“May the Lord Put His Spirit (rûḥô) Upon Them” (Num 11:25–29b): Reading Moses’ Prayer for the Nigerian Contemporary Situation

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ABSTRACT

The expression “may the Lord put his Spirit (rûḥô) upon them (Num 11:29b)…” is a known “prayer or wish of Moses,” Israel’s greatest prophet. It is from the eleventh chapter of the Book of Numbers. Numbers as a whole, narrates how generations of Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness, and how God walks, marches with, provides, and acts towards his chosen people, in spite of their grumbling and stubbornness. Numbers 11, especially vv.25–29, the focus of this work, is the scene when God takes some of Moses’ prophetic spirit and bestows them on seventy elders. While this new divine gift of the Spirit (hârûaḥ) to a disgruntled-OT community displeases Joshua, Moses’ prayerful response “that the Lord would bestow his Spirit upon them,” (v. 29b), is worth reinterpreting historically and theologically for contemporary communities, particularly, Nigeria.

Key Words: exegesis, theology, rûaḥ 'ûdônây, leadership, prophecy, charism, Moses, contemporary society
Introduction

The expression “may the LORD put his Spirit (rûhô) upon them” (Num 11:29b) is a known “prayer or wish of Moses”, Israel’s greatest charismatic leader and prophet.¹ It is drawn from Numbers 11, which narrates how generations of Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness. Numbers 11 provides a retrospective understanding of Moses’ paradigmatic leadership led by the Spirit of God, who walks with, guides, provides for, and accompanies the Israelites through the wilderness despite their grumbling and rebellion. Drawing on Exodus 33:7–11, Numbers 11:25–29b narrates how God took some of Moses’ prophetic Spirit and placed it in seventy elders outside the tent, as well as Eldad and Medad. This outpouring of the divine Spirit (ḥārūaḥ) displeases a young man (Num 11:27) and the zealous Joshua (Num 11:28), which in turn prompts Moses to pray: “would that the LORD would bestow his Spirit upon them” (Num 11:29b).

This passage raises the question of which Spirit Moses refers to here. Is there any Holy Spirit in the Old Testament? Questions regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament are often met with shocking resistance, challenges, or negligence by religious people, Christians, and scholars both within and outside of Africa and Nigeria. When such questions are addressed, they are done so on the basis of the New Testament due to the lack of explicit use of the phrase “Holy Spirit” (rûaḥ qôdeš) in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.²

Existing research on this scene or Moses’ prayer often lacks sufficient application of its relevance to the Church in Nigeria, which is filled with talents and gifts manifested both inside and outside of the

Indeed, the Nigerian Church is similar to the ancient Israelite community of the book of Numbers in many respects. It is a church and society in transition—from the British, from the Irish, and from successive governments. It is a church and society searching for food, nourishment, and a better life for its citizens and members. And it is a society that is burdened with leadership issues as well as socio-political, economic, and religious challenges.⁴

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⁴ Some of these challenges have been discussed in Chinua Achebe, Trouble with Nigeria (London: Heinemann, 1984); Michael Ufok Udoekpo, Corruption in
Using faith hermeneutics as its exegetical point of departure (i.e., “the harmony of faith and reason, exegesis and theology, biblical and systematic”), this paper historically and theologically explores related terms, metonyms, uses, meanings, activities, and theological functions of the Spirit of the Lord (rûaḥ ’ādōnāy) in Moses’ prayer (Num 11:29b) for the situation of contemporary Nigeria, including the Church in Nigeria.

**Rûaḥ in the Old Testament and Other Ancient Texts**

The Old Testament Hebrew term rûaḥ is translated with the Greek term pneuma in the Classical Writings, the LXX, Deutero-Canonical texts (the Apocrypha), the writings of Philo and Josephus, and the New Testament. Leon Wood and Tengström view rûaḥ and pneuma as “spirit”, “breath”, and “wind”, depending on the context. Usually in the Old Testament, rûaḥ occurs as a feminine, but sometimes it occurs as

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5 This is drawn from Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, _Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology_ (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 42–62; Scott H. Hahn, _Covenant and Communion: Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI_ (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 41–62; and Udoekpo, _Worship in Amos_, xxx–xxxi, which describes “faith hermeneutics” irrespective of the biblical text as a “scientific” reading with an “explanatory power” from the heart of the Church in an ecclesial spirit. It has twofold power: (1) the power to hold fast the entire testimony of the sources, and (2) the power to transcend differences of culture, division, time, people, civilization, and values.

masculine. The term occurs in noun and verb form about 388 times in the Old Testament, including eleven times in the Aramaic portions of Daniel.\(^7\)

It occurs thirty-eight times in the Torah. There are zero occurrences in Leviticus, two in Deuteronomy, seven in the Primeval History, and forty-seven in the Deuteronomistic History. It occurs rarely in the writings of the eighth-century classical prophets; a notable exception is Amos 4:13, which references God as the creator of the spirit (\(bōrē’\ rûaḥ\)).\(^8\) Rûaḥ occurs seven times in Hosea, twenty-nine times in proto-Isaiah, twice in Micah, and eighteen times in Jeremiah.

The term rûaḥ is not found in Nahum and Zephaniah. However, it occurs fifty-two times in Ezekiel, twenty-three times in Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah, twice in both Jonah and Habakkuk, four times in Haggai, and twelve times in both Zechariah and Malachi. A statement concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is found in Joel 3:1–2. Rûaḥ is also used frequently in the Psalms (thirty-nine occurrences) and Wisdom literature (thirty-one occurrences in Job, twenty-one in Proverbs, and twenty-four in Ecclesiastes, sometimes as “vanity” [\(\text{ḥeḇēl}\)]). As stated earlier, context must be our guide in discerning whether rûaḥ is in reference to the “spirit of man” or “spirit of God” in these texts.\(^9\) A few occurrences also appear in the Chronicler’s History (1 Chr 5:26; 12:19; 2 Chr 20:14; 21:16; 24:20; 34:22; Ezra 1:1, 5). In these occurrences its most basic meaning is “God’s wind”. It is a living “breath” (\(nǝšâmāh\)), a “life principle in man”, invisibly “controlled and given by God”.\(^10\) The term does not occur in Ruth, Song of Songs, or Esther.\(^11\)

In the Classical Writings (e.g., Homer, Plato, Aschylus), the LXX, Deutero-Canonical literature (the Apocrypha), the writings of Philo and Josephus, and the New Testament, the Greek term pneuma corresponds to the Hebrew word rûaḥ, with the basic meanings of “wind” and “breath”.

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\(^9\) See Wood, *Holy Spirit in the Old Testament*, 17–20 for “identifying references to God’s Spirit” as “divine nature and vital energy” about 97 times and “spirit of man” 84 times.


\(^11\) Tengström, “רוחוֹ rûaḥ,” 373.
In the New Testament and the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, however, the term “became an exclusively religious and psychological term . . . the word is seldom employed to mean wind or breath, but is use much more frequently in the sense of spirit of God and (especially in Pauline Writings) of the spirit of man”.  

In his comparative analysis of $r\text{"u}a\text{h}$ and $pneuma$ in the Old Testament and New Testament, Wood affirms that the latter is the Greek equivalent of the former. He stresses that $pneuma$ was used frequently in New Testament times. He cites about 378 uses of $pneuma$ compared to 388 occurrences of $r\text{"u}a\text{h}$. He argues that if the New Testament is about one-fourth the length of the Old Testament, then $pneuma$ must have been used in reference to God four times more frequently. The term occurs in the phrase “spirit of God” no less than 261 of the 378 occurrences in the New Testament, approximately ninety-four times with the adjective “holy” ($hagios$). Saint Paul also uses the phrase “spirit of holiness” ($peneuma hagi\text{"o}sun\text{ē}s$) in Romans 1:4.

We can reach several conclusions from this brief lexical survey. First, it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully categorize and systematize the use of $r\text{"u}a\text{h}$ and $pneuma$ in the Old Testament, except to highlight a few representative texts. Second, it invites us to appreciate the unity of the two Testaments. Third, it reminds us of the use or functions of $r\text{"u}a\text{h}$ and $pneuma$ in different texts and contexts in the biblical period.

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12 See Schoemaker, “Use of רוח in the Old Testament,” 35–67 for a detailed and impressive study of the use of $pnuema$ in the Classical Writings, LXX, Deuterocanonical books (the Apocrypha), the writings of Philo and Josephus, and the New Testament, which is impossible to discuss in great length because of the limited scope of this paper.


15 See Schoemaker, “Use of רוח in the Old Testament,” 13–35, where an alternate development of the meaning of $r\text{"u}a\text{h}$ and related terms and metonyms is arranged into the following four Old Testament periods: (1) the use of $רו\text{"u}חַ$ in the oldest documents of the Old Testament, dating approximately 900–700 BC (J and E materials of the Hexateuch, oldest sections of Judges, Samuel, Kings, eighth century prophets, Amos Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah); (2) the use of $רו\text{"u}חַ$ in the Deuteronomic period dating ca. 700–550 BC (i.e., the D section of the Hexateuch, Judges, and
In addition to offering a lexical survey, Wood offers a chronological arrangement of this divine rûaḥ divided into five Old Testament periods: (1) creation to the patriarchs, (2) Moses to Samuel, (3) the united monarchy, (4) the divided monarchy, and (5) the postexilic period. Wood includes significant and informative examples as well. The creation story, for instance, references activities of the rûaḥ (“wind” or “breath”) of God in the priestly account of Genesis 1:2. In this account, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God (wǝrûaḥ ‘êlōhȋm) swept over the face of the waters”. Similarly, Job 26:13 references the Spirit’s role in creation when Job says to Blida, “by his wind (bǝrûhō) the heavens were made”. Similarly, in Job 33:4 Job says to Elihu, “the spirit of God (rûaḥ-êl) has made me and the breath of the Almighty (nišmat šaddai) gives me life”.

During the Moses-Samuel era (where Wood locates our text, Numbers 11), soon after the Spirit of creation in Genesis 1, God gives divine gifts (rûaḥ ‘êlōhȋm) of craftsmanship, skill, intelligence, ability, knowledge, and wisdom to Bezzelel and Oholiab in Exodus 31:3 (cf. 35:31) for the continuous work of creation—the building of the tent and

Kings, with exception of later additions, the prophecies of Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk); (3) the use of רוח in Babylonian (exilic) and early Persian periods, dating ca. 550–400 BC (Ezekiel, Babylonian Isaiah, Zechariah 1–8, Haggai; Malachi, Holiness and Priestly materials in the Hexateuch, the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, and many Psalms); (4) the use of רוח in the later Persian and the Greek periods, dating ca. 400 BC to the Maccabean times (Joel, Jonah, Job, Proverbs, Chronicles, Ecclesiastes, Daniel, certain Psalms, and later additions to the prophets).

furnishing of the community. Apart from Bezeael and Oholiab, the non-Israelite Balaam experiences the Spirit of God (rûaḥ ʿêlōhìm) as he speaks on behalf of Israel (Num 24:2). In Numbers 27:18, Joshua is indwelt by the spirit (ʾîš-ʾāšer rûaḥ). After Moses lays his hand on Joshua, Joshua is filled with the Spirit of wisdom (rûaḥ ḥôkmâh, Deut 34:9). Many of the twelve judges were filled with the Spirit (e.g., Othniel in Judg 3:10; Gideon in Judg 6:34; Jephthah in Judg 11:29; Samson in Judg 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14).

