

Numbers 11:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And Moses said, The people, among whom I am, are six hundred thousand footmen; and thou hast said, I will give them flesh, that they may eat a whole month.

Analysis

Moses' question 'Shall the flocks and the herds be slain for them, to suffice them?' reveals his struggle with God's promise. After complaining about the burden of leadership (verses 10-15), Moses now questions God's ability to provide. The calculation shows Moses thinking in human terms—if they slaughtered their livestock, would it be enough? The question exposes doubt: can God really provide flesh for millions in the wilderness? Moses' faith wavered between trusting God's promise and calculating earthly resources.

The alternative 'or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to suffice them?' pushes the impossibility further. The wilderness had no sea nearby, making this option even more absurd than slaughtering livestock. Moses' rhetorical questions anticipate God's response in verse 23: 'Is the LORD's hand waxed short?' Moses had forgotten that the same God who parted the Red Sea, sent manna daily, and brought water from rock could surely provide meat. His questions revealed the common failure of even faithful servants: seeing obstacles rather than omnipotence.

This passage parallels other moments when God's servants doubted divine provision: Abraham laughing at the promise of Isaac (Genesis 17:17), Sarah's unbelief (Genesis 18:12-14), and the disciples questioning how to feed five thousand (John 6:5-9). Yet God's response vindicated His promise—the quail came (verse 31), demonstrating that divine resources far exceed human calculation.

Moses' doubt, though rebuked, was answered with proof of God's power, teaching that faith must rest in God's character, not human resources.

Historical Context

The question about slaughtering flocks and herds reflects the reality that Israel's livestock was limited and needed for sacrifices, breeding, and long-term sustenance. The reference to 'fish of the sea' may allude to Egypt (where they had fish, verse 5), emphasizing the impossibility of obtaining it in the landlocked wilderness. Moses' calculation from human perspective couldn't conceive how God would provide for 600,000 men plus women and children (verse 21)—perhaps 2-3 million people total. Yet God's method (bringing quail) exceeded human imagination.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. How does Moses' questioning of God's ability to provide warn against the tendency to calculate divine possibilities by human resources?
2. What does this passage teach about the relationship between honest doubt and genuine faith—can we bring our questions to God while still trusting His promises?

Interlinear Text

אָמַרְתָּ	מֹשֶׁה	שֵׁשׁ	מֵאָה	אֶלֶף	בְּגָלֵי י
and thou hast said	And Moses	whom I am	are six	hundred	thousand
H559	H4872	H8337	H3967	H505	H7273
הָעָם	אֲשֶׁר	אֲנֹכִי	בְּקִרְבִּי	וְאַתָּה	אָמַרְתָּ
The people	H834	H595	among	H859	and thou hast said
H5971		H7130		H559	H1320
אֶתְּ	לָהֶם	וְאָכְלוּ	חֹדֶשׁ	יָמִים:	
I will give	H0	that they may eat	month	a whole	
H5414		H398	H2320	H3117	

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 12:37 (Parallel theme): And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand on foot that were men, beside children.

Numbers 1:46 (Parallel theme): Even all they that were numbered were six hundred thousand and three thousand and five hundred and fifty.

Exodus 38:26 (Parallel theme): A bekah for every man, that is, half a shekel, after the shekel of the sanctuary, for every one that went to be numbered, from twenty years old and upward, for six hundred thousand and three thousand and five hundred and fifty men.

Genesis 12:2 (Parallel theme): And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: