Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Shelah

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Shelah:

The Spies in Numbers and Deuteronomy

The spies narrative (Numbers 13-14) is among the most familiar and devastating stories in the Torah. In its presentation in the Book of Numbers, the narrative appears straightforward. God commands Moses to send spies to survey the Land of Israel. Moses agrees and instructs the spies regarding their mission. The spies themselves are distinguished leaders, divinely sanctioned representatives of the tribes. Everything about the mission initially appears legitimate and proper.

The catastrophe emerges only afterward. Ten spies return with a demoralizing report, the nation loses faith, and God decrees that the generation of the wilderness will perish before entering the land. In the plain sense of Numbers, the sin lies in the people's faithlessness and despair after hearing the spies' report.

However, the Book of Deuteronomy dramatically complicates this picture.

Moses's retelling of the spies narrative in Deuteronomy chapter 1 is not an independent account. It plainly assumes familiarity with the original story in Numbers. Yet the retelling systematically shifts the emphasis of the narrative and

redistributes responsibility in striking ways.

In Numbers, God appears to initiate the mission: “Send men for yourself, and let them spy out the land of Canaan” (Numbers 13:2).

In Deuteronomy, however, the initiative comes from the people: “Then all of you approached me and said: Let us send men before us” (Deuteronomy 1:22). Moses then states: “The matter was good in my eyes” (1:23).

Remarkably, God is not mentioned at all in connection with authorizing the mission until after the disaster unfolds and the decree is issued. In the plain sense of Deuteronomy, the mission appears to have originated with the people and to have been approved by Moses himself.

This shift is not merely technical. It fundamentally alters the theological atmosphere of the episode.

Even the language of Moses’s rebuke differs sharply from Numbers. In Deuteronomy, Moses emphasizes the nation’s initiative: *va-tikrevun elai kullekhem* (1:22). The phrase can be translated neutrally as “you approached me,” though some commentators hear a more accusatory tone: “you pressed upon me” or “you demanded of me.” Either way, the emphasis falls upon the people’s initiative rather than upon divine command.

How, then, can Deuteronomy’s retelling coexist with Numbers’s original presentation?

Drawing on Midrashic tradition, Rashi argues that Deuteronomy reveals the hidden truth behind the story all along. The request to send spies was itself sinful from the outset. According to Rashi, the demand for reconnaissance reflected a

lack of trust in God immediately after Moses had enthusiastically promised that God would give them the land. For Rashi, the very desire to investigate and verify the land after God's promise already betrayed deficient faith.

Accordingly, Rashi reads Moses's words in Deuteronomy sharply. *Va-tikrevun elai kullekhem* does not mean merely "you approached me," but carries a critical tone: despite Moses's encouragement and God's promise, the people pressed for spies anyway.

Even more strikingly, Rashi explains "the matter was good in my eyes" (1:23) to mean that Moses only *pretended* to approve of the request. Rashi compares Moses to a salesman displaying confidence in a used donkey to discourage further inquiry. Moses hoped that by expressing confidence, the people would abandon the desire to investigate the land altogether.

When they persisted, however, God acceded reluctantly: *shelah lekha anashim* —send *for yourself* (Numbers 13:2). According to Rashi, the phrase implies divine disapproval: "I am not commanding this; if you wish, send them."

In this reading, the downfall occurred before the spies even departed. The actual mission merely exposed the people's already defective faith.

Rashi's interpretation is powerful and coherent, but it comes at a significant textual cost. In Deuteronomy, Moses's statement that "the matter was good in my eyes" sounds like genuine approval, not strategic pretense. Likewise, Numbers presents the mission as divinely sanctioned. God speaks directly to Moses, and the spies depart "by the word of the Lord" (Numbers 13:3). Nothing in the narrative overtly conveys reluctant divine concession.

Ramban therefore rejects Rashi's reinterpretation. Although Ramban agrees that the people initiated the request and that God responded afterward, he insists that the request itself was entirely legitimate.

For Ramban, prudent military reconnaissance does not contradict faith. Moses himself later sends spies, and Joshua does so as well before the conquest of Jericho. Gathering intelligence is normal military behavior, not religious betrayal.

Accordingly, Ramban reads *va-tikrevun elai kullekhem* (Deuteronomy 1:22) neutrally: “Then you approached me.”

Likewise, *shelah lekhah anashim* (Numbers 13:2) is simply standard biblical idiom meaning “send.” The sin occurred only later, when the spies abused their mission and the people succumbed to panic and rebellion.

Ramban thus harmonizes the two narratives without fundamentally reinterpreting either one. The people requested spies, Moses approved, and God endorsed the plan. The catastrophe emerged only afterward through the spies’ panic-inducing report and the people’s loss of faith.

Ramban’s approach resolves the major textual difficulties raised by Rashi’s interpretation. It preserves Moses’s straightforward approval in Deuteronomy while also maintaining Numbers’s clear presentation of divine sanction. At the same time, Ramban preserves a broader theological principle: responsible human effort and strategic planning coexist with faith rather than undermine it.

Thus, while Rashi sees Deuteronomy as uncovering the hidden failure already present at the beginning of the episode, Ramban views Deuteronomy as supplementing—but not overturning—the original presentation in Numbers. At stake in the debate between Rashi and Ramban is not merely how to read one biblical episode, but a larger question about the relationship between faith and human initiative in religious life.