During the period of the united monarchy, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Saul, who was “turned into another man” and prophesied (1 Sam 10:6–10; 19:18–24). This prompted the proverbial question: “Is Saul also among the prophets”? (1 Sam 19:24). Soon after David’s anointing, the Spirit of the Lord came upon David for his leadership role (1 Sam 16:13). Israel’s second king consistently prayed for this spirit, as shown in many other passages (Ps 51:10–12; 139:7; 143:10; 1 Chr 28:12; 2 Sam 23:2).

During the divided monarchy, the Spirit of God was vigorously at work in the ministry of Israel’s prophets, such as Azariah (2 Chr 10:1), Jahaziel (2 Chr 20:14), Zechariah (2 Chr 24:20), Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 18:12; 2 Kgs 2:9–16), and Joel (Joel 2:28–29). The northern prophet Hosea is called a “man of the spirit” (ʾîš hārûaḥ) in Hosea 9:7. Micah, a contemporary of proto-Isaiah, sees himself as “spirit-filled” (Mic 3:8). Texts such as Isaiah 4:4 speak of a “spirit of judgment” and “spirit of

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burning”, while Isaiah 11:1–9 offers a message of hope for those being anointed with the Spirit of the Lord (wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and fear of the Lord).21 During the exilic and postexilic periods, the prophets Ezekiel (Ezek 2:2; 3:24; 11:5, 24; 36:26–27), Haggai (Hag 2:5), and Zechariah (Zech 4:6) are filled with the Spirit of the Lord.22

**Exegetical Analysis of Numbers 11:25–29**

The foregoing survey demonstrates, among other things, that the Spirit of God was present and active during the Old Testament period. It further demonstrates that Numbers 11 is not the only Old Testament passage to witness to the various roles, functions, and activities of the Spirit of God. The Spirit of the Lord (רֻֽעָֽחַ ʼădōnāy) appears to be that creative force of order, creation, life, wisdom, knowledge, prudence, fear of the Lord, listening, and humility. It empowered individuals, judges, kings, craftsmen, women, prophets, charismatic leaders, and worshiping communities in the Old Testament. It is an energizing force in the life of the people who journey with God and seek to accomplish God’s mission on earth. The exegesis that follows considers the text of the prayer of Moses (Num 11:25–29), its biblical context, and the contemporary situation of the Church in Nigeria.

**Text and Context**

In light of the preceding historical survey, an examination of Numbers 11, especially verses 25–29, within the context of the Old Testament demonstrates that the Spirit of God always accompanied the Old Testament people. Numbers 11 narrates how and why the Israelites had to spend forty years wandering in the desert. It is a classic story of the first generation of Israelites following the exodus from Egypt and of their wilderness transition, prior to the second generation of Israelites’ arrival into the promised land. Although scholars, theologians, and commentators may have noticed some topographical, geographical, and chronological

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data within this account that help them determine the structure of the story, the bipartite “generational structure” adopted in this paper is much easier to follow—especially for non-biblical scholars in our Nigerian parishes.23

Part one (Num 1–25) narrates the story of the first generation. It details how the Israelites prepare military and spiritually to march into the wilderness from Sinai (Num 1:1–10:10). Part two (Num 26–36) portrays the second generation’s issues of sin, complaints, conflicts over leadership, victories, and conquests while heading to the promised land (Num 10:11–36:13).24 Numbers 11 is located within this second section; specifically, its context is one of conflict and complaint over Moses’ prophetic spirit and sharing of leadership charisms (Num 11–12). Exodus 33 provides a backdrop for Numbers 11. Numbers 11:1–3 serves as an introduction to the Israelites’ complaints (‘ānan, Num 11:2), noting the Israelites’ situation and misfortunes (ra‘, Num 11:1), God’s reaction, and Moses’ intercessory role upon the Israelites’ departure from Sinai (Num 10:11–36).

