

Notes on Numbers

2016 Edition

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Introduction

TITLE

The title the Jews used in their Hebrew Old Testament for this book comes from the fifth word in the book in the Hebrew text, *bemidbar*: "in the wilderness." This is, of course, appropriate since the Israelites spent most of the time covered in the narrative of Numbers in the wilderness.

The English title "Numbers" is a translation of the Greek title *Arithmoi*. The Septuagint translators chose this title because of the two censuses of the Israelites that Moses recorded at the beginning (chs. 1—4) and toward the end (ch. 26) of the book. These "numberings" of the people took place at the beginning and end of the wilderness wanderings, and frame the contents of Numbers.

DATE AND WRITER

Moses wrote Numbers (cf. Num. 1:1; 33:2; Matt. 8:4; 19:7; Luke 24:44; John 1:45; et al.). He apparently wrote it late in his life, across the Jordan from the Promised Land, on the Plains of Moab.¹ Moses evidently died close to 1406 B.C., since the Exodus happened about 1446 B.C. (1 Kings 6:1), the Israelites were in the wilderness for 40 years (Num. 32:13), and he died shortly before they entered the Promised Land (Deut. 34:5).

There are also a few passages that appear to have been added after Moses' time: 12:3; 21:14-15; and 32:34-42. However, it is impossible to say how much later.

SCOPE AND PURPOSE

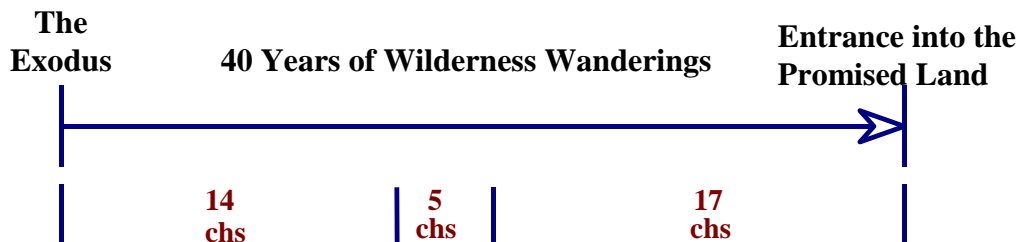
When the book opens, the Israelites were in the second month of the second year after they departed from Egypt (1:1). Yet in chapters 7—10 we read about things that happened in the nation before that time. Those events happened after Moses finished setting up the tabernacle, which occurred on the first day of the first month of the second year (7:1; cf. Exod. 40:17). When Numbers closes, the Israelites were in the tenth month of the fortieth year (cf. Deut. 1:3). Thus the total time Numbers covers is about 39 years.

¹See the commentaries for fuller discussions of these subjects, e.g., Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers*, pp. 21-25.

Numbers records that the Israelites traveled from Mt. Sinai to the plains of Moab, which lay to the east of Jericho and the Jordan River. However, their journey was not at all direct. They proceeded from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea on Canaan's southern border, but failed to go into the Promised Land from there because of unbelief. Their failure to trust God and obey Him resulted in a period of 38 years of wandering in the wilderness. God finally brought them back to "Kadesh" (short for "Kadesh Barnea"), and led them from there to the Plains of Moab, that lay on Canaan's eastern border.

Even though the wilderness wanderings consumed the majority of the years that Numbers records, Moses passed over the events of this period of Israel's history fairly quickly. No one knows for sure how much time the Israelites spent in transit during the 38 years between their first and last visits to Kadesh Barnea. God's emphasis in Numbers is first on His preparation of the Israelites to enter the land from Kadesh (chs. 1—14), and lastly on His preparation of their entrance from the Plains of Moab (chs. 20—36). This indicates that the purpose of the book was primarily to show how God dealt with the Israelites as they anticipated entrance into the Promised Land. It was not to record all the events, or even most of the events, that took place in Israel's "wilderness wandering" history. This selection of content, presented to teach spiritual lessons, is in harmony with the other books of the Pentateuch. Their concern, too, was more theological than historical.

Where Numbers Concentrates its Emphasis



The Number of Chapters in Numbers

"The material in Numbers cannot be understood apart from what precedes it in Exodus and Leviticus. The middle books of the Pentateuch hang closely together, with Genesis forming a prologue, and Deuteronomy the epilogue to the collection."²

The content in Numbers stresses events leading to the destruction of the older generation of Israelites in the wilderness, and the preparation of the new generation for entrance into the land. The census at the beginning of the book (chs. 1—4), and the one at the end (ch. 26), provide: ". . . the overarching literary and theological structure of the book of Numbers."³

²Ibid., pp. 15-16.

³Dennis T. Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch*, p. 81.

"We may also venture the purpose of the book in this manner: To compel obedience to Yahweh by members of the new community by reminding them of the wrath of God on their parents because of their breach of covenant; to encourage them to trust in the ongoing promises of their Lord as they follow him into their heritage in Canaan; and to provoke them to worship of God and to the enjoyment of their salvation."⁴

"The Book of Numbers seems to be an instruction manual to post-Sinai Israel. The 'manual' deals with three areas: (a) how the nation was to order itself in its journeyings, (b) how the priests and Levites were to function in the condition of mobility which lay ahead, and (c) how they were to prepare themselves for the conquest of Canaan and their settled lives there. The narrative sections, of which there are many, demonstrate the successes and failures of the Lord's people as they conformed and did not conform to the requirements in the legislative, cultic, and prescriptive parts of the book."⁵

GENRE

The basic genre of Numbers is narrative, though there are legal and genealogical sections as well, that supplement the narrative. One scholar identified 14 different genres in the book.⁶ However, most of it is narrative and legal material, and the overarching genre is instructional history designed to teach theology.⁷

STYLE

"The individual pericopes of Numbers manifest design. Their main structural device is chiasm and introversion. Also evidenced are such artifices as parallel panels, subscripts and repetitive resumptions, prolepses, and septenary enumerations. The pericopes are linked to each other by associative terms and themes and to similar narratives in Exodus by the same itinerary formula."⁸

THEME

I believe the theme of the book is obedience.

"The major theological theme of Numbers is reciprocal in nature: God has brought a people to Himself by covenant grace, but He expects of them a wholehearted devotion. Having accepted the terms of the Sinai Covenant, Israel had placed herself under obligation to obey them, a process that was

⁴Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," in *Genesis-Numbers*, vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 662.

⁵Eugene H. Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 215.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁷Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 95.

⁸Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. xxxi.

to begin at once and not in some distant place and time (Exod. 19:8; 24:3)."⁹

OUTLINE

- I. Experiences of the older generation in the wilderness chs. 1—25
 - A. Preparations for entering the Promised Land from the south chs. 1—10
 - 1. The first census and the organization of the people chs. 1—4
 - 2. Commands and rituals to observe in preparation for entering the land chs. 5—9
 - 3. The departure from Sinai ch. 10
 - B. The rebellion and judgment of the unbelieving generation chs. 11—25
 - 1. The cycle of rebellion, atonement, and death chs. 11—20
 - 2. The climax of rebellion, hope, and the end of dying chs. 21—25
 - II. Prospects of the younger generation in the land chs. 26—36
 - A. Preparations for entering the Promised Land from the east chs. 26—32
 - 1. The second census ch. 26
 - 2. Provisions and commands to observe in preparation for entering the land chs. 27—30
 - 3. Reprisal against Midian and the settlement of the Transjordanian tribes chs. 31—32
 - B. Warning and encouragement of the younger generation chs. 33—36
 - 1. Review of the journey from Egypt 33:1-49
 - 2. Anticipation of the Promised Land 33:50—36:13
- J. Sidlow Baxter outlined Numbers as follows:¹⁰
- I. The old generation (Sinai to Kadesh) chs. 1—14
 - A. The numbering chs. 1—4
 - B. The instructing chs. 5—9
 - C. The journeying chs. 10—14
 - II. The transition era (wandering in the wilderness) chs. 15—20
 - III. The new generation (Kadesh to Moab) chs. 21—34
 - A. The new journeying chs. 21—25
 - B. The new numbering chs. 26—27
 - C. The new instructing chs. 28—34

⁹Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 98.

¹⁰J. Sidlow Baxter, "The Book of Numbers," in *Explore the Book*, 1:156.

MESSAGE

To formulate a statement that summarizes the teaching of this book, it will be helpful to identify some of the major revelations in Numbers. These constitute the unique values of the book.

The first major value of Numbers is that it reveals the "graciousness of God" to an extent not previously revealed. We see God's graciousness in His dealings with Israel throughout this book.

In the first section of Numbers (chs. 1—10), God's *provision* for His people stands out. We see this in the *order* and *purity* God specified for the maintenance of the Israelite camp. We see it in the *worship* God provided for in the camp. We also see it in the *movement* God prescribed for the camp. God faithfully provided for the needs of His people in these many ways as they prepared to enter the Promised Land.

In the second section of the book (chs. 11—21), God's *patience* with His people stands out. When the Israelites failed to obey God, He did not desert them, but He disciplined them in love. God's patience in dealing with the Israelites did not result from God's weakness, but it was an evidence of His strength. God did not manifest *carelessness* toward the Israelites by making them wander in the wilderness for 38 years. He manifested *carefulness* as He used those 38 years to prepare the next generation to obey Him.

God *disciplined* the people for their disobedience, but He always directed them toward the realization of His purpose for them as He disciplined them. The years of wilderness wandering were years of education rather than abandonment. God had similarly prepared Moses for 40 years in the wilderness before the Exodus. Compare Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days.

In the third section (chs. 22—36), God's *persistence* in bringing Israel to the threshold of the land is prominent. God protected Israel from her enemies and provided for her needs. Even though Israel had been unfaithful, God persisted in demonstrating faithfulness to the nation He had chosen to bless (cf. 2 Tim. 2:12).

A second major value of this book is the revelation it contains of the gravity of "unbelief." This is a revelation of man, whereas the first was a revelation of God. Numbers reveals the seriousness of the sin of unbelief, which manifests itself in disobedience. The Israelites struggled with unbelief throughout the book, but the most serious instance of it took place at Kadesh Barnea (chs. 13—14).

Numbers reveals the roots of unbelief. There were two causes: a mixed multitude and mixed motives.

The congregation consisted of a combination of believing Israelites and others who had, for various reasons, joined themselves to the people of God: a *mixed multitude*. These foreigners joined Israel first at the Exodus (Exod. 12:38), but we find them mixed in with

the Israelites throughout Israel's subsequent history (cf. Lev. 24:10-23). This "rabble" was first to complain against God, and their murmuring spread through the camp like a plague periodically (cf. 11:4). Is there a mixed multitude in Christendom? Yes, *real* mixed with *professing* Christians.

The second cause of unbelief was the *mixed motives* of the Israelites. They wanted to enjoy God's blessings, and even obeyed Him to a degree to obtain these. But they also wanted things that God—in His love for them—did not want them to have (cf. Gen. 3). The Israelites did not fully commit themselves to God (cf. Rom. 12:1-2). They did not fully allow God to *shape* them into a nation that would fulfill His purpose for them in the world. This too resulted in murmuring. They longed for what they had experienced in Egypt, and preferred a comfortable life over the adventurous life to which God had called them. Murmuring is the telltale evidence of selfishness. It arises from a lack of single-minded dedication to God. How are these mixed motives evident today? We see them in discontent and worldly standards.

The message of Numbers is that everything depends on our attitude toward God. Our attitude toward our opportunities and our circumstances reveals our attitude toward God. If we are not content with what God has brought into our lives, it indicates we may want something different for ourselves than what God wants for us.

When we face a challenge to our faith, we need to visualize the difficulty itself being *overshadowed* by God's presence, power, and promises.

The alternative is to allow the difficulty to block our view of God. The influences of unbelievers and our own double-mindedness will tend to make us behave as the Israelites did. At these times of testing, remembering Israel's experiences in Numbers should help us understand what is going on, to help us trust God and obey Him more consistently.

The message of Numbers is a message of "comfort," on the one hand.

Numbers teaches that the failures of God's people cannot frustrate His plans. In Exodus, we saw that the opposition of God's enemies cannot defeat Him. In Numbers, we see that the failure of His instruments cannot defeat Him, either. God's chosen instruments can postpone God's purposes, but they cannot preclude them.

In Numbers, we also see that God always deals with His chosen instruments *righteously*. He will bless the minority who are faithful to Him, even though they live among a majority who are under His discipline for being unfaithful. We see this in God's dealings with Caleb and Joshua. God honors the faithful. He will also faithfully work with those He is disciplining for their unfaithfulness. He will encourage them to experience the greatest blessing they can within the sphere of their discipline. We see this in His dealings with the rebellious generation of Israelites. Furthermore, God will not overlook those who have disobeyed Him, just because, or even if, they have established a record of past obedience. He will discipline *them*, too. We see this in God's dealings with Moses. Whereas God honors the faithful, He also disciplines the unfaithful.

Numbers further teaches us that God's provisions are always *adequate* for His people's needs (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9). He sustained the Israelites in the wilderness. Their failures were not a result of God's inadequate provision, but came from their own dissatisfaction with His provision. God *Himself* is an adequate Resource for His people as they go through life (cf. Exod. 14—17). We need to look to Him for our needs.

On the other hand, Numbers is also a message of "warning." Every believer and every group of believers (e.g., a local church), from time to time, faces the same challenge to their faith that the Israelites faced in the wilderness and at Kadesh. The crisis comes when faith encounters obstacles that only God's supernatural power can overcome. The believer should then proceed against these obstacles by placing simple confidence in God. Our response will depend on whether we are willing to act on our belief that God's presence, power, and promises can overcome them. We need to focus on God more than on ourselves.

We can fail to realize all that God wants for us if we fail to trust Him. Let me challenge you to attempt great things for God. Think big! In 1977, Chris Marentika started the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Indonesia. As of November, 2002, the school had a permanent campus, about 450 students, a Christian university with 2,500 students, 15 branch schools, students and graduates had planted over 1,000 churches, and seen 50,000 Moslems become Christians. All of this took place in the largest Moslem country in the world—which is also persecuting Christians!

By way of review, Genesis expounds faith. Exodus reveals that faith manifests itself in worship and obedience. Leviticus explains worship more fully. Numbers stresses the importance of obedience.

Numbers shows the importance of obedience by revealing the roots, process, and fruits of disobedience.¹¹

J. Sidlow Baxter believed that the central message of Numbers may be expressed in the words of Romans 11:22: "Behold then the kindness and severity of God."

"In Numbers we see the *severity* of God, in the old generation which fell in the wilderness and never entered Canaan. We see the *goodness* of God, in the new generation which was protected, preserved, and provided for, until Canaan was possessed. In the one case we see the awful inflexibility of the Divine justice. In the other case we see the unflinching faithfulness of God in His promise, His purpose, His people.

"Closely running up to this central message of the book are two other lessons—two warnings to ourselves; and these also may be expressed in words from the New Testament. The first is a warning against *presumption*. Turning again to the Corinthian passage which we have just quoted in full (I Cor. x. 1-12), we find that this warning against

¹¹Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:65-80.

presumption is the lesson which Paul himself sees in the book of Numbers. After telling us that 'all these things happened unto them as types' for us, he says: *'Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.'*

"The second warning is against *unbelief*. In Hebrews iii. 19 we read: 'They could not enter in (to Canaan) because of unbelief'; and then it is added—'*Let us therefore fear* lest, a promise being left us of entering into His rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.' And again: '*Take heed, brethren*, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief' (iii. 12).

"Thus the New Testament itself interprets the book of Numbers for us. This fourth writing of Moses says: 1. 'Behold the goodness and severity of God.' 2. 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed . . .' 3. 'Take heed lest there be in you—unbelief.'"¹²

¹²Baxter, 1:162.

Exposition

I. EXPERIENCES OF THE OLDER GENERATION IN THE WILDERNESS

CHS. 1—25

This first main section of the book records how God prepared the Israelites to enter the Promised Land from Kadesh Barnea, and why they failed to achieve that goal. Numbers, like Leviticus, is divisible into two parts. The first part of Numbers (chs. 1—25) focuses on the experiences of the older generation of Israelites that left Egypt in the Exodus. Part 2 of the book (chs. 26—36) deals mainly with the younger generation that entered the Promised Land.

A. PREPARATIONS FOR ENTERING THE PROMISED LAND FROM THE SOUTH CHS. 1—10

The first 10 chapters in Numbers describe Israel's preparation for entering the land. There is some similarity between these chapters and Exodus 16—19, which record preparations to enter into covenant with Yahweh at Mt. Sinai.

" . . . just as the way from Goshen to Sinai was a preparation of the chosen people for their reception into the covenant with God, so the way from Sinai to Canaan was also a preparation for the possession of the promised land."¹³

Note again the phrase "just as the Lord had commanded Moses" that recurs throughout these chapters (1:19; et al.). This obedient attitude contrasts with the attitude of rebellion that grew over time and resulted in the Kadesh Barnea fiasco (11:1). This change in attitude is even more important for us to observe than the census figures and the order of march.

1. The first census and the organization of the people chs. 1—4

"The two censuses (chs. 1—4, 26) are key to understanding the structure of the book. The first census (chs. 1—4) concerns the first generation of the Exodus community; the second census (ch. 26) focuses on the experiences of the second generation, the people for whom this book is primarily directed. The first generation of the redeemed were prepared for triumph but ended in disaster. The second generation has an opportunity for greatness—if only they will learn from the failures of their fathers and mothers the absolute necessity for robust faithfulness to the Lord despite all obstacles."¹⁴

¹³C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 3:1.

¹⁴Allen, p. 701.

The muster of the tribes except Levi ch. 1

"Over 150 times in the Book of Numbers, it's recorded that God spoke to Moses [v. 1] and gave him instructions to share with the people."¹⁵

This phrase ("the LORD spoke to Moses") appears many times in Exodus, in Leviticus, and once in Deuteronomy, as well. In view of the frequency of this claim, it is disappointing to note the following statement by a leading contemporary Jewish historian:

"Even the most pious are recognizing that it does not detract one jot or tittle from the richness and usefulness of the age-hallowed volume [i.e., the Bible] to admit that it is the record of an amazing people's spiritual progress rather than an infallible document of divine origin. Stanley Cook suggests that it deepens the value of the Bible and brings out its central truths to regard it as 'man's account of the divine rather than a divine account of man.'"¹⁶

The purpose for counting the adult males 20 years of age and older was to identify those who would serve in battle when Israel entered the land (v. 3).¹⁷ This is clear from the fact that the phrase "from twenty years old and upward, whoever was able to go to war," or its equivalent, appears 14 times in this chapter (vv. 3, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 45; cf. v. 18). Entrance into the land should have been only a few weeks from the taking of this census. Moses had taken another census nine months before this one (Exod. 30:11-16; 38:25-26), but the purpose of that count was to determine how many adult males owed atonement money.

The primary purpose of the second census, in Numbers 26, was to count the soldiers again, and to determine the size of the tribes for each tribe's land allotment. The census described in Numbers 1 excluded the Levites, all of whom God exempted from typical military service in Israel (vv. 49-50). It also excluded the "mixed multitude" of non-Jews who accompanied the Israelites.

"Only true Israelites were allowed to fight Israel's battles. None of the 'mixed multitude' which came from Egypt with Israel were eligible. What a lesson for us today, when all sorts of persons are allowed to serve in the organized Church who are without the Divinely required spiritual pedigree of the new birth!"¹⁸

The number of fighting men in each tribe counted was as follows:

¹⁵Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Pentateuch*, p. 313.

¹⁶Abram Sachar, *A History of the Jews*, p. 10. He provided no documentation for his quotation of Cook.

¹⁷See Gershon Brin, "The Formulae 'From . . . and Onward/Upward' (*m . . . whl'h/wmslh*)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99:2 (1980):161-71.

¹⁸Baxter, 1:166.

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|----------|--------|--|----------|--------|
| Reuben | 46,500 | | Ephraim | 40,500 |
| Simeon | 59,300 | | Manasseh | 32,200 |
| Gad | 45,650 | | Benjamin | 35,400 |
| Judah | 74,600 | | Dan | 62,700 |
| Issachar | 54,400 | | Asher | 41,500 |
| Zebulun | 57,400 | | Naphtali | 53,400 |

The total was "603,550" men (v. 46). Since each tribe's total figure ends in zero, it appears that Moses must have rounded off these numbers. God was already well on the way to making the patriarchs' descendants innumerable (cf. Gen. 15:5). However, the large census numbers have posed a problem for thoughtful Bible students. How could so many people have survived in the desert for so long? Many skeptical scholars have tried to explain these very large numbers as being much smaller.¹⁹ The problem involves the meaning of the Hebrew word *elep*. This word has been translated "thousand," "unit," "clan," etc., as it appears in various contexts.

"In short, there is no obvious solution to the problems posed by these census figures."²⁰

I believe we should take *elep* in census contexts as "thousands," until further investigation clearly indicates that we should interpret it differently.

"It has been estimated that from two to three million people—including Levites, aged persons, children, and women—comprised the camp."²¹

"It is in the context of developing a military organization for war that the Levites are assigned their tasks in relation to the tabernacle. In a sense, their military assignment is the care and transportation of the religious shrine. Num. 1:49-53 clearly outlines the requirements for the militaristic protection of the tabernacle by the Levites."²²

¹⁹For a summary of the ways commentators have sought to explain the very large census numbers as smaller, see R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 631-64; Allen, pp. 680-91; Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, pp. 6-9; Wenham, pp. 60-66; Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, pp. 60-66; Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Bible, . . .*, p. 217; David M. Fouts, "A Defense of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:3 (September 1997):377-87; idem, "The Incredible Numbers of the Hebrew Kings," in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts*, pp. 283-99; idem, "The Use of Large Numbers in the Old Testament with Particular Emphasis on the Use of '*elep*,'" (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992); K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, pp. 263-65; the note on 1:21 in the NET Bible.; and John W. Wenham, "The Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967):19-53.

²⁰Idem, *Numbers*, p. 66.

²¹Elmer Smick, "Numbers," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 115. See also idem, p. 116.

²²John R. Spencer, "The Tasks of the Levites: *smr* and *sb'*," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 96:2 (1984):270.

The "Levites" were one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The Kohathites were one of three *clans* within that tribe, and the "priests" were the descendants of Aaron's family within the Kohathite clan. Moses and Aaron were Kohathites. Moses had *functioned* as Israel's "high priest" before God appointed Aaron to that office. So the hierarchy of priests in Israel's early history was: the high priest on top (Aaron and later one of his descendants), the other priests below him (Aaron's other descendants), and lastly the Levites at the bottom (the relatives of Aaron's descendants within the tribe of Levi). The Levites often assisted the priests in their less important duties.

During the wilderness wanderings, the Levites carried the tabernacle and its furnishings (1:47-54). They also guarded this sanctuary (1 Chron. 9:19), taught the Israelites the Law (Deut. 33:8-11; Neh. 8:7-9), and led them in worshipping the Lord (2 Chron. 29:28-32).

The total impression of Israel's God that this chapter projects is that He is a God of *order* rather than of chaos and confusion (cf. Gen. 1; 1 Cor. 14:40).

The phrase "the Lord spoke to Moses" (v. 1) occurs over 80 times in the Book of Numbers.²³

The placement of the tribes ch. 2

The twelve tribes—excluding the Levites—camped in four groups of three tribes each, a different group on each of the tabernacle's four sides. The Aaronic family of priests and the three clans of Levites camped on the four sides of the tabernacle, but closer to the sanctuary than the other tribes (v. 17). This arrangement placed Yahweh at the center of the nation—geographically—and reminded the Israelites that His rightful place was at the center of their life—nationally and personally.

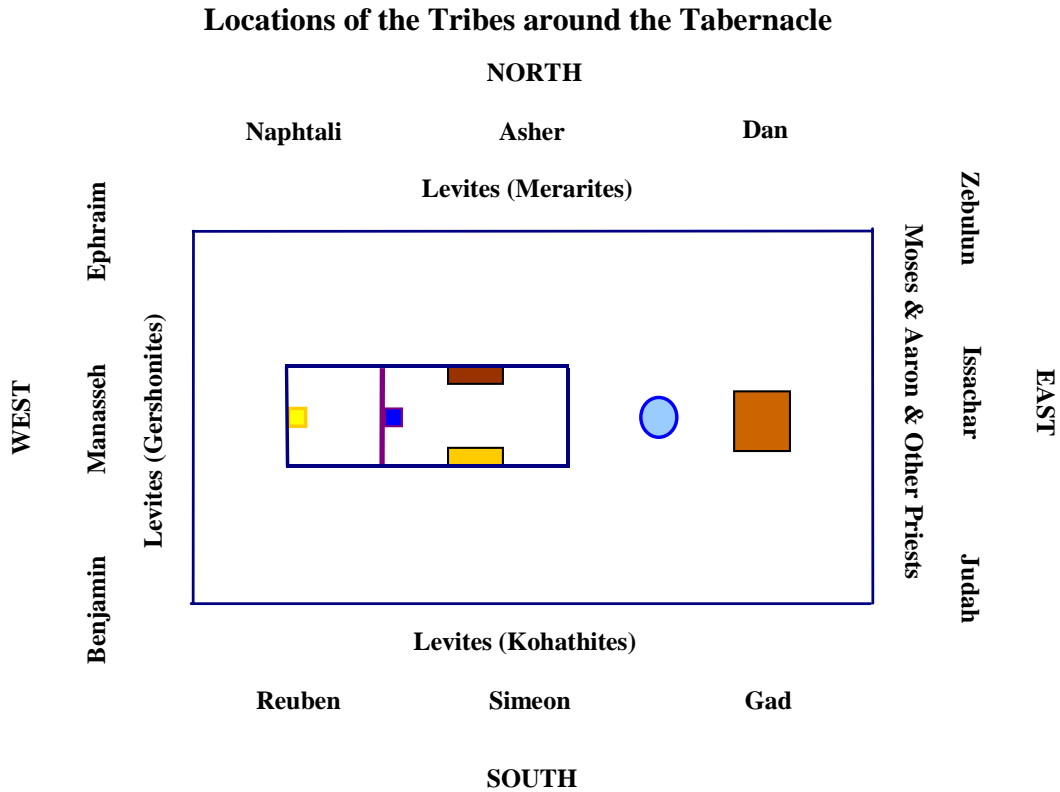
"The Egyptians characteristically placed the tent of the king, his generals, and officers at the center of a large army camp, but for the Israelites another tent was central: the sanctuary in which it placed God to dwell among his people. From him proceeds the power to save and to defend, and from this tent in the middle he made known his ever-saving will."²⁴

"This picture of the organization of Israel in camp is an expression of the author's understanding of the theology of the divine presence. There are barriers which divide a holy God from a fallible Israel. The structure of the tent itself and the construction of the sophisticated priestly hierarchy has the effect, at least potentially, of emphasizing the difference and distance between man and God. This is valuable to theology as a perspective, but requires the compensating search for nearness and presence. The . . . author sought to affirm this in and through his insistence that God is to be found, tabernacled among his people, at the center of their life as a community."²⁵

²³Walter Riggans, *Numbers*, p. 6.

²⁴B. Maarsingh, *Numbers: a practical commentary*, p. 15.

²⁵Budd, p. 25.



The tribes that camped to the east and south marched *ahead* of the tabernacle, whereas those on the west and north marched *behind* the tabernacle—whenever Israel was in transit. The tabernacle *faced* "east" (i.e., "orient"), to face the rising sun, as was customary in the ancient world.

"According to rabbinical tradition, the standard of Judah bore the figure of a lion, that of Reuben the likeness of a man or of a man's head, that of Ephraim the figure of an ox, and that of Dan the figure of an eagle . . ."26

The early Christians used these same symbols to represent the four Gospels: They used a "lion" to stand for Matthew, an "ox" for Mark, a "man" for Luke, and an "eagle" for John. These animals symbolize various aspects of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ that each evangelist stressed.

God evidently arranged the tribes in this order of encampment because of their ancestry.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Judah, Issachar, Zebulun | Descendants of Leah |
| Reuben, Simeon, Gad | Descendants of Leah and her maid Zilpah |
| Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin | Descendants of Rachel |
| Dan, Asher, Naphtali | Descendants of the maids Bilhah and Zilpah |

²⁶Keil and Delitzsch, 3:17. Cf. Ezek. 1:10; Rev. 4:7.

"It will be seen from this arrangement that the vanguard and rearguard of the host had the strongest forces—186,400 and 157,600 respectively—with the smaller tribal groupings within them and the tabernacle in the center."²⁷

Moses did not explain the relationship of the individual tribes, that camped on each side of the tabernacle, to the two other tribes on the same side. Some scholars believe they were as my diagram above indicates, while others feel that Judah, Reuben, Ephraim, and Dan were in the center of their groups.²⁸

"Further, the placement on the east is very significant in Israel's thought. East is the place of the rising of the sun, the source of hope and sustenance. Westward was the sea. Israel's traditional stance was with its back to the ocean and the descent of the sun. The ancient Hebrews were not a sea-faring people like the Phoenicians and the Egyptians. For Israel the place of pride was on the east. Hence there we find the triad of tribes headed by Judah, Jacob's fourth son and father of the royal house that leads to King Messiah."²⁹

". . . the Genesis narratives devote much attention to the notion of 'the east,' a theme that also appears important in the arrangement of the tribes. After the Fall, Adam and Eve, and then Cain, were cast out of God's good land 'toward the east' (3:24; 4:16). Furthermore, Babylon was built in the east (Ge 11:2[9]), and Sodom was 'east' of the Promised Land (13:11). Throughout these narratives the hope is developed that God's redemption would come from the east and that this redemption would be a time of restoration of God's original blessing and gift of the land in Creation. Thus, God's first act of preparing the land—when he said, 'Let there be light' (1:3)—used the imagery of the sunrise in the east as a figure of the future redemption. Moreover, God's garden was planted for humankind 'in the east' of Eden (2:8), and it was there that God intended to pour out his blessing on them.

"Throughout the pentateuchal narratives, then, the concept of moving 'eastward' plays an important role as a reminder of the Paradise Lost—the garden in the east of Eden—and a reminder of the hope for a return to God's blessing 'from the east'—the place of waiting in the wilderness. It was not without purpose, then, that the arrangement of the tribes around the tabernacle should reflect the same imagery of hope and redemption."³⁰

Baxter estimated that the quadrangle formed by some 2 million Israelites around the tabernacle would have made the encampment about 12 miles square (each of the four borders of the camp being 12 miles long).³¹

²⁷James Philip, *Numbers*, p. 43.

²⁸E.g., Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, p. 152; and Ashley, p. 74.

²⁹Allen, p. 715.

³⁰John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, pp. 371-72.

³¹Baxter, 1:164.

The placement and number of the Levites and firstborn of Israel ch. 3

Note the recurrence of a key word in the Pentateuch in verse 1: *toledot*.

"For the first time after the formative events of the Exodus deliverance and the revelation on Mount Sinai, the people of Israel are organized into a holy people on the march under the leadership of Aaron and Moses with the priests and Levites at the center of the camp. A whole new chapter has opened in the life of the people of Israel, and this new beginning is marked by the toledot formula."³²

God exempted the Levites from military confrontation with Israel's enemies. He did this because He chose the whole tribe to assist the *priests*, Aaron's "family" within the tribe of Levi, in the service of the sanctuary (vv. 5-9). The Levites' "duties" were: to *guard* ("keep") the "holy things" (tabernacle "furnishings") from affront by (violation, defilement from) foolish people, and to *care for* ("the service of") the holy things.³³

"The Levites ministered to the priests (3:6) mainly in the outward elements of the worship services, while the priests performed the ceremonial exercises of the worship itself."³⁴

God sanctified the Levitical service. Any Israelite who was not a Levite, who did this work, was to suffer execution (vv. 10, 38).

On the first Passover night in Egypt God set apart "all" the "firstborn" of the Israelites ("sons of Israel"), man and beast ("from man to beast"), to Himself (vv. 12-13). He did this when He chose Israel as His "firstborn (i.e., privileged) son." From that day to the one this chapter records, the Israelites had to dedicate "all" their "firstborn" sons for sanctuary service, and their "firstborn" animals (cattle, sheep, goats) as sacrifices. Now God selected the Levites and their animals instead, to take the place of the entire nation's "firstborn." God bestowed this privilege on the Levites because they *stood with God* when the rest of the nation apostatized by worshipping the golden calf (Exod. 32:26-29).

"The power of a people lies in the birth of its progeny, and so a great value was placed on the first child to be born—a value so great, in fact, that in many nations the eldest son was sacrificed to the gods."³⁵

The tabernacle responsibilities of each group were as follows:

| | |
|-------------|--|
| Gershonites | software (curtains and coverings; vv. 21-26) |
| Kohathites | furniture and utensils (vv. 27-32) |
| Merarites | hardware (boards and bars; vv. 33-37) |

³²Olson, p. 108.

³³G. Wenham, p. 70; Ashley, p. 69.

³⁴Irving Jensen, *Numbers: Journey to God's Rest-Land*, pp. 28-29.

³⁵Maarsingh, p. 16.

The total number of Levite "males" from "a month old and upward" was "22,000" (v. 39), making it the smallest tribe in Israel by far.³⁶ The fact that this figure does not add up using the totals in verses 22 ("Gershon, 7,500"), 28 ("Kohath, 8,600"), and 34 ("Merari, 6,200"), may be the result of a "textual corruption,"³⁷ in particular a "copyist's error."³⁸ Verse 28 probably read 8,300 originally.

"3 (Hebrew *sls*) could quite easily have been corrupted into 6 (*ss*)."³⁹

"It certainly seems that the level 22,000 is the right total, for verse 43 says that the number of the firstborn in *all* the tribes was 22,273, and verse 46 says that this was 273 more than the Levite males."⁴⁰

Moses then numbered all the "firstborn" males in the other tribes, from one month old and up. There were 22,273 of them (v. 43). Evidently these were born right after the Exodus (cf. 1:45-46). God "took" (substituted) 22,000 of the Levites in their place (v. 45). He specified the redemption price of the remaining "273" (the superfluous, "leftover number" of Israelite males not replaced by Levites). That is, the Israelites had to pay "five shekels" to the priests for each of these men (vv. 46-48). This freed them from God's claim on them for sanctuary service (cf. 1 Pet. 1:18-19).

"Theologically the section as a whole explores the theme of God's holiness. Viewed in one way the priestly hierarchy is a means of protecting Israel from divine holiness. The introduction of another sacred order between priests and people emphasizes the difference between the fallibility of man and the perfection of God. . . . Viewed in another way the hierarchy constitutes the recognized channel through which God brings stability and well-being to his people."⁴¹

"The Levites, the keepers of Yahweh's dwelling place, were to surround the Tabernacle. They were particularly close, both in location and function, because they represented the firstborn of Israel whom Yahweh spared in the Exodus (3:12-13, 44-45; 8:5-26). It was their responsibility to attend to the sanctuary (chap. 4) for it is ever the ministry of the eldest son to serve his father and protect his interests."⁴²

The number of Levites in tabernacle service ch. 4

Moses did not arrange the three Levitical families, in the text here, in the order of the ages of their founders. He arranged them in the order of the *holiness* of the articles that they managed.

³⁶See Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Bible . . .*, p. 220, for explanation of the comparatively small number of Levites.

³⁷G. Wenham, p. 71. Cf. A. Noordzij, *Numbers*, p. 38.

³⁸Keil and Delitzsch, 3:23. Cf. Smick, p. 117.

³⁹G. Wenham, p. 71.

⁴⁰Baxter, 1:167.

⁴¹Budd, p. 41.

⁴²Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 60.

The *Kohathites* ("descendants" or "sons of Kohath")—who included Moses, Aaron, and the priests—were in charge of the tabernacle furniture ("furnishings"), including the "ark." God told them how to *prepare* the various pieces of furniture for travel, and how to "carry" them. The priests ("Aaron and his sons") wrapped the articles of furniture, except the laver, in various, specially prescribed "scarlet" and "blue cloths" and or "porpoise skins," and then the other Kohathites carried them.

". . . it is to be noted that the ark was to have the blue ("violet") cloth placed *over* the skins [v. 6], not *under* as with the other holy things (vv. 7-10). By such means the ark could be distinguished in the march (cf. 10:33)."⁴³

Touching a holy piece of furniture, or even looking at one, would result in certain *death* ("so that they will not touch the holy *objects* and die . . . they shall not go in to see the holy *objects* even for a moment, or they will die"; vv. 15, 20). This teaches *us* that even we in New Testament times should not regard the things most closely associated with God as common or ordinary, but give them special consideration, and deep respect. The oils ("oil for the light" and "anointing oil"), "fragrant incense," and the flour for the daily meal ("continual grain") "offering," were the special responsibility of Eleazar, the heir to the high priest's office (v. 16). God also explained the responsibilities of the *Gerшонites* (vv. 21-28) and the *Merarites* (vv. 29-33).

There were "8,580" Levites who were fit for service (v. 48). A Levite had to be at least ("from") "30 years (and upward)," and not more than ("even to") "50 years old," in order to participate in these acts of ministry (cf. 8:23-26).

"The service of God requires the best of our strength, and the prime of our time, which cannot be better spent than to the honour of him who is the first and best. And a man may make a good soldier much sooner than a good minister."⁴⁴

"The truth is that all work in the kingdom of God is royal service, however unostentatious and, from the human standpoint, lowly and insignificant."⁴⁵

"The sense of order and organization already observed in this book comes to its finest point in this chapter. Again, we observe that the standard pattern in Hebrew prose is a movement from the general to the specific, from the broad to the particular. Chapters 1—4 follow this concept nicely. . . . The chapters have moved from the nation as a whole to the particular families of the one tribe that has responsibility to maintain the symbols of Israel's worship of the Lord. Each chapter gets more specific, more narrow in focus, with the central emphasis on the worship of the Lord at the Tent of Meeting."⁴⁶

⁴³Smick, p. 117.

⁴⁴Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 146.

⁴⁵Philip, p. 63.

⁴⁶Allen, p. 731.

"The chapters [i.e., 3—4] also remind us that not everybody has the same burdens to bear. . . . There are some burdens we can share (Gal. 6:2), but there are other burdens that only we can bear ([Gal. 6:] v. 5)."⁴⁷

A prominent emphasis in this book appears again at the end of this chapter (v. 51). Moses carried out the Lord's commands exactly (cf. 1:54; 3:33-34; 4:42; Heb. 3:5).

2. Commands and rituals to observe in preparation for entering the land chs. 5—9

God gave the following laws to maintain holiness in the nation, so He could continue to dwell among His people and bless them. This was particularly important, because Israel would soon depart from Sinai to enter the Promised Land, in which she would need to be holy to be victorious over her enemies. These were requirements for the whole nation, not just the priests.

"Between covenant promise and covenant possession lay a process of rigorous journey through hostile opposition of terrain and terror. Israel had to understand that occupation of the land could be achieved only through much travail, for Canaan, like creation itself, was under alien dominion and it had to be wrested away by force, by the strong arm of Yahweh, who would fight on behalf of His people."⁴⁸

Note the importance of proper interpersonal relationships in these chapters.

Holiness among the people chs. 5—6

These chapters are similar to what we read in Leviticus, in that they explain the importance of *holiness* among the Israelites.

The purity of the camp 5:1-4

"The purpose of the writer is to show that at this point in the narrative, Israel's leaders, Moses and Aaron, were following God's will and the people were following them obediently. This theme will not continue long, however. The narrative will soon turn a corner and begin to show that the people quickly deviated from God's way and, with their leaders, Moses and Aaron, failed to continue to trust in God."⁴⁹

God ordered that individuals who were ceremonially unclean should not live within their tribal communities, but should reside on the outskirts of the camp during their uncleanness. The reason for this regulation was not any discrimination against these people based on personal inferiority. It was the need to separate the unclean, as long as

⁴⁷Wiersbe, p. 316.

⁴⁸Merrill, "A Theology . . .," p. 60.

⁴⁹Sailhamer, p. 376.

they were unclean, from the holy God of Israel who dwelt in the center of the camp. The closer one lived to God, the greater was his or her need for personal holiness. In view of the other passages that deal with lepers, people with discharges, and people who are unclean because of a dead person (i.e., Lev. 13; 15; Num. 19), the requirement that these people be excluded from the camp must refer to extreme cases.⁵⁰

"The Rabbis had a saying which has come down to the modern Western world via the preaching of John Wesley and Matthew Henry, 'Cleanliness is next to godliness,' which catches this suggestion of inseparability."⁵¹

"This is the foundation principle of discipline, that the Holy One Himself being in the camp, the camp must be holy. This principle applies to the Church today."⁵²

Treachery against others and God 5:5-10

To emphasize the importance of maintaining proper interpersonal relationships within the camp, Moses repeated the law concerning the restitution of and compensation for a trespass against one's neighbor here (cf. Lev. 5:14—6:7; Matt. 5:23-24). The expression "sins of mankind" (v. 6) can refer either to sins committed *by* a human being, or to sins committed *against* a human being.⁵³ The context favors the latter option.

Added instructions covered another case. This was a person who could not fulfill his responsibilities because the person against whom he had committed the trespass, or that person's near kinsman, had died or did not exist. In this case, the guilty party had to make "restitution" and compensation to the priests (v. 8).

Trespasses against one's neighbor (cf. Lev. 6:1-7) needed atonement, because they constituted acts of "unfaithfulness" to God (v. 6). The Israelites had to maintain proper *horizontal* relationships with their neighbors—in order to maintain a proper *vertical* relationship with Yahweh (cf. Matt. 5:23-24).

"The point is clear—wrongs committed against God's people were considered wrongs committed against God himself."⁵⁴

"In this way, the Lord taught His people that sin is costly and hurts people, and that true repentance demands honest restitution."⁵⁵

⁵⁰Smick, p. 118.

⁵¹Riggans, p. 43.

⁵²Baxter, 1:168.

⁵³Maarsingh, p. 22.

⁵⁴Sailhamer, p. 376. Cf. Ps. 51:4.

⁵⁵Wiersbe, p. 318.

The law of jealousy 5:11-31

The point of this section is: the importance of maintaining purity in the marriage relationship in order to preserve God's blessing on Israel. Marriage is the most basic interpersonal relationship.

In verses 11-15, the writer explained the first steps that an Israelite man who suspected his wife of unfaithfulness should take. The offering (v. 15) was a special meal offering, "a grain offering of memorial." Usually the grain used in the meal offering was wheat ground into fine flour, but in this instance the man presented "barley" flour. Barley cost only half as much as wheat (2 Kings 7:1, 16, 18). It was the food of the poor and the cattle in the ancient Near East (Judg. 7:13; 1 Kings 5:8 [*sic* 4:28]; 2 Kings 4:42; Ezek. 4:12). It may have represented, ". . . the questionable repute in which the woman stood, or the ambiguous, suspicious character of her conduct."⁵⁶

The meal offering was, of course, representative of the works that an individual presented to God. In this case, it was also an offering that the man gave in "jealousy," as a "memorial" or remembrance. This meant that he presented it in order to bring his wife's crime to the *Lord's remembrance*, so that He might judge it.

The "earthenware vessel" into which the priest poured the water from the laver was of little value relative to the other utensils of the sanctuary. It was, therefore, an appropriate container for this test. The "dust" he added to the water probably symbolized the *curse of sin*. It is what causes humans grief as they toil for a living because of sin's curse. Another possibility is that the dust was designed to remind the Israelites of man's humble origin (Gen. 2:7) and his ultimate destiny: death (Ps. 22:15).⁵⁷

"Since this dust has been in God's presence, it is holy. As has been said before, one who is unclean is in great danger in the presence of the holy."⁵⁸

The release of the woman's hair, which was normally bound up, represented the temporary loss of her glory (i.e., her good reputation). Other possibilities are that it symbolized her openness,⁵⁹ mourning,⁶⁰ or uncleanness.⁶¹

Medical doctor/Bible teacher M. R. DeHaan offered a natural, as opposed to a supernatural, explanation of what happened in this trial by ordeal, that has captured the imagination of some evangelicals. He believed that the treated (test) water that the woman drank, reacted to the chemical composition of the juices in her digestive system ("cause[d] bitterness"), that had become abnormal because of her guilt. Science has

⁵⁶Keil and Delitzsch, 3:31.

⁵⁷Wiersbe, p. 319.

⁵⁸Ashley, p. 129.

⁵⁹Allen, p. 746.

⁶⁰Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Old . . .*, p. 107.

⁶¹Ashley, p. 129.

established that certain emotions and nervous disturbances change the chemical composition of our bodily secretions. While this might be what produced the symptoms described in the text, DeHaan erred, I believe, in interpreting the "dust" (v. 17) that the priest mixed with the water as a "bitter herb."

"We believe that, if we knew the identity of the bitter herb which Moses used, the same test would work today."⁶²

The physical symptoms of God's judgment on the woman, if she was guilty (vv. 23, 27), point to a special affliction—rather than one of the natural diseases that overtook the Israelites. Josephus said it was ordinary dropsy.⁶³ This seems unlikely, in view of how Moses described her condition. Merrill believed her sense of guilt produced a psychosomatic reaction.⁶⁴ Noordtziij concluded that the woman's pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage because the bitter water destroyed the fetus.⁶⁵ It is interesting, whatever the cause, that the punishment fell on the very organs that had been the instruments of the woman's sin.

"The thigh is often used as a euphemism for the sexual organs."⁶⁶

"The most probable explanation for the phrase ['and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away'] . . . is that the woman suffers a collapse of the sexual organs known as a prolapsed uterus. In this condition, which may occur after multiple pregnancies, the pelvis floor (weakened by the pregnancies) collapses, and the uterus literally falls down. It may lodge in the vagina, or it may actually fall out of the body through the vagina. If it does so, it becomes edematous and swells up like a balloon. Conception becomes impossible, and the woman's procreative life has effectively ended . . ."⁶⁷

Apparently the translators of the New Revised Standard Version took the view described above, since they rendered the phrase in question: "when the LORD makes your womb discharge . . . your uterus drop!" (vv. 21-22, et al.).

⁶²M. R. DeHaan, *The Chemistry of the Blood and Other Stirring Messages*, p. 48.

⁶³Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 3:11:6. Josephus was not a divinely inspired historian, but his history is generally reliable.

⁶⁴Merrill, "Numbers," *The Bible . . .*, p. 222; and idem, "Numbers," in *The Old . . .*, p. 107.

⁶⁵Noordtziij, p. 57. Cf. Smick, p. 120; *The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 237.

⁶⁶Riggins, p. 50. Cf. Gen. 24:2, 9; 47:29.

⁶⁷Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah (Numbers V 11-31)," *Vetus Testamentum* 34:1 (January 1984):20-21. See also the same author's more popularly written article, "The Trial Before God of an Accused Adulteress," *Bible Review* 2:3 (Fall 1986):46-49, which, by the way, provides supporting evidence for the widespread prohibition of polygamy in the ancient Near East. Other helpful resources are Michael Fishbane, "Accusations of Adultery: A Study of Law and Scribal Practice in Numbers 5:11-31," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 45 (1974):25-45; Herbert Chanan Brichto, "The Case of the Sota and a Reconsideration of Biblical 'Law,'" *Hebrew Union College Annual* 46 (1975):55-70; W. McKane, "Poison, Trial by Ordeal and the Cup of Wrath," *Vetus Testamentum* 30:4 (October 1980):474-92; and Ashley, pp. 132-33.

Verses 23-28 explain additional acts that were to take place before the woman drank the water. They are not in chronological sequence with verses 16-22. Drinking the water was the last step in the ritual, which took place in the tabernacle courtyard.

"The thought expressed here is that that which is written is dissolved in the water and imparts to the water the power inherent in the words so that the water can accomplish that of which the words speak (we must remember that to Israel and the ancient Near Eastern world words were more than sounds; they had power)."⁶⁸

"The ritual trial of the Sotah [suspected adulteress] ended with the drinking of the potion. Nothing further was done, and we can assume that the woman went home to await the results at some future time."⁶⁹

The man whom Moses referred to in verse 31 is "the man" who accused his wife of unfaithfulness. He incurred no guilt before God for being jealous of his wife's fidelity.

This case raises some questions: Why was only the woman punished if she had been unfaithful? The answer seems to be that her male companion in sin was unknown. If she was proven to be unfaithful, and the adulterer was identifiable, both partners should have suffered death by stoning (Lev. 20:10).

What about a wife who suspected that her husband had been unfaithful to her? Did she not have the same recourse as the husband? Evidently she did not. The Israelites were to observe God's revealed line of authority consistently. A man was directly responsible to God, but a woman was directly responsible to her father (if unmarried) or her husband (if married). Thus a wife was responsible to her husband in a way that the husband was not responsible to his wife. This does not mean that marital infidelity was a worse sin for a wife than it was for a husband. It simply explains how God wanted the Israelites to handle infidelity in the case of a wife. Perhaps God Himself retained the responsibility for judging a husband who was unfaithful to his wife (cf. Heb. 13:4).

This procedure protected the wife of an extremely jealous husband, who might otherwise continue to accuse her. He would suffer shame by her proven innocence, and public embarrassment, since this was a public ceremony.

"This legislation forbids human punishment of a woman on the basis of suspicion alone, and, in fact, protects her from what could be a death sentence at the hands of the community."⁷⁰

"Marital deceit is a matter of such seriousness that the truth must be discovered. It is harmful to the sanctity of the community at large, and destructive of one of the bases of community life."⁷¹

⁶⁸Noordtzi, p. 56.

⁶⁹Frymer-Kensky, "The Strange . . .," p. 22.

⁷⁰Ashley, p. 135.

⁷¹Budd, p. 66.

". . . this particular case law is included here because it gives another illustration of God's personal involvement in the restitution for the sin of the nation. Within God's covenant with Israel, there could be no hidden sin among God's people nor any hidden suspicion of sin.

"The law of jealousy shows that through the role of the priest, God was actively at work in the nation and that no sin of any sort could be tolerated among God's holy people."⁷²

Maintaining purity in marriage is likewise essential to assure God's blessing in the *church* (cf. 1 Pet. 3:7; Heb. 13:4).

The Nazirite vow 6:1-21

"After the law for the discovery and shame of those that by sin had made themselves vile [in 5:11-31], there follows this for the direction and encouragement of those who by their eminent piety and devotion had made themselves honourable."⁷³

The emphasis in this section continues to be on the importance of maintaining purity in the camp, so that God's blessing on Israel might continue unabated.

The "Nazirite" (from the Hebrew root *nazar*, meaning "to separate") illustrated the consecrated character of all the Israelites, and of the nation as a whole, in an especially visible way.

The Nazirite "vow of separation" was normally *temporary*. There are two biblical examples of life-long Nazirites: Samson and Samuel. John the Baptist may have been a third case, but we do not know for sure that he lived as a Nazirite before he began his public ministry. This "vow of separation" was also normally *voluntary*. Any male or female could take this vow, that involved dedication to God's service. The vow itself required three commitments. These were not the vow itself, but grew out of it as consequences:

1. The separated one abstained from any and all fruits of the "grape vine" (v. 4). Perhaps God commanded this because: ". . . its fruit was regarded as the sum and substance of all sensual enjoyment."⁷⁴ Other passages link strong drink (wine or hard liquor) with the neglect of God's law (e.g., Gen. 9:20-27; 19:32-38; Prov. 31:4-6; Hab. 2:5).

"In itself, wine culture was considered to be good—Israelites regarded the harvest of their vineyards as a blessing—but there was also a dangerous side to it: the possibility of lapsing into a pagan lifestyle."⁷⁵

⁷²Sailhamer, p. 377.

⁷³Henry, p. 147.

⁷⁴Keil and Delitzsch, 3:35. Cf. Riggans, p. 53.

⁷⁵Maarsingh, pp. 25-26.

2. The Nazirite was required to leave his or her hair *uncut* ("no razor shall pass over his head . . . he shall let the locks of hair on his head grow long"; v. 5). The significance of this restriction has had many interpretations by the commentators, as have the other restrictions. The most probable explanation, I believe, connects with the fact that hair represented the strength and vitality of the individual (cf. Judg. 16:17; 2 Sam. 14:25-26).⁷⁶ The *long hair* of the Nazirite would have symbolized the dedication of the Nazirite's strength and vigor to God.

"There might also have been a negative reason [for] this prescription. In many nations at this time, people devoted their hair to their gods."⁷⁷

"Hair is representative of life itself, for only a living man produces hair. He offered it, therefore, in place of his own body, as a sign that he himself was a 'living sacrifice, holy and well-pleasing to God.'"⁷⁸

3. The third commitment was to avoid any physical contact with a human corpse ("do not go near to a dead person"). This is perhaps the easiest restriction to explain. It seems that since the Nazirite had dedicated himself to a period of separation to God, and from sin, he should avoid contact with the product of sin, namely, *death*. Perhaps, too, since death was an abnormal condition, contact with dead bodies caused defilement.

If the Nazirite broke his vow through no fault of his own, he had to follow the prescribed ritual for cleansing, and then begin the period of his vow again (vv. 9-12).

". . . there was the recognition that some things in life superseded the requirements of the vow. If someone died suddenly in one's presence, for example, the vow could be temporarily suspended (v. 9). After the emergency had passed, there were provisions for completing the vow (vv. 10-12ff)."⁷⁹

The Nazirite did not withdraw from society, except in the particulars of these restrictions. He lived an active life of service in Israel. His dedication to God did not remove him from society, but affected his *motivation* and *activities* as he lived.

The Nazirite lived *as a priest* temporarily, in the sense that he lived under more stringent laws of holiness, and served God more directly than other Israelites did. His service was not generally the same as the priests', but sometimes it involved some sanctuary service, as well as other types of service (e.g., Samuel).

"This law specifically shows that there were provisions not just for the priest but for all members of God's people to commit themselves wholly to God. Complete holiness was not the sole prerogative of the priesthood or

⁷⁶Cf. Ashley, p. 143.

⁷⁷Maarsingh, p. 26.

⁷⁸Smick, p. 120.

⁷⁹Sailhamer, pp. 377-78.

the Levites. The Nazirite vow shows that even laypersons, men and women in everyday walks of life, could enter into a state of complete devotion to God. Thus this segment of text teaches that any person in God's nation could be totally committed to holiness."⁸⁰

When the time of the Nazirite's vow expired, he had to go through a prescribed ritual called "the law of the Nazirite" (vv. 13, 21). *Burning his cut hair* on the brazen altar under his peace offering (v. 18) probably symbolized giving (dedicating) to God the strength and vigor that he had previously employed in His service. It also ensured that no one would misuse his hair, possibly in a pagan ritual. The Nazirite ate part of his "vow fulfillment offering" (v. 19). He thus physically enjoyed part of the fruits of his dedication to God.

"Nobody is saved by making and keeping a vow. Salvation is a gift of God to those who believe, not a reward to those who behave."⁸¹

God did not require the taking of vows under the Mosaic Law (cf. Lev. 27). Consequently the fact that Paul took a Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18), and paid the expenses of others who had taken one (Acts 21:26), does not indicate that he was living under the Law of Moses. He was simply practicing a Jewish custom, that had prevailed into the Church Age, as the Mosaic Law regulated that custom. He did this to win Jews to Jesus Christ, not because as a Christian Jew he was under the Mosaic Law (1 Cor. 9:19-23)—he was not.

"It can hardly be denied that there is a desperate need in the church today for such leadership, for men utterly given over to God for His purposes—not men of fanatical zeal (which can very often be fleshly and even devilish), but men of controlled fire, men who can truly say, 'One thing I do' (Phil. 3:13), men of whom it can be said that the love of Christ constrains them, giving their lives depth, drive, and direction in the service of God."⁸²

Though Jesus was not a Nazirite, He exemplified what those dedicated to God should look like in their behavior, regardless of when they happen to live.

Remember, Christians are not under the Mosaic Law (Mark 7:18-19; Acts 10:12-15; 15:19-20; Rom. 7:1-4; 10:4; 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8; Gal. 3:24; 4:9-11; Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 7:12; 9:8-12). Some well-meaning Christian teachers, throughout the centuries, have been confusing many believers, by encouraging them to submit to certain regulations that are unique to the Mosaic Law. This is legalism. If someone chooses not to eat pork, for example, for health reasons, that is entirely up to him or her. But if that person thinks that he or she will be more pleasing to God by not doing so, they are mistaken (cf. Acts 10; 1 Tim. 4:1-5). There is more personal freedom under the New Covenant than there was under the Old.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 377.

⁸¹Wiersbe, p. 320.

⁸²Philip, pp. 86-87.

The Aaronic benediction 6:22-27

The location of this benediction in this context indicates that one of the priest's central tasks was to be a source of *blessing* for God's people. This blessing, like the preceding Nazirite legislation, deals with the purification of Israel. As the nation prepared to move out toward the Promised Land, God gave this benediction to the priests to offer for the sanctification of the people. God's will was to bless all His people, not just the Nazirites. The priests were the mediators of this blessing from God to the Israelites.

"Whereas Nazirites generally undertook their vows for a short period, the priests were always there pronouncing this blessing at the close of the daily morning service in the temple and later in the synagogues."⁸³

This blessing was threefold, and each segment contained two parts. In each line of poetry, the second part was a particular application of the general request stated in the first part. The first part *hoped* for God's action, that would result in the people's benefit in the second part. The three blessings were increasingly emphatic. Even the structure of the blessing in Hebrew is artful. Line one consists of 15 letters (3 words), line two of 20 letters (5 words), and line three of 25 letters (7 words).

"Each of the three clauses, in a different way, gives expression to God's commitment to Israel—a commitment which promises earthly security, prosperity, and general well-being."⁸⁴

The first blessing is the most general ("The LORD bless you, and keep you"; v. 24). God's "blessing" is *His goodness poured out*. The priest called on Him not only to provide for His people, but to defend ("keep," guard) them from all evil (cf. Matt. 6:13).

The second blessing is more specific ("The LORD make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you"; v. 25). God's "face" is the revelation of His personality (i.e., Himself) to people. It radiates as fire does, consuming evil and bestowing light and warmth, and it shines as the sun, promoting life. God's graciousness refers to the manifestation of His favor and grace in the events of life.

The third blessing is the most specific ("The LORD lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace"; v. 26). "Lifting up the countenance" refers to *manifesting power*. The priests, in pronouncing this blessing, would be calling on God to manifest His "power" for His people. Specifically, this would produce "peace" (Heb. *shalom*). "Shalom" does not mean simply the absence of aggravation; it is *the sum of all God's blessings*.

"The two main elements in the oracle are 'grace and peace.' It is probable that the Apostle Paul based his salutations on this oracle."⁸⁵

⁸³G. Wenham, p. 89.

⁸⁴Budd, p. 77.

⁸⁵The NET Bible note on 6:22.

"Excavations of a tomb overlooking the Hinnom Valley in Jerusalem [Ketef Hinnom, 1979] brought to light a small silver scroll containing a tiny inscription bearing the words of the priestly benediction of Numbers 6:24-26. This sheds light on Hebrew orthography and morphology. Also its date (ca. seventh century B.C.) long precedes the composition of the P document of historical-critical scholarship (450 B.C.), thus undermining the hypothesis to that degree."⁸⁶

One writer suggested the following alternative translation of verse 27:

"And when they shall name me the Most High of the Israelites, I, on my part, will bless them."⁸⁷

This rendering seems to capture the *spirit* of God's promise in this benediction. This blessing has always been a very important part of Israel's worship, even to the present day, in Judaism.

"This was a type of Christ's errand into the world, which was to *bless us* (Acts iii. 26), as the high priest of our profession."⁸⁸

". . . the high priestly blessing was pronounced whenever the nation of Israel gathered for collective worship and sacrifice as well as when the individual Israelite brought sacrifices to the LORD. The nature of the blessing was that of an oracle, a sure word from God that He had accepted the sacrifice and was pleased with the worshipper. The contents of the blessing were protection, gracious dealings, and peace with God, which assuredly produced the effect of joy, security, and confidence on the part of the people."⁸⁹

"Some people suggest that only spontaneous prayer is 'real' prayer; verses such as these show that such sentiment is not correct."⁹⁰

". . . the Aaronic blessing concludes the section of text dealing with the bulk of Israel's priestly legislation, and, implicitly, promises that if these laws are kept, the blessing of God will follow. The material in this major section (Lev. 1—Num. 6) comes between the date of the erection of the tabernacle and the movement of the camp some fifty days later (Num. 10:11)."⁹¹

⁸⁶Eugene Merrill, "The Veracity of the Word: A Summary of Major Archaeological Finds," *Kindred Spirit* 34:3 (Winter 2010):13.

⁸⁷Pieter de Boer, "Numbers vi 27," *Vetus Testamentum* 32:1 (January 1982):13.

⁸⁸Henry, p. 148.

⁸⁹Neil W. Arnold, "The High Priestly Blessing," *Exegesis and Exposition* 2:1 (Summer 1987):50. See also "The Priestly Blessing," *Buried History* 18:2 (June 1982):27-30. For other instances of the use of this blessing, see Michael Fishbane, "Form and Reformulation of the Biblical Priestly Blessing," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103:1 (January-March 1983):115-21; and Leon Liebreich, "The Songs of Ascents and the Priestly Blessing," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955):33-36.

⁹⁰Allen, p. 754.

⁹¹Ashley, pp. 149-50.

The dedication of the tabernacle chs. 7—9

The revelation of ordinances and instructions designed to enhance the spiritual sanctification of the Israelites as they journeyed to the Promised Land ends with chapter 6. The narrative of events that transpired just before the nation began marching resumes with chapter 7. Chronologically, chapters 7—9 precede chapters 1—6.

The offerings at the dedication ch. 7

The "presentation" this chapter records—an elaborate ceremony of dedicatory offerings lasting 12 days—jumps back chronologically, and took place at the time when the Israelites dedicated the tabernacle and the brazen altar (vv. 1-2; cf. Lev. 8:10).

"The purpose of this section of narrative is to show that as the people had been generous in giving to the construction of the tabernacle (Ex 35:4-29), now they showed the same generosity in its dedication."⁹²

First, the 12 Israelite tribes presented as a contribution gift "six wagons (covered carts)" and "12 oxen" to the Merarite and Gershonite Levites, to use in their service of carrying the materials of the tabernacle (vv. 1-9). Of the six wagons, the Gershonites received two wagons and the Merarites four. The Kohathites needed no wagons, since they carried the sanctuary furniture with poles on their shoulders (cf. 2 Sam. 6:3, 7-8).

"Observe here, How [*sic*] God wisely and graciously ordered the most strength to those that had the most work."⁹³

| Day in second year ⁹⁴ | Event | Text |
|----------------------------------|---|----------------------|
| Day 1, first month | Completion of tabernacle | Exod. 40:2; Num. 7:1 |
| | Laws for offerings begin | Lev. 1:1 |
| | Offerings for altar begin | Num. 7:3 |
| | Ordination of priests begins | Lev. 8:1 |
| Day 8, first month | Ordination of priests completed | Lev. 9:1 |
| Day 12, first month | Offerings for altar completed | Num. 7:78 |
| | Appointment of Levites | Num. 8:5 |
| Day 14, first month | Second Passover | Num. 9:2 |
| Day 1, second month | Census begins | Num. 1:1 |
| Day 14, second month | Passover for those unclean | Num. 9:11 |
| Day 20, second month | The cloud moves, the camp begins its trek | Num. 10:11 |

⁹²Sailhamer, p. 379.

⁹³Henry, p. 148.

⁹⁴Allen, p. 757, after G. Wenham, p. 91.

This long section—this chapter is the second longest in the Bible—records the presentation of gifts for the altar (v. 10) by each tribal prince (vv. 12-88). The longest chapter in the Bible is Psalm 119. The Israelites spread the presentation out over 12 days, one per day, because it took a whole day to receive and sacrifice what each tribe presented.

Each tribe offered exactly the same gifts. "one silver dish" and "one silver bowl," each "full of fine flour mixed with oil," "one gold pan full of incense," a year-old "bull," "ram," and "male lamb" ("for a burnt offering"), a "male goat" ("for a sin offering"), "two oxen," "five rams," "five male goats," "five male lambs" (for "peace offerings") No tribe was superior or inferior to the others in this respect. Each had equal privilege and responsibility before God to worship and serve Him.

Moses faithfully recorded the presentation of each gift, even though the record is repetitious and reads redundantly, probably because each gift had equal value before God (cf. Heb. 6:10).

"The account may strike us as repetitious, but this sort of formula was used by people in the ancient Eastern world to reflect ever-increasing joy: look how much these many people gave for their altar!"⁹⁵

"The passage was designed to be read aloud in a slow and stately manner. As each tribal leader and his tribe was mentioned, members of that tribe would take special pleasure. Each would sense, 'These were our gifts. This was our moment to give to the Lord.' Chapter 7 presents a scene of pageantry, pomp, ceremony, and ritual."⁹⁶

"The chapter stands as a monument to the pleasure of God who took enjoyment from the repetition—for these were grand gifts in the good days of his early relationship with his people. These were the honeymoon days of the marital relationship of the Lord and Israel (see Jer 2:2-3). Each of the gifts is relished, as presentations by a lover in the early days of the bliss of marriage."⁹⁷

"The fact that God noted and recorded each name and each gift indicates His love for and interest in the individual believer. He knows our names (John 10:3) and has recorded them individually in His heavenly register (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3). When we stand before the Lord, He will see us individually, 'and then shall every man have praise of God' (1 Cor. 4:5) and 'every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor' ([1 Cor.] 3:8). Nobody will be overlooked and nobody will be lost in the crowd."⁹⁸

⁹⁵Maarsingh, p. 29.

⁹⁶*The Nelson . . .*, p. 241.

⁹⁷Allen, p. 756.

⁹⁸Wiersbe, p. 321.

The fact that Moses "heard God's (the) voice speaking to him" when "he went into" the tabernacle, from the Most Holy Place, from above the mercy seat, indicates God's acceptance of these gifts (v. 89). They touched His heart. Moses, as the representative of the nation, and God, enjoyed a close relationship because of this sacrifice of worship. Evidently Moses heard "a (the) voice" speaking to him "from above the mercy seat . . . between the two cherubim"—and that voice was God's!

"The offering of the princes, then, was the spontaneous response of grateful hearts to the goodness and grace of God. This sets the question of Christian liberality in its true perspective, and the scriptural principle is not difficult to see. Where people are conscious of the blessing of God in their lives, they will give spontaneously—and keep on giving. Finance in the church is directly related to faith and consecration."⁹⁹

Note the moral order evidenced in chapters 6 and 7. First there was separation (6:1-12), then worship (6:13-21), then blessing (6:22-27), and then service (ch. 7; cf. Heb. 13:12-16).

The lighting of the lamps 8:1-4

The lighting of and continual burning of the "lamps" in the tabernacle symbolized the consecration of the Levites, who were to represent the whole nation as *lights to the world* (vv. 1-4; cf. Isa. 42:6). The high priest was in charge of the "lampstand" (cf. Rev. 1:20—3:22).

The consecration of the Levites 8:5-26

The consecration of the *priests* had taken place earlier (cf. Lev. 8). On that occasion the people had only *looked on* (Lev. 8:3-4). Now God was setting apart to His service the *whole tribe of Levi* ("the Levites"), that He had taken (substituted as His dedicated "first fruits offering") in place of all the firstborn sons of the Israelites (vv. 16-18). This time the people *played a role*, by "lay[ing] their hands" on the Levites (v. 10). The Levites stood in the place of the people as their close representatives, whereas the priests were closer to God and further from the people.

The consecration ("separation") proceeded after the high priest had lit the lamps (vv. 5-22). First, the Levites "washed" (their bodies and "clothes" with "purifying water") and trimmed their hair (shaved "their whole body"; Heb. *'abar ta'ar 'al*), to symbolize and effect cleansing, then the Israelites placed their hands on them, portraying the transference of responsibility from the firstborn sons to them (vv. 10, 12). Thus the Levites became "living sacrifices" unto God (cf. Rom. 6:13; 12:1-2). Shaving their whole bodies (v. 7) may have symbolized a return to innocence.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹Philip, p. 100.

¹⁰⁰*The Nelson . . .*, p. 243.

Only Levites between the ages of "25" and "50 years" old could "perform service" in the tent of meeting (vv. 23-26). Carrying the tabernacle each time the nation traveled was a task for which there were stricter qualifications (cf. 4:47), probably because of the dangers connected with this service (cf. 4:15, 20). As stated previously, the Levites had to be between 30 to 50 years old to carry the tabernacle (cf. 4:3). Perhaps the *five years* of difference, between the Levites' minimum age to *serve* in the tabernacle, and to *carry* the tabernacle, were an apprenticeship.¹⁰¹

"The distinctive emphasis of this section is that the Levites are nevertheless not remote from the community. Through the laying on of hands they in some sense represent the people at large, and constitute an offering from the people. Unlike the priests they do not receive anointing or special vestments. Like laymen they wash their clothes for the special rites. They are perhaps something of a bridge between priests and people."¹⁰²

"Chapter 8 deals with two issues: lamps and Levites. Both the proper setting of the lamps and the distinction of the Levites from the community are further elements in the purification of the nation in preparation for the holy task God had prepared for her. . . . May one suggest that as the lamps were to be properly focused on the bread of the Presence, so the Levites were to have their proper stance within the community as well?"¹⁰³

The Passover at Sinai and instructions for a supplementary Passover 9:1-14

On the first anniversary of the Passover in Egypt, just after the Israelites had dedicated the tabernacle, they observed this feast as a memorial feast ("appointed time"), just as God "had commanded" (v. 5). This first memorial Passover feast took place in the first month of the second year after the Exodus (v. 1). The census in chapter 1 occurred in the second month of the same year (1:1). This fact shows that at least these two events (census and Passover), as described in Numbers, are not in chronological order.

God graciously gave an ordinance, that people who were "unclean" or were on a "journey" when the rest of the nation celebrated the Passover, could eat it exactly one month later ("in the second month on the fourteenth day at twilight"; vv. 10-11). However, to preclude negligence in observing the primary Passover, in view of this exception, God prescribed the *death penalty* for anyone who did not observe it at the preferred time *if he or she could* (v. 13). This regulation applied equally to foreigners ("aliens") living among the Israelites, who had identified with the Abrahamic Covenant through circumcision (v. 14; cf. Exod. 12:48-49). Most of the males were already circumcised (cf. Josh. 5:5)

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 244; Wiersbe, p. 323.

¹⁰²Budd, p. 94.

¹⁰³Allen, p. 764.

"The purpose of including this segment of narrative was perhaps to show that God's laws were not arbitrary and unreasonable. The Israelites themselves even played a part in their formulation."¹⁰⁴

The covering cloud 9:15-23

The time had come for the Israelites to resume their journey, now that the people had celebrated the Passover. All that remained for the Israelites to know (i.e., to learn regarding their knowledge of God's will), was *how* God would lead them. Moses recorded God's revelation of that in this section.

The cloudy pillar ("the cloud") stood over ("covered") "the tabernacle" (vv. 15-16). Apparently it did not cover the entire camp of Israel. God may have chosen a "pillar of cloud" to lead Israel, in order to teach: His heavenly origin, sovereignty over His people, protection (from heat and cold), provision (shelter), and presence (as at Mt. Sinai).

"Like the Tabernacle, Canaan would be a focal point of Yahweh's residence among men, the place where His sovereignty would find historical expression through His specially chosen people."¹⁰⁵

The comparatively lengthy description of God's direction of Israel with the cloud ("at" or "according to the command of the LORD," 7 times; vv. 17-23) indicates God's sovereign and purposeful leadership of His people. The Israelites were to remain where they were camped exactly as long as God wanted them to remain at each encampment. Their experiences along the way were not accidental but providential. This description also expressed the "excitement of the occasion."¹⁰⁶

One way the Israelites discovered how God was leading them, was to look at the revelation of Himself that He provided in the cloud. He did not explain His movements, but their duty was to follow in faith.

"The writer is intent on showing that at this point in their walk with the Lord, Israel was obedient and followed the Lord's guidance. The writer's concern to make this point can be seen in that seven times in this brief narrative, it is said that they 'obeyed the commandment of the Lord' and thus traveled when the cloud lifted from the tabernacle and moved (9:18, 20, 23; cf. Ex 17:1)."¹⁰⁷

"To assist us today in determining and doing God's will, we have the Holy Spirit within us (Rom. 8:26-27; Acts 16:6-7), the Word of God before us (Ps. 119:105), and the interceding Savior above us who providentially works on our behalf (Rom. 8:28-34)."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴Sailhamer, p. 380.

¹⁰⁵Merrill, "A *Theology* . . .," p. 60.

¹⁰⁶G. Wenham, pp. 100-101.

¹⁰⁷Sailhamer, p. 381.

¹⁰⁸Wiersbe, p. 324.

The chapter closes with another reference to the Israelites' careful and exact obedience to Yahweh's instructions ("they kept the LORD's charge, according to the command of the LORD through Moses"), an important theme in this book.

3. The departure from Sinai ch. 10

The two silver trumpets 10:1-10

God ordered that the priests (Aaron's sons) must announce His movement of the people by blowing "two silver trumpets," because the Israelites would not be able to watch the cloud continuously, or perhaps could not see it from every part of the camp. The blasts from the "trumpets," sounded for "summoning the [entire] congregation," would reach the farthest tents in the camp (cf. 1 Thess. 4:16-17).

"Whereas the cloud in Num. 9:15-23 represents the divine initiative in leadership the trumpets constitute the response of the human leadership as it summons the congregation to gather at the tent, and signals the moment of advance for each tribal group."¹⁰⁹

The size and shape of these trumpets probably approximated those that appear on a panel on the Arch of Titus that still stands in Rome.¹¹⁰ If so, they were long and straight. The Israelites may have fashioned them after Egyptian models, pictures of which appear on several old Egyptian monuments.

The priests also used these trumpets in times of "war" in Canaan. They used them to call the people to arms, and to remind them to seek God's help so He would deliver them (v. 9). They also announced the "feasts" of Israel, and the "first [day] of each new month (of your months)," to remind the people to remember their God ("as a reminder of you before your God"; v. 10).

"Even when the trumpets sounded, there was never to be a pell-mell rush of the people. The tone throughout this section is one of discipline and order. God is a God of order, and this would be reflected in the conduct of the Israelites' camp (see 1 Cor. 14:40; Eph. 4.)"¹¹¹

In this chapter, we have the first reference to the *new moon celebration* ("first of your months"; v. 10). The appearance of the new moon signaled the beginning of a new month. The Jews viewed the first day of each new month as consecrated to God, in a way similar to the Sabbath (cf. Isa. 1:13). They marked this fresh beginning with special sacrifices (28:11-15), over which the priests blew the silver trumpets (v. 10; Ps. 81:3). On the new moon of the seventh month, the Feast of Trumpets, the people did no work (Lev. 23:25-25; Num. 29:1-6; 2 Kings 4:23). In Israel's later history, the priests blew these trumpets on other festal occasions as well (Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:35, 41; 1 Chron. 15:24; 16:6; 2 Chron. 5:12; 7:6; 29:27).

¹⁰⁹Budd, p. 107.

¹¹⁰See Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, p. 329 and fig. 120.

¹¹¹*The Nelson . . .*, p. 246.

"The impression that this narrative intends to give is that of an orderly and obedient departure from Sinai. The picture is a far cry from the scene which Moses saw when he first returned from the mountain and found the nation celebrating before the golden calf: 'the people were running wild and Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies' (Ex 32:25). In other words, the author is trying to make a point with this narrative. He shows that after the incident of the golden calf the Mosaic Law was able to bring order and obedience to the nation. The Law, necessitated by the disobedience of the people, was having its effect on them."¹¹²

As the nation left Mt. Sinai, the people were at their strongest spiritually, having received the Law and having committed themselves to following it faithfully.

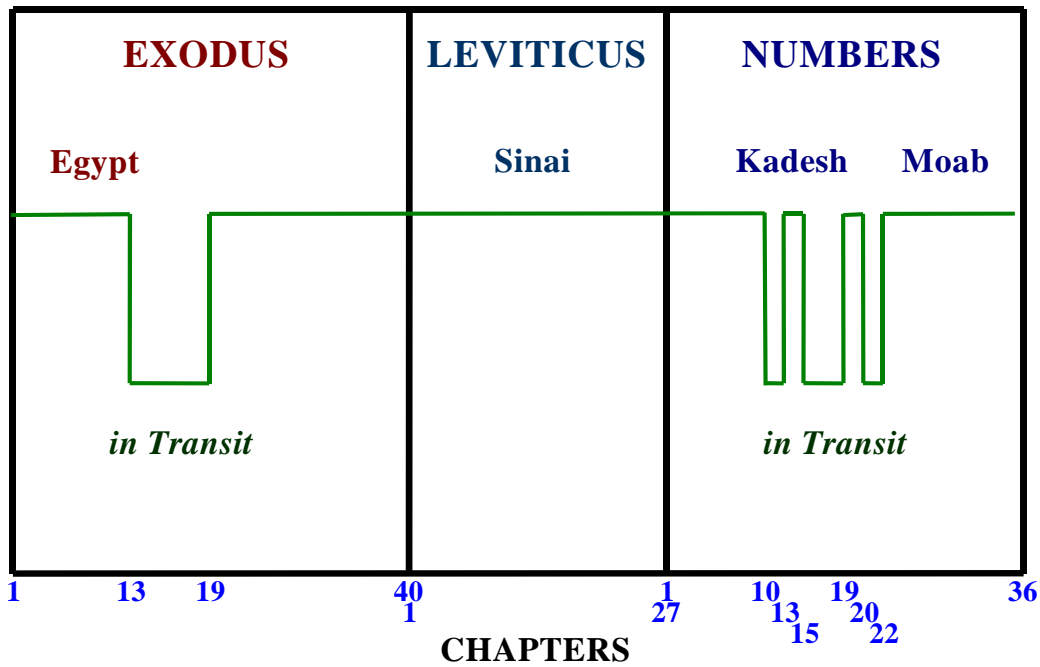
"Holy work should be done with holy joy."¹¹³

The first 10 chapters of Numbers contrast with the next 10, which record Israel's terrible regression and failure.

The journey from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea 10:11-36

The Israelites had been at Mt. Sinai for almost one year (Exod. 19:1; Num. 10:11). All that Moses recorded as occurring between Exodus 19:1 and Numbers 10:11 took place during those twelve months.

Israel's Locations (Exodus through Numbers)



¹¹²Sailhamer, p. 381.

¹¹³Henry, p. 150.

Even though the eastern Sinai Peninsula contains several oases, and some grazing land, these could not have provided for the two million or so Israelites, not to mention all their animals, during their stay there. Merrill believed Israel's population was more than two and a half million.¹¹⁴ Allen argued for it being about 250,000 to 300,000.¹¹⁵ As the text of Scripture implies and sometimes states, God provided for the needs of His people—from Egypt all the way to Canaan—by giving them an unbroken series of miraculous provisions.

The trip from Sinai to Kadesh on Canaan's southern border was normally a journey of only 11 days (Deut. 1:2). Verses 11 and 12 summarize the whole journey from Sinai to Kadesh, that the writer described in more detail in 10:13—12:16. The "wilderness of Paran" (v. 12) was an area between Sinai and Kadesh.

"The Desert of Paran is a large plateau in the northeastern Sinai, south of what later would be called the Negev of Judah, and west of the Arabah. This forms the southernmost portion of the Promised Land, the presumed staging area for the assault on the land itself. The principal lines of assault on the land of Canaan are from the southwest, following the Way of the Sea from Egypt, and from the northwest, following the Way of the Sea from Phoenicia. Israel's staging for attack in the Desert of Paran was a brilliant strategy. In this way they would avoid the fortified routes to the west, presumably under the control of Egypt. This unusual line of attack from the south would stun the inhabitants of the land. They would come like a sirocco blast from the desert, and the land would be theirs, under the hand of God."¹¹⁶

The Israelites broke camp ("moved out"), and proceeded to march as the Lord had commanded them (vv. 13-28; cf. ch. 2).

"Those that have given up themselves to the direction of God's word and Spirit steer a steady course, even when they seem to be bewildered."¹¹⁷

The "tabernacle" receives special attention in this description of the marching order, in keeping with its central importance in the nation.

"A major component of the covenant promise to the fathers and to Israel the nation was . . . the inheritance and occupation of a land. This land was representative of the whole earth. As man was placed in the Garden of Eden to keep and rule it, so Israel would be placed in Canaan to keep and rule it as a fiefdom from the Great King. At last, when the saving purposes of the Lord will have been accomplished, all the earth—indeed all creation—will fall under the rule of mankind, who will 'have dominion over all things.'"¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Old . . .*, p. 101.

¹¹⁵Allen, p. 689

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 781.

¹¹⁷Henry, p. 150.

¹¹⁸Merrill, "A *Theology . . .*," pp. 59-60.

Verses 29-32 record an incident that took place before the Israelites left Sinai. This section is a flashback of secondary importance to the departure from Sinai. Moses' brother-in-law, "Hobab," had come to live among or visit the Israelites at Sinai. He evidently agreed to Moses' suggestion that he act as a "scout" or "trail guide" for the nation (cf. Judg. 1:16).

"Moses continued to urge Hobab to join Israel. In a sense this is an act of evangelism. Hobab did not come easily. But subsequent biblical texts indicate that he did come. As such, he is like Ruth who joins Naomi en route to the Land of Promise, leaving all behind, with a promise of something ahead that is of more value than anything left at home."¹¹⁹

"Those that are bound for the heavenly Canaan should invite and encourage all their friends to go along with them."¹²⁰

"Israel didn't need Hobab to tell them where to march or when to camp; God would do that. But Hobab's knowledge of the land would assist them in making other decisions as they moved from place to place. Charles Spurgeon said: 'We ought to learn from this, I think, that while we ever seek the guidance of God in providence, yet we may frequently find direction and guidance in the use of our own common sense, our own discretion with which the Lord had endowed us.' We don't 'lean on' our own understanding (Prov. 3:5-6), but neither do we ignore it. God wants us to act intelligently as well as believingly, and the spiritually minded Christian knows how to use both heart and mind in discerning God's will (Rom. 12:2)."¹²¹

Other scholars believed Moses erred in extending this invitation.

"How soon the temptation comes to look away from the guiding pillar of cloud and fire! Such is the weakness of the human heart. We profess to trust God, and then look to man. We find it easier to lean on a puny mortal whom we can see, than on the almighty Lord Himself whom we cannot see."¹²²

Even though God had led Israel with the cloud, Hobab would have proven useful too, since he knew the wilderness, and could advise Moses concerning its terrain, oases, and other features. The name of Moses' father-in-law, normally "Jethro," is recorded as "Reuel" here (v. 29). He was Zipporah's father (cf. Exod. 2:18).

The Israelites apparently carried "the ark . . . in front of" the whole nation as they marched (v. 33). "The cloud" was evidently over it ("them," over those carrying the ark),

¹¹⁹Allen, p. 783.

¹²⁰Henry, p. 151.

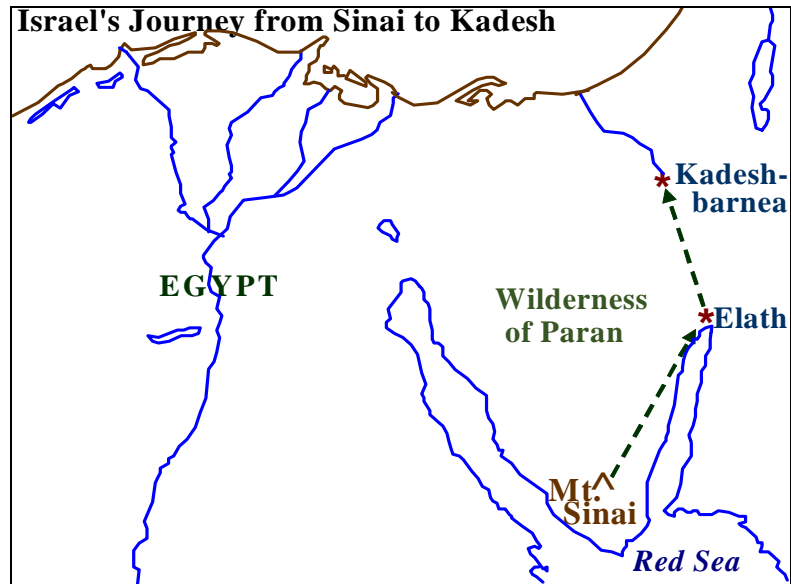
¹²¹Wiersbe, p. 327. His quotation from Spurgeon is from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle*, vol. 7, p. 161.

¹²²Baxter, 1:174. Cf. Noordtzi, p. 96.

but not necessarily over the whole nation (v. 34). The cloud hovered above the ark, and led those carrying it and the entire nation, as the Israelites moved forward. This reminded the people that God was their Leader, and that they were to follow His leading.

"It [the ark] is something like a wedding ring: the visible sign of the bond between the Lord and his people."¹²³

Moses' two prayers, the first whenever the cloud moved ("set out"; v. 35), and the second whenever it stopped ("came to rest"; v. 36), give us a glimpse into his intercessory ministry for Israel.¹²⁴ They show his prayerful concern for the people he was responsible to lead. Israel's "enemies" (v. 35) were those who might seek to turn them back from the Promised Land along the way, as well as the Canaanites whom Israel would fight in the land.



"The theme of this passage is Israel's glorious leadership by Yahweh as the people depart from the Mountain of God for an immediate conquest of Canaan. There is no sense here of the impending doom that awaits Israel's rebellion in the wilderness."¹²⁵

B. THE REBELLION AND JUDGMENT OF THE UNBELIEVING GENERATION CHS. 11—25

These chapters explain why Israel failed to enter the Promised Land immediately, and subsequently had to spend the next 38 years in the wilderness.

1. The cycle of rebellion, atonement, and death chs. 11—20

The end of chapter 10 is the high point of the Book of Numbers, spiritually speaking. The beginning of chapter 11 records the beginning of the spiritual decline of Israel that resulted in God judging the nation. He not only postponed the fulfillment of His promise to bring her into the Promised Land, but the entire older generation had to die off, while wandering in the wilderness for 38 years.

¹²³Maarsingh, p. 37.

¹²⁴See the Appendix at the end of these notes for a chart of Moses' intercessory ministry after the Exodus.

¹²⁵Ashley, p. 200.

"The law discovered sin, but could not destroy it; checked it, but could not conquer it."¹²⁶

"Chapters 11—20 present a dismal record of their acts of ingratitude and of God's consequent judgments on his ungrateful people. Within these chapters are innumerable instances of his continuing grace. The reader of these texts goes astray if he or she focuses solely on God's wrath or on the constant provocations to his anger by his meandering people. The more impressive feature in this text is God's continuing mercy against continuing, obdurate rebellion. . . .

"These ten chapters now balance and contrast with the ten chapters that present the record of Israel's preparation."¹²⁷

Further events on the way to Kadesh Barnea chs. 11—12

These chapters are similar to Exodus 13:17—19:2, in that they record Israel's experiences in transit from one location to another.

A warning from the Lord 11:1-3

Archaeologists have not determined the location of "Taberah" (v. 3). It must have been an insignificant spot geographically, since Moses did not include it in the list of Israel's encampments in chapter 33 (cf. 33:16-17). It was a significant spot spiritually, however. Not long after Israel left Sinai, the people began to grumble again.

"A modern traveller [*sic*] would sympathize."¹²⁸

"There is a cyclical nature to Israel's rebellions against God; obdurate people tend to repeat the sins of the past. The first rebellion of the redeemed people came on the third day of marching toward the Mount of God after their miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds (Exod 15:22-24). Now, three days out on their triumphal march to Canaan from Mount Sinai, they fall back into their complaining behavior. The pattern of 'three days' in both cases shows both similarity of actions as well as an intemperate, impatient attitude on the part of the people."¹²⁹

"Those who murmur without cause are soon given cause to murmur."¹³⁰

To warn them that their dissatisfaction could develop into more serious rebellion, God sent "fire" on "the outskirts of the camp." It is not clear whether the fire (lightning?) that God sent actually killed some of the people, or if it only burned up some *things* like

¹²⁶Henry, p. 151.

¹²⁷Allen, p. 785.

¹²⁸G. Wenham, p. 106.

¹²⁹Allen, p. 786.

¹³⁰Baxter, 1:175.

bushes and tents. Evidently the people recognized this event as a *warning* from God, so they "cried out" to Moses—whose intercession moved God to withhold further discipline. The people named the site "Taberah" ("burning") in memory of this event.

"In the midst of his wrath, the Lord remembers mercy. This is one of the ongoing themes of Scripture and is a particular truism in the Book of Numbers."¹³¹

This is the third time in the Pentateuch that an event such as this happened. God had wrestled with Jacob after he had parted from his father-in-law, and before he reentered the Promised Land (Gen. 31:55; 32:22-32). God had sought to kill Moses after he had left Sinai and had parted from his father-in-law, and before he rejoined the Israelites (Exod. 4:24-26). Now God sent fire from heaven to the Israelites, after they had left Sinai and Moses' father-in-law, and before they entered the Promised Land. Each incident cast a foreboding mood over events, and hinted that something worse might have followed soon. Remember the fire from heaven on Sodom in Genesis 19, and compare.

God's provision of manna and His Spirit 11:4-35

The "rabble" or "worthless foreigners" (CEV, v. 4) were the non-Israelites who had come out of Egypt with God's people (Exod. 12:38). It did not take *these* particular people long to become discontented with conditions in the desert, and to complain about their bland diet of manna. Their grumbling quickly infected the Israelites (v. 4). These malcontents despised God's provision of manna for them, and longed for the stronger flavors they had enjoyed in Egypt. They failed to take heed to the warning God had given at Taberah.

"To spurn a regularly occurring, abundant and nutritious food only because it is boring is understandably human—a pitiable mark of our tendency toward ingratitude."¹³²

As believers of the church era, we must be careful of the strong flavors of the interesting and stimulating fare—that the world has to offer—and not imbibe these things too much. Too much participation in these things can make us feel bored with and lose interest in what God has provided for our spiritual nourishment, which may seem bland and unappealing by comparison. God's provision for our nourishment and growth, our manna, are His written Word and His incarnate Word, the Bread of Life (cf. 1 Pet. 2:2; John 6:48-58).

Moses must have felt caught in the middle (vv. 10-15). On the one hand, the people seemed to be mutinous, and on the other, God was angry because of their attitude (v. 10). The discomfort of desert travel seems to have affected *him*, too. Moses failed to look to God for His wisdom and provision. So he became frustrated. This frustration seems traceable to Moses' taking on more responsibility for the people than God intended.

¹³¹Allen, p. 787.

¹³²Ibid., p. 790.

"Few things discourage God's servants more than people criticizing them unjustly and complaining about the blessings the Lord has given."¹³³

Moses' use of the *mother* figure to describe God ("conceived . . . brought them forth [gave birth to] . . . carry them in your bosom as a nurse," v. 12) is unusual, but not unique in Scripture (e.g., Exod. 4:22; Isa. 49:15; 66:13; Hos. 11:1; cf. 1 Thess. 2:7). Normally the Bible presents God as a *male*, because He relates to people in traditionally male roles primarily. However, He also deals with us in ways that are more typically *female*, and in these instances He compares Himself to females.

God again accommodated Himself to Moses' weakness (vv. 16-23; cf. Exod. 4:14), and provided 70 men to share Moses' responsibility of explaining God's will to the people. He did this so that their complaining would not grow into mob violence. God's "Spirit" rested on ("[was] upon," filled, controlled) Moses in a special measure (v. 17). God now gave these elders His Spirit in similar fashion, and *with Him*, the ability to *prophesy* (v. 25).

"Prophesying here does not refer to prediction or even to proclamation but to giving (in song or speech) praise and similar expressions without prior training (see the comparable experience of Saul in 1 Sam. 10:9-11)."¹³⁴

The people's discontent with God and His will for them (v. 20) had given them an unrealistic picture of their situation. They claimed to have been happy in Egypt (vv. 18, 20). But they forgot that they had been *slaves*.

". . . in ancient times meat was eaten in Israel only on special occasions. In the wilderness it would have been very much a luxury. In any event, the offense of the demand for meat was just part of the larger offense of romanticizing the time in Egypt, where there had always been an abundance of fish and fresh vegetables. They were saying in effect that the entire so-called 'deliverance' from slavery had turned out to be one huge disappointment."¹³⁵

God's gracious provision of "meat" was a mixed blessing. He gave them what they requested, but kept them there "for a whole month" (v. 20), by sending them a superabundance of quail (one possible interpretation is: "two cubits (three feet) *deep*" all around the camp, v. 31, emphasis added), and allowing them to get very sick from the meat ("a very severe plague," v. 33; Ps. 106:15).

This punishment was not vindictive, but disciplinary, and designed to teach the people to accept what God sent them as *best* for them. God permitted their trials in the wilderness, to prepare the nation, namely the younger generation, for the hardships they would face when they entered the land.

¹³³Wiersbe, p. 328.

¹³⁴Merrill "Numbers," in *The Bible . . .*, p. 227. See also 1 Chron. 25:1.

¹³⁵Maarsingh, p. 39.

"The people were to be broken by the experience because they had despised the gift of God, glorified their stay in Egypt, and characterized their redemption from slavery as a meaningless event."¹³⁶

God's promise to provide meat stretched Moses' faith to its limit ("Should [Can enough] flocks and herds be slaughtered . . . or should all the fish of the sea be gathered . . . to be sufficient for them? vv. 21-22). God reminded Moses that His "power" was *limitless*. Even Moses had temporarily forgotten the miracles in Egypt.

Verse 21 seemingly supports the view that there were only about 600,000 Israelites who left Egypt in the Exodus, rather than perhaps 2,000,000 or more. Exodus 12:37 says that there were "about 600,000 men on foot, aside from children." Probably verse 21 should then be understood to mean "600,00 [men] on foot [plus women, children, and Levites]" (cf. 1:46).¹³⁷

Evidently the elders' prophesying was a singular occurrence; it happened only on this one occasion ("they did not do it again," v. 25). This incident indicates that God's bestowal of the Holy Spirit at that time was *temporary*. The Spirit had not previously been on these elders. Furthermore it was *selective*. The Spirit was not "upon" *all* the Israelites in the same way as He was "upon" these elders. Contrast this to our day, when the Spirit indwells *all believers permanently* (John 14:16-17; 16:7, 13; Acts 2).

"Though the Old Testament does not contain a fully developed theology of the Holy Spirit, it does reveal enough to show that the Spirit was a manifestation of God Himself and not merely a way of referring to some divine attribute (see, for example, Gen. 1:2; 6:3; Exod. 31:3; Num. 24:2; Judg. 3:10; 1 Sam. 10:6, 10; Isa. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1)."¹³⁸

It is not surprising that Jewish interpreters see this "Spirit" as Moses' *human spirit* rather than the *Holy Spirit*.¹³⁹ We have no reason to believe that God *withdrew* the Spirit from the elders, though the text does not say one way or the other. Perhaps only their ability to prophesy ceased (v. 25).¹⁴⁰ This ability was a divine sign to the people that dampened their rebellious spirits. Leon Wood refuted the view that prophesying involved ecstatic utterances (speaking in tongues).¹⁴¹ And this passage does not support such a view. The prophesying in view probably involved *praising God* (cf. 1 Chron. 25:1).¹⁴² It was not Moses who was indispensable for Israel, but the Lord's Spirit.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 41.

¹³⁷Ashley, p. 213. Cf. Allen, p. 793.

¹³⁸Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Old . . .*, p. 112.

¹³⁹See, for example, Ze'ev Weisman, "The Personal Spirit as Imparting Authority," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93:2 (1981):225-34.

¹⁴⁰See Allen, p. 794.

¹⁴¹Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, pp. 39-56.

¹⁴²Ibid., pp. 90-91.

Joshua's "jealousy" for Moses' honor in the nation (vv. 28-29) is understandable (cf. Mark 9:38-39), but he had greater concern for Moses' honor than for the good of the people.

"We must not be forward to condemn and silence those that differ from us, as if they did not follow Christ because they do not follow *him with us*, Mark ix. 38. Shall we reject those whom Christ has owned, or restrain any from doing good because they are not in everything of our mind [(in agreement on everything)]?"¹⁴³

Moses realized that Israel would have been better off if God had given "all the people . . . His Spirit" and the gift of prophecy. God *has*, however, given *all Christians* His Spirit, and the ability to *praise Him*. God may have included this incident involving Joshua in the narrative because of his later role as Israel's leader. He may have included it to emphasize the value of the gift of the Holy Spirit as well, that God graciously gave the people, even in their rebellious condition.

"Behind these words [in v. 29] lay a world of faith. We see that Moses understood that the issue was not for him to decide but for God. If necessary God would act on his servant's behalf."¹⁴⁴

The "Spirit" (Heb. *ruah*) of Yahweh ("the LORD") settled the leadership problem (v. 29), and now the "wind" (Heb. *ruah*) from Yahweh would solve the food problem (v. 31). The wind blew from the southeast (Ps. 78:26), and apparently brought quails from the Gulf of Aqabah ("from the sea"; vv. 31-34). Normally quails migrated to the northeast, from central Africa, so the direction from which these quails came was an unusual and supernatural provision of the Lord.¹⁴⁵ The NASB interpreted verse 31 as meaning the quails lay three feet deep on the ground, but the NIV translators understood that they flew about three feet above the ground. The latter interpretation seems more probable to me. The sickness of the people ("very severe plague") was a judgment for their greed. They wanted something for themselves that God had not chosen for them.¹⁴⁶

"When God really wants to judge people, He lets them have their own way (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28)."¹⁴⁷

"The central purpose of the narrative appears to be to show the failure of Moses' office as mediator for the people [v. 14]. . . . The ideal leadership of God's people is shown in the example of the seventy elders. . . . In other words, this narrative shows that Moses longed for a much different type of community than the one formed under the Law at Sinai. He longed for a community led not by a person like himself but a community guided by God's Spirit [v. 29; cf. Deut. 30:6].

¹⁴³Henry, pp. 152-53.

¹⁴⁴Maarsingh, p. 42.

¹⁴⁵Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Bible . . .*, p. 227; Keil and Delitzsch, 3:72.

¹⁴⁶See Theodore Ouzounellis, "Some Notes on Quail Poisoning," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 211:7 (Feb. 16, 1970):1186-87.

¹⁴⁷Wiersbe, p. 329.

"The view expressed by Moses in this narrative is precisely that of the later Israelite prophets in their description of the new covenant [cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 11:20; 36:22-27; Joel 2:28]."¹⁴⁸

After their month at Kibroth-hattaavah ("Graves of Craving"), the people journeyed on to Hazeroth ("Enclosures"), where the events recorded in the next chapter took place (cf. 12:16).

The rebellion of Miriam and Aaron ch. 12

Perhaps it was God's exaltation of *Moses*, indirectly, by His bestowing the gift of prophecy on the elders, that provoked the envy of Miriam and Aaron. After all, God was reminding the people—and in no small way—of Moses' special endowment with the Spirit, when He blessed the elders with the Spirit.

12:1-3 Miriam was the outspoken leader in this incident. The priority of her name over Aaron's, and the feminine gender of the verb in the Hebrew text translated "spoke," indicate this (v. 1).

The Cushite woman Moses had married was probably not Zipporah (Exod. 2:21). Zipporah was from *Midian*, which was in Arabia. At this time, *Cush* was a name for Upper Egypt (Ethiopia).

". . . the Septuagint and the Vulgate translate 'Cushite' in Numbers 12:1 as 'Ethiopian,' the word used by the Greeks and Romans to refer to the region south of Egypt inhabited by people with black skin."¹⁴⁹

Merrill, however, believed that "Cushite" described people who lived in Arabia, and not just in "Cush proper," in which case Moses' wife here may not actually have been *black*, and may have been Zipporah.¹⁵⁰ But it seems unlikely that Miriam would have objected, at this late stage, that Moses had married Zipporah. After all, he had married her several years before this incident.

The repetition of the phrase "for he had married a Cushite woman" (v. 1) seems to imply a recent marriage. This would better explain Miriam's objection at this time. We may assume, therefore, that Zipporah had *died*, and that Moses had *remarried*. Moses wrote in Psalm 90:10 that a normal lifespan was about 70 years. He would have been in his early eighties at

¹⁴⁸Sailhamer, pp. 385-86.

¹⁴⁹J. Daniel Hays, "The Cushites: A Black Nation in the Bible," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:612 (October-December 1996):398.

¹⁵⁰See Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Bible . . .*, p. 288, and idem, in *The Old . . .*, p. 113-14; and Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 120.

this time, so it is very possible that Zipporah had died of old age, assuming she was about the same age as he.

There is no textual reason to believe, however, that Moses was married to two women at the same time, though that is possible. Also, marriage to a *Cushite* was within the will of God. God had only forbidden the Israelites from marrying *Canaanites* (Exod. 34:16).

Evidently Miriam and Aaron felt that their leading roles in Israel, as *prophetess* (Exod. 15:20) and *high priest* respectively, were losing their distinctiveness, because God had given 70 elders the privilege of mediating His word. Perhaps Miriam saw in Moses' new wife a threat to her own role as the leading female in Israel. Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman may have been nothing more than an excuse for Miriam's jealousy.¹⁵¹

The statement of Moses' humility ("the man Moses was very humble," v. 3) was not a *boastful* claim by the writer, but an inspired statement of fact. We need not conclude that another writer added it later, necessarily, since it is essential to the argument of this passage. Because while it is highly unlikely that Moses, who was called "the most humble man on earth" here, would have written this about himself, it is possible that God instructed him to insert this statement. That another writer added it later is a distinct possibility, however. It is possible that—on the basis of etymology, usage, and context—the *qere* reading of the Hebrew word used here is preferable. The Hebrew word should be translated "miserable" rather than "meek."¹⁵²

"The events described in ch. 11 may have taken an enormous toll on Moses. This verse may be a description of Moses' utter sense of brokenness as he experienced his brother and sister's betrayal."¹⁵³

"Sometimes the unkindness of our friends is a greater trial of our meekness than the malice of our enemies."¹⁵⁴

12:4-9 God's common method of communicating with His prophets was by giving them "visions" and "dreams" (v. 6).¹⁵⁵ Moses was a specially privileged prophet, however, with whom God spoke *directly*, without any

¹⁵¹Noordtzij, p. 107.

¹⁵²Cleon Rogers, "Moses: Meek or Miserable?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29:3 (September 1986):257-63.

¹⁵³*The Nelson . . .*, p. 250.

¹⁵⁴Henry, p. 153.

¹⁵⁵See Richard L. Ruble, "The Doctrine of Dreams," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125:500 (October-December 1968):360-64. For more information on the structure of God's words here, see J. S. Kselman, "A Note on Numbers xii 6-8," *Vetus Testamentum* 26:4 (October 1976):500-504.

special mediation or reserve. He spoke with Moses as friends converse ("mouth to mouth," v. 8; cf. Exod. 33:11). Michael Fishbane suggested that Paul had verse 8 in mind when he wrote 1 Corinthians 13:8.¹⁵⁶

12:10-15

The Lord punished Miriam for her dissatisfaction with her divinely appointed role in the nation. He punished her with *leprosy*, the disease that specially symbolized sin (Lev. 13—14). Frank Cross suggested that Miriam's punishment of *white* as now, "leprous" skin was a divine response to her prejudice against her black sister-in-law.¹⁵⁷ All the Israelites probably identified her *self-assertion* over Moses, attacking his leadership, as "sin." Perhaps God did not smite Aaron because his involvement was not as great.

