

The Bible as Novel¹

On the way the people became irritable and impatient. They murmured against God and against Moses.

Despite the rigid order of their lives, despite the many commands of God, their movement lacked a plan or point or purpose! It was ridiculous. Wandering, wandering nowhere—but doing it all with stiff rules and wonderful precision!

A general mood of bitterness infected Israel, until it seemed to some that everyone must feel the same, though few had the courage to say it. So those few became bold on behalf of the rest. With the added swagger of self-righteousness, they complained loudly, in public places.

Carmi was among the loudest. Sixty years old, thin and stooped, gaunt in his cheeks, balding and blotched on the top of his head, Carmi chose to speak of the food. He stood in front of his tent and shouted, “There is neither food nor water!”

His son, now thirty years old, watched with a scornful indifference. He wasn’t embarrassed or ashamed. In fact, he no longer felt anything at all for this disappointed old man.

Carmi’s wife, on the other hand, was terrified of his rash behavior. She begged him to come in and be quiet. She said, “Carmi, you know better. There is water when we need it, and there has been manna every morning—”

But the man bellowed the louder: “When I think what my life could have been! When I think what I might have made of myself! A little land! A few fig trees, a few sheep—no, Elisheba, this is not food. Moses!” he roared, waving his hands. “Moses, do you hear me? I am the voice of ten thousand now. I am pointing at a jar of manna! I am remembering manna, day after day for thirty years, manna! And I gag! I say for ten thousand: we loathe this worthless food!”

That same night, Carmi the son of Zabdi died.

He was bitten by a snake. And though the bite produced a fiery inflammation all over his flesh, the man chose silence at the end. He did not cry out. He did not speak. His wife took him in her arms and stroked his sweating forehead and rocked him. Once he opened his eyes and looked up at her. His swelling countenance seemed to say, *I expected nothing else*. And then he breathed his last.

But from other tents in Israel there went up many an agonized cry that night.

The entire camp had been overrun by serpents. They came in silence, surprising the people by the sudden fire of their bite.

And in the morning light the serpents were visible everywhere, dropping from loose clothing, lying in the folds of the tents, sliding through the dry grass—and killing the children of Israel.

So they went to Moses with wounded bodies and broken hearts. They found him at the Tabernacle in the midst of all. And they said, “We have sinned. We’ve spoken against the Lord and against you. Moses, we repent the iniquity! Please pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us!”

Moses listened, his fierce old eyes probing the faces of those who surrounded him, then he turned and entered the Tabernacle, and there he stayed for the space of an hour.

During that same day, Elisheba also was bitten by a snake.

Achan heard the tiny sigh his mother made for the pain she had sustained. He went into her room and saw the dry eye of the serpent. Immediately he crushed its head and gathered his mother into his arms and ran outside. He

¹ Walter Wangerin. *The Book of God: The Bible as a Novel*, pp. 155–157.

raced westward through the wide encampment from the tents of Judah to the center of all the circles—the Tabernacle.

As he arrived, he saw several of the men of Levi lifting a dull yellow snake to the top of a pole. It had been molded of bronze.

Moses was calling to all the people: “The Lord has commanded me to raise this serpent before you. In mercy he says, *If those who have been bitten look upon the serpent, they shall live.*”

Achan laid his mother down before the pole. Already her breath was labored and foul. Her face was swollen and red.

Slowly she opened her eyes. She looked upward. She gazed upon the bronze effigy for a brief moment. Then she closed her eyes and relaxed and fell into a deep sleep.

When she woke, she was well.