The Israelites complain about food, mentioning manna, meat, fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic (Num 11:4–15). Dozeman sees this episode as part of a “pre-priestly complaint story, in which the subordinate theme of leadership is the central problem”.25 In the following narrative (Num 11:10–15), Moses does not intercede for the people as he previously did (Num 11:1–3). Rather, Moses lays before God his own complaint about the burden of leadership. God directly responds to Moses by gathering seventy elders from the various tribes of Israel that left Egypt around the tent and outside the camp (Num 11:16–24). God puts part of Moses’ divine Spirit (rūaḥ) into these elders. This divine spirit is one of prophetic charism and leadership as anticipated in the prayer of Moses (Num 11:29b).

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25 Dozeman, Numbers, 105.
**Text**

Textually, Numbers 11:25–29 is laid out in a manner typical of a Hebrew literary narrative. It offers valuable moral, spiritual, pastoral, and theological lessons for the global Church, including the Church in Africa and in Nigeria in particular. The text is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NRSV/Modified</th>
<th>MT Transliteration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>w. 25 And it happened that the LORD came down in cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again’</td>
<td>wayyērek ʿădōnay beʿānān wayyədabēr ‘elay wayyāʾṣel min-hārūaḥ ʿāser ʿaloy wayyitēn ‘al-šīb ḫm ‘īs hazzqēnīm wayyēḥī kōnōh ʿāleyhēhem hārūaḥ wayyitnabbōʿu wolo yāṣopū.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w. 26 And it happened that two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp</td>
<td>wayyiššāʾārušānēʾānāšīm bammaḥāneḥ šēm hâʾēḥād ‘eldād wōṣēm haḥṣēnī médād wāttānāh ʿālēhem hārūaḥ wōḥēmāh bākōtūḥīm wālōʾ yāṣaʿū hāʾōḥēlāh wayyitnābōʿū.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w. 27 And it happened that a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.”</td>
<td>wayyērāṣ ḡannaʿar wayyvagēḏ lōmōṣeh wayyōʾmar ‘eldād ūmedād mitnabbōʿim bamaḥāneḥ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w. 28 And it happened that Joshua, son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My Lord Moses, stop them!”</td>
<td>wayyāʾan yḥōṣuaʾbin-nūn maṣārēṯ mōṣeh mibhurāwīʾ, wayyoʾmar ʿādōnī mōṣeh kōlāʾm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w. 29 And it happened that Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!”</td>
<td>wayyōʾmer lō mōṣeh hamqannēh ʿattāh lī, ūmī yīṭtēn kōlʿam ʿādōnāy nābīʾīm kī-yīṭtēn ʿādōnāy ḫet-rūḥō ʿālēhem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Masoretic Text (MT) of the Old Testament, Numbers 11:25–29 is not heavily obscured. But in verse 25 we have wayyāʾṣel, a *hiphil waw* consecutive imperfect, third person masculine singular (from the root verb ʿṣel) meaning “to set apart” or “to take away” (*Qal* form). Perhaps due to scribal or transmission errors, this verb is attested as wayyāṣel in the Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch. Noticeably, in verse 17 (where God promised to come down to take some of Moses’ Spirit for others), the form of the verb is wəʿāšālī, with the root “ʿsel” but with alef
(’) omitted in the Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch. Also, in verse 25d, the verb yāsopû, meaning “they did not do so again”, is attested with similar meaning as “y’s” in the Targums and the Vulgate. Scholars suggest that there is a relationship with the Deuteronomic (Deut 5:22) form of yāsupû attested with qibbus (u) and not sureq (û).

Apart from these few errors and scholarly proposals in regard to verse 25, in verse 26 the name 'Eldād, witnessed with sere in the MT, is attested with hataf segol and yod (‘ELYdād) in other places. The MT apparatus also notes that Mēdād is spelled with full holem (Mōdād) in the Samaritan Greek Pentateuch. In verse 28, Moses’ assistant Joshua, mibǝḥurāw in the MT, is attested as mibǝheyrāw—with yod added after het—in the Samaritan Pentateuch manuscript. It is attested as eklektos (autou) in the LXX and Symmachus’s Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Syriach version of the Old Testament seems to follow the MT.

