effort* as “be of good courage,” the rendering here seems more plausible. Bringing back *some of the fruit of the land* would provide visible proof of how productive the land is. It was possible to do so because *the*

time was the time of the first ripe grapes. In Canaan, this would have been the early grape harvest which occurred in mid-summer, late July or August.

Bringing back grapes would have been especially significant. The Israelites had not seen grapes since they had left Egypt over a year earlier. This should have convinced them that, instead of just manna and quail in their diet (Numbers 11), they would have a wide variety of good food and drink again as soon as they conquered Canaan. It is probable that Moses's goal in all these instructions included a desire to bolster the enthusiasm of his prone-to-grumble nation.

Biblical Text

¹⁷ When Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, he said to them, "Go up there into the Negev; then go up into the hill country. ¹⁸ See what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong *or* weak, whether they are few or many. ¹⁹ How is the land in which they live, is it good or bad? And how are the cities in which they live, are *they* like *open* camps or with fortifications? ²⁰ How is the land, is it fat or lean? Are there trees in it or not? Make an effort then to get some of the fruit of the land." Now the time was the time of the first ripe grapes.