In spite of these minor variant readings, the literary construction of this story using the Hebrew waw consecutive or conversive is worth noting, no matter the version of the Holy Bible. It is beautiful. In Numbers 11:25–29, the story is arranged in such a way that, with the waw conjunction attached predominately to the imperfect verbs, the narrative beautifully, logically, and chronologically follows a sequence of actions.

Numbers 11:25, for instance, logically and chronologically narrates God’s fulfilment of his promise to Moses’ complaints about the

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26 Verse 17 reads in full: wǝyārāḏti wǝḏibartî ‘îmkā šām; wǝ‘āšáltî min-hārûaḥ ‘āšer ‘āleykā wašamtî ‘āleyhem, wanā’s’ū ‘itt.taḵā bamaţsā’ hā’ām wǝlō’-tišsā‘ ‘attâḥ labaddekā (And I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself).

27 Usually when “waw consecutive/conversive” is attached to a verb in the imperfect conjugation, it converts the action of the verb to that of the perfect conjugation. When it is attached to a verb in the perfect conjugation, it converts the action of the verb to that of whatever verb comes before it.

28 See Williams, The Biblical Hebrew Companion for Bible Software Users: Grammatical Terms Explained for Exegesis (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2015), 116–117 for further discussion on the force and exegetical insight of Hebrew “Waw Consecutive.” In Efik Bible, Edisana Nwed Abasi Ibom, the Waw conjunction is “Ndien”; in the LXX, “kai” is attested.
burden of leadership (Num 11:11–15). The LORD came down in a cloud (wayyērek 'ādōnāy be'ānān) and spoke to Moses (Num 11:24) as promised (Num 11:17). He also took some of the rûaḥ from Moses and put it in the seventy elders chosen from the people, who prophesied (wayyitnabbō 'ū) momentarily (yāsopū). Many commentors, especially David Firth, find it unclear upon first reading whether rûaḥ is a reference to YHWH or to Moses’ own character as a charismatic leader.29

This becomes clearer, however, when one reflects further on the symbolism of the “cloud” ('ānān) from which YHWH, the distributor of the rûaḥ, came from (v. 25a). Biblical clouds are associated with divine presence (Exod 13:21-22; 16:10; 19:9; Mark 9:7) and glory (Num 14:17–20; 16:10; 1 Kgs 8:10; 2 Chr 5:13). Thus, rûaḥ here does not necessarily refer to the rûaḥ of Moses, but of YHWH.

The seventy chosen were also probably high quality representative elders from various tribes and sectors of the community, perhaps indicating God’s generosity with his grace and blessings (v. 25b). Dozeman sees a symbolic biblical meaning in the seventy. Elsewhere we find seventy sons of Jacob (Exod 1:5), seventy elders accompanying Moses upon Mount Sinai (Exod 24:9–11), and seventy princes killed by Jehu (2 Kgs 10:6).30

Also significant in this passage is the verbal form hithpael qualifying the prophecy of the seventy elders. As the spirit rested on them, they prophesied (wayyitnabbō 'ū) and spoke in an ecstatic fashion because they were enthused. The same verb is used to qualify the other two, Eldad and Medad (v. 26), and many other prophets in the early periods (Hos 9:7).31 Saul fell into prophetic ecstasy when the Spirit of God came upon him (1 Sam 10:10–11).32

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30 Dozeman, Numbers, 106.
32 Dozeman, Numbers, 107.
This has prompted questions about whether the early prophets experienced ecstaticism as a prophetic experience. Additionally, what is ecstaticism with reference to Numbers 11? Leon Wood’s work *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament* addresses these questions extensively. Wood traces biblical ecstaticism, including that in Numbers 11, to Asia Minor, Greece, and Canaanite influence. He cites several scholarly arguments for and against biblical ecstaticism as a prophetic experience. Wood draws our attention to the root meaning of the word “prophet”, nābi’, a name first given to Abraham (Gen 20:7); he further identifies the related root word nābā for “prophesy”, which is used in the episode of the seventy elders in our text. While nabî’ (“prophet”) occurs over 300 times in the Old Testament, nābā occurs either in hiphal or hithpael forms about 113 times. Johnson believes its derives from the Akkadian term nabu, meaning “to speak”. Albright prefers its passive meaning of “one spoken to” or “called”. Rowley finds its meaning in the Arabic term naba’a, meaning “to announce”, or the Hebrew term bo’, meaning “to come” or “enter”.

Ordinarily, Israel’s prophets were God’s mouthpieces, servants, and messengers, as this verb insinuates. They were conscience of their society, and they were intercessors who prayed and mediated between heaven and earth. They were agents of peace, justice, moral conduct, positive change, and newness of life. Their tasks, as noted by Walter Brueggemann, were also to “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture”, as did the biblical Moses.

However, in his work “Significance of Numbers 11”, Cotton Rogers argues that this form of verb “was used for visible physical

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demonstrations of some kind of prophetic events . . . that testified to contact with God’s presence”. In the case of the seventy elders (‘al-shīḥ ʿīm ’īs ḥazzqēnìm), God apparently used visible, spirit-empowering prophetic events to publicly confirm his authorization of power upon them and his intimate involvement in their ministries. Wood suggests this visible expression of God’s Spirit may have taken the form of singing and dancing, which is also common in African liturgy; this behavior would have been added to the seventy elders in their new form of judging and helping Moses. In his work The Spirit and Leadership, Firth interprets their momentary prophecy (wǝlo’ yāsopū) as a reminder to Moses, and perhaps leaders everywhere, that “the rûaḥ is not simply Moses’ character, but rather points to the divine endowment he has from Yahweh to lead the people”.

Dozeman thinks the pre-priestly writers in the book of Numbers did not want these seventy charismatic leaders, even though they were initially “scribes”, to be uncontrolled. This is something worth reflecting on by those who are gifted differently in and outside of the Church, especially in Africa.

Like the seventy elders, Eldad and Medad, the two registered men (wḥēmāh bakōtūḥîm) who were outside the tent of meeting, also received the rûaḥ and began to prophesy (wayyitnabǝ’û) inside the camp (Num 11:26). Why they were subjected to registration is not clear. Were they among the seventy or part of the Hebrew community as a whole? The significant paradox here is that even though the placement of the tent of meeting outside the camp was meant to address the problem of charismatic and prophetic leadership, the Spirit of God extended to Eldad and Medad.

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41 Wood, Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, 111.
42 Firth, “Spirit and Leadership,” 164.
43 See Dozeman, Numbers, 102–107 where his thoughts are explained on the basis that “the priestly writers idealize the power of prophecy, while they also wish for its traditional role to cease.” Also, in Deuteronomy 17:15–22, a prophet like Moses who speaks oracles from YHWH is idealized. The “Israelites are encouraged to look for another prophet like Moses.”
Eldad and Medad could represent any of us, or they could illustrate God’s generosity in doing whatever he wishes with his gifts.

In Dozeman’s view, Eldad and Medad’s experience could represent the unpredictable side of charismatic leadership and a challenge to the orderly control of the Spirit of Moses (Num 11:24–25). In other words, there is an undeniable divine initiative in calling each of us. The complaining young man thought otherwise, and he voluntarily reported to Moses about the activities of the divine rûaḥ in Eldad and Medad (Num 11:27). What spirit was in this young man, one may ask? Perhaps it was the spirit of uncertainty, inexperience, insecurity, and complaint, which had been central to the story of the Israelites’ experience in the wilderness (Exod–Num). This same spirit may characterize the experience of some Nigerians in the desert of West Africa today.

Besides this complaining young man, Joshua son of Nun also wishes to control the spirit and urges Moses to restrain (kəlā’īm) Eldad and Medad from prophesying (Num 11:28). This impossible demand from one of Moses’ chosen men—a man who had been with Moses all along (Exod 17:9–14; 24:13; 33:11)—prompts Moses to respond, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them” (hamqannēh ‘attâh lî, ûmî yîttēn kōl-‘am ʿādōnây nəbîʾîm kî-yîttēn ʿādōnây ʿet-rûhô ʿālēhem). Moses wisely chooses the verb qânāʾ (“envy”) to determine whether Joshua and the young man’s complaints were driven by human envy, passion, and jealousy rather than an overzealous attempt to protect Moses’ given responsibilities. Echoes of Moses’ prophetic spirit are heard in his prayer: “Would that all the LORD’S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them” (Num 11:29).

In Numbers 11, it is the work of the Spirit of the Lord that enables the seventy elders and others to assist and follow Moses’ paradigmatic prophetic and charismatic leadership without unnecessary complaints,
violence, and resistance. If the New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament, while the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament, should not contemporary Christians, including members of the Church in African and Nigeria specifically, pray for the Spirit of God that is in Moses in Numbers 11?

**Relevance and Conclusion**

The relevance of the book of Numbers for African Christians, particularly those in Nigeria, cannot be overemphasized. Just as Moses’ generation was involved in a desert transition, the Church in Africa—and Nigeria specifically—is engaged in many transitions. The Church faces issues such as globalization, poverty, epidemics, climate change, diseases, tribalism, hunger, starvation, violence, kidnappings, corruption, religious pluralism, interfaith issues, and a multiplicity of denominations. How do we deal with such social-economic, political, and religious challenges? As part of the universal Church currently led by Pope Francis, with his uniquely prophetic charisms, which are demonstrated in his messages and pastoral outreach, how does the Church in Africa define its prophetic faith and mission in the world today? Just as the generation of Israelites detailed in Numbers—the generation that left Egypt through the desert (*bəmidbar*)—was composed of many tribes (Reuben, Simeon, Judah Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin, Dan, Asher, Gad, and Naphtali; Num 1:5–15, 20–54; 2:3–29; 7:1–88; 10:11–28; 13:4–15; 26:5–50; 34:19–28), so Nigeria is a nation of many tribes, languages, and cultural challenges. How do we respond to these challenges in light of our discussed text?

In the foregoing paragraphs, we demonstrated that Numbers 11, while stressing Moses’ prophetic paradigm and charismatic leadership, also emphasized the role of the Spirit of the Lord in Moses and his subsidiaries—the seventy elders along with Eldad and Medad. To the young man (*hanna’ar*) and Joshua, the issue was not just the lack of melons and fish (Num 11:4–9) or the burden of leadership that Moses

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46 Drawn from St. Augustine. See *Dei Verbum* n. 12 and *Verbum Domini* nos.39–41
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complains about (Num 11:10–29b). Rather, the issue is to whom God’s spirit of prophecy and leadership should be vested. This question is familiar to the Church in contemporary Nigeria. The seventy elders in Numbers could serve as a reminder of the role of African elders and all spirit-filled believers. They serve as the personification of wisdom, the experience of truth, the Spirit of God, authentic leadership, caring, honesty, justice, equity, patience, magnanimity, courage, fear of the Lord, prudence, and modesty. In contrast, the young man serves as the personification of overzealousness, envy (qanna), and inexperience in regard to divine plans.

Finally, Numbers presents us with a journey based on faith and hope. This journey is accompanied by the Spirit of God (rūḥ ῃḍōnāy). Though this journey is rife with challenges, God is present with his people. He is the one who leads, provides for, loves, and never leaves Israel or the Church without the gift of the Spirit of prophecy in its leadership. Echoes of Moses’ paradigm are heard in his prayer: “would that all the LORD’S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them” (Num 11:29).
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