"Her foul tongue (says Bishop Hall) is justly punished with a foul face. While Moses needs a veil to hide his glory, Miriam needs one to hide her shame."¹⁵⁸

"In the present narrative, the sign of Moses' leadership was Miriam's 'leprosy, which was white as snow' (Nu 12:10). Similarly, one of the first signs given to vindicate God's election of Moses as leader of his people was the sign of 'leprosy, white as snow' (Ex 4:6). In the initial narratives dealing with the work of Moses, Moses himself doubted his calling and consequently became a leper. Here, however, it is Miriam who doubts and thus becomes a leper. We should also note that the other sign given to vindicate the role of Moses in the earlier narrative was the serpent that came from Moses' rod (Ex 4:3). So also here, when Moses' authority is further questioned by the people at the end of their time in the wilderness (Nu 21:5), God responds by sending serpents against them (21:6)."¹⁵⁹

Moses interceded for Miriam ("OO LORD, heal her, I pray!") at Aaron's pleading. Ironically, Aaron had wanted to be like Moses (v. 2), but instead of being able to intercede directly with God as Moses did, Aaron had to appeal to Moses—who alone interceded with God.¹⁶⁰ God again showed mercy. The LORD removed Miriam's leprosy, but punished her with exclusion from the camp "for seven days" (Lev. 14:8). *Spitting in the face* (v. 14) was an act of *contempt* for one who had done something despicable

¹⁵⁶Michael Fishbane, "Through the Looking Glass: Reflections on Ezek. 43:3, Num. 12:8 and 1 Cor. 13:8," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986):63-74. See also Edward J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, ch. II: "Moses and the Prophets," for an exposition of verses 1-8.

¹⁵⁷Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, p. 204. See also Cain H. Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family*, p. 42.

¹⁵⁸Henry, p. 153.

¹⁵⁹Sailhamer, pp. 386-87. Cf. 2 Kings 5:27.

¹⁶⁰Ashley, p. 227.

(cf. Deut. 25:9; Job 17:6; 30:10). The people suffered, too, as a result of Miriam's and Aaron's rebellion: God halted their progress toward the Promised Land again (v. 15; cf. 11:20).

"Aaron, on seeing the judgment of leprosy come upon his sister, beseeches Moses for mercy. There is surely in his prayer an implicit recognition of the different kind of authority that Moses had. Indeed, he is acknowledging that Moses possessed a power in intercession with God that he himself could not exercise, hence his appeal to his brother."¹⁶¹

"The purpose of this chapter, then, is to vindicate Moses' divinely given leadership and to brush aside any further suggestion that, because of the establishment of other forms of authority, the type of leadership epitomized in Moses was no longer valid."¹⁶²

12:16 From "Hazereth," Israel moved on through the "wilderness of Paran" and then Kadesh on the southern border of Canaan.

These three failures to be content with God's provisions and plans—at Taberah, Kibroth-hattaavah, and Hazereth—prepared the Israelites for an even more serious failure at Kadesh (cf. Phil. 4:11; Heb. 13:5-6).

As we read the record of the Israelites' experiences after they left Mt. Sinai, we might ask why God allowed them to experience so much difficulty. There are several reasons: to teach them to accept what He sent as best, to prepare them for hardships in the land, to develop character in them, and to train them to depend on Him. This is often why God allows *us*, as well, to experience so many difficulties (cf. Heb. 12).

The failure of the first generation chs. 13—14

The events recorded in chapters 13 and 14 took place while Israel was at Kadesh.

The sending of the 12 spies into Canaan 13:1-25

13:1-2 When the people arrived at Kadesh, the Lord told them to "go up" and "take possession of (possess)" the land He had promised them (Deut. 1:19-21). Kadesh stood in the Desert of Zin, which was a section of the great Paran Wilderness. Instead of advancing into Canaan, the people asked Moses if they could send spies ahead of them. They did so, "that they may search out the land for us, and bring back to us word of the way by which we should go up, and the cities which we shall enter" (Deut. 1:22). Moses

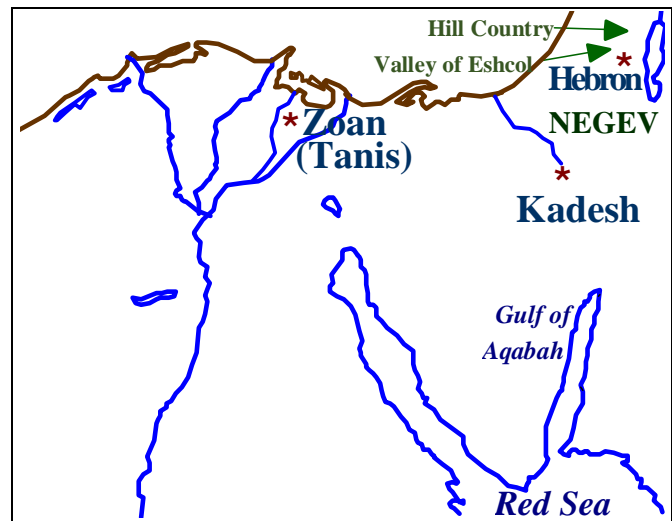
¹⁶¹Philip, p. 148.

¹⁶²Sailhamer, p. 386.

allowed this (Deut. 1:23), but only with God's permission (Num. 13:2). Clearly the Israelites were not *rebellious* against God by sending the spies, but neither were they stepping forward in bold obedience with strong confidence in God, as they should have done.

"The name Kadesh is associated with the Hebrew word [*kodesh*] that means 'holy.' Had the story turned out differently, this name would have been associated with positive memories. It would have been here that they would have sanctified themselves for their campaign of conquest of the land."¹⁶³

Why did God not lead Moses to record here (vv. 1-3) the fact that the sending of the spies was the people's idea (Deut. 1:22)? The reason may be that this was not the sin that resulted in God's postponement of their entrance into Canaan. Their reaction to the spies' report caused that result. The mission of the spies had some genuine value to the Israelites (vv. 18-20), but it also opened the possibility of fear and failure to obey God.



13:3-16

The men named as the "spies" were not the same "heads" or leaders as the tribal princes ("conveners"; 1:5-15; 7:12; et al.). Their personal qualifications for this mission may have been the basis for their selection.

"The name [Joshua, v. 16] describes a special role that Moses wished Joshua to have when he renamed him in Numbers 13:16. Joshua's earlier name, Hoshea, simply means 'he has saved'. In the name Hoshea, the person or god who saves is not made clear. Moses specified the LORD as the source of salvation by renaming Joshua."¹⁶⁴

Moses' renaming of Joshua may have been an act of ritual adoption.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³The Nelson . . . , p. 252.

¹⁶⁴Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁵The Nelson . . . , p. 252.

13:17-20 The "Negev" (lit. "south") was the arid area of land to the south of Canaan, that formed a transition between the desert to the south and the cultivated fields of Canaan to the north. Rainfall averages 8-12 inches per year in the Negev, making it semi-arid. The "hill country" (v. 17) refers to the more mountainous sections of Canaan generally, here. Later Moses used the term more specifically, of part of the territory God gave the tribes of Ephraim and Judah. The "time of the first ripe grapes" (v. 20) would have been late July or early August.

13:21-25 The spies surveyed a very large area. "Lebo-hamath" (v. 21) stood about 50 miles north of Damascus, 100 miles north of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee).¹⁶⁶

The "Anakites" ("descendants of Anak," v. 22) were a tribe of very tall people who lived in Canaan (v. 33).

"Hebron" was a large fortified town. Moses gave it special emphasis here, because it was near Hebron that God had promised to give Abraham the land (Gen. 13:14-18). From Hebron, Abraham had set out to defeat a coalition of kings (Gen. 14:13). The only piece of real estate Abraham possessed in Canaan was in Hebron, and there he and the other patriarchs lay buried. The spies, of course, knew these historical facts, and memories of these patriarchal events should have strengthened their faith in Yahweh as they passed through Hebron.

"Zoan" (v. 22) is another name for "Tanis," the capital city of Egypt, from which the Israelites had come.¹⁶⁷

The "valley of Eshcol" was apparently just north of Hebron, on the travel route to Jerusalem.¹⁶⁸ The Hebrew word translated "Eshcol" refers to the stalk or stem of some fruit or flower. From this, it came to mean a whole bunch or "cluster" (of grapes). A *huge cluster of grapes*, carried on a pole between two men, has long been a symbol of the land of Israel. This figure illustrates the great agricultural productivity of the land. It still is a popular symbol of modern Israel today, and is the logo of Israel's Department of Tourism.

The report of the spies 13:26-33

The spies reported that "the land" was indeed as fruitful as they had heard ("does flow with milk and honey," v. 27), "nevertheless . . ." (v. 28). Everything the spies said, from this word on, was uncalled for.¹⁶⁹ Their commission had been to view the land and to

¹⁶⁶Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, pp. 72-73.

¹⁶⁷See N. Na'aman, "'Hebron Was Built Seven Years before Zoan in Egypt' (Numbers xiii 22)," *Vetus Testamentum* 31:4 (1981):488-92.

¹⁶⁸*The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Eschol," by R. C. Ridall, 2:364.

¹⁶⁹See J. A. Beck, "Geography and the Narrative Shape of Numbers 13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157:627 (July-September 2000):271-80.

report back on what they saw. It was not their job to determine if the Israelites could overcome the Canaanites. God had promised that He would give the land to His people.

"Centuries later, when the Assyrians invented siege warfare, they used massive machinery and an engineering corps to subdue walled cities; and even then it often took years. From the human viewpoint, Israel was to face a formidable foe."¹⁷⁰

It was the "strong people" and the "fortified cities" in Canaan that discouraged the spies (v. 28). *These* "Hittites" (v. 29) were probably one of the native tribes in Canaan, not the great Anatolian Hittites (cf. Josh. 1:4; Judg. 1:26; 2 Sam. 11:3). As they had despised God's provisions and plans (chs. 11—12), the 10 spies now disbelieved God's promises too, that He would give the land and its people into their hands. They reckoned only on their own natural ability, and failed to rely on God's supernatural ability (v. 31).

"What John Gardner said about the political arena can be applied to the spiritual arena and the Christian's walk of faith: 'We are continually faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems.'"¹⁷¹

The spies described the *tallest and largest* of the Anakites as "Nephilim" (v. 33).

The Nephilim were, "the demi-gods who lived on the earth before the flood (Gn. 6:4)."¹⁷²

The word "Nephilim" means "strong ones" or "tyrants," not "people of gigantic stature," though it came to refer to *superhuman giants*. The spies concluded that the Anakites were relatives of the Nephilim.

"The use of the term *Nephilim* seems to be deliberately provocative of fear, a term not unlike the concept of bogeymen and hobgoblins."¹⁷³

The rebellion of the people 14:1-12

14:1-4 God had just proved His supernatural power to the Israelites—*three times* since the nation had left Sinai (chs. 11—12). There was no excuse *now* for this failure to trust Him to lead them victoriously into Canaan.

"The will of God will never lead us where the grace of God can't provide for us or the power of God protect us. If our daily prayer is, 'Thy will be done,' and if we walk in obedience to God's will, then what is there to complain

¹⁷⁰Smick, p. 130.

¹⁷¹Wiersbe, p. 333.

¹⁷²G. Wenham, p. 120.

¹⁷³Allen, p. 812.

about? A complaining spirit is evidence of an ungrateful heart and an unsundered will. By our grumbling, we're daring to say that we know more than God does about what's best for His people!"¹⁷⁴

14:5-9 "Moses and Aaron" tried to persuade the people to enter the land (Deut. 1:29-31). They also "fell on their faces in the presence of all . . . the congregation," suggesting they prayed for the nation in this hour of its rebellion (v. 5). Moreover, "Joshua" and "Caleb" warned the people against turning back (vv. 7-9). They rightly identified the true actions (and attitudes) of the Israelite majority, as "rebellion" against God and "fear" of the Canaanites (v. 9). They reminded the people that God "was (is) with" them (v. 9).

14:10-12 Nevertheless the congregation violently rejected Caleb and Joshua's pleas to trust and obey God (v. 10). God Himself prevented the people from stoning Caleb and Joshua by manifesting Himself ("the glory of the LORD appeared . . . to all"; v. 10).

". . . the majesty of God flashed out before the eyes of the people in a light which suddenly burst forth from the tabernacle (see at Ex. xxv. 10)."¹⁷⁵

As a faithful mediator, Moses again interceded for the disobedient Israelites (vv. 13-19). Many modern pastors would have left their people, if they responded as the Israelites did here, but these leaders did not. They humbled themselves and committed themselves to enduring the consequences of their peoples' lack of faith. God rewarded them for their commitment. We should leave those who are stubborn only if God clearly leads us to do so.

The LORD stated the root of Israel's failure clearly in verse 11. The failure of the Israelites grew out of *unbelief* (cf. Heb. 3:19). They failed to believe that God would give them the land of their enemies as He had promised.

"Like Pharaoh, they were hardening their hearts and ignoring God's clear command (cf. Ps. 95:7-8) . . ."¹⁷⁶

Often in Scripture we read of people asking God, "How long?" (e.g., Ps. 6:3; 13:1-2; 35:17; et al.). However, here it is God who asked this question of Moses (cf. Exod. 16:28). This illustrates the intimate relationship that Moses and God enjoyed (12:7-8).

¹⁷⁴Wiersbe, p. 333.

¹⁷⁵Keil and Delitzsch, 3:92.

¹⁷⁶Herbert M. Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch*, p. 194.

Was God's threatened action, to wipe out or "smite" the people, a real possibility, or was He only testing Moses' reaction with this offer? God had threatened a similar punishment at Sinai when the Israelites had made the golden calf (Exod. 32:10).

If He had actually done this, God could still have fulfilled His promises to Abraham, by destroying and dispossessing all the other living Israelites, and by sparing only Moses and his descendants. However, God could not have fulfilled the prophetic promises that He had given through *Jacob* (Gen. 49)—had He done so. There would have to be descendants of *Judah*, from whom a "great ruler" would come (Gen. 49:10), as well as some future for the other tribes.

Perhaps God meant that He would completely destroy that *older generation* of Israelites immediately (wiping them out in one blow, instead of gradually; cf. Exod. 32:10). God also said that He would give Moses and his descendants a much larger place in the nation ("I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they"). Perhaps, if God had gone through with this offer, other peoples would have later regarded "Moses" as the "father of the Israelite nation."

". . . this passage intends to show that the people failed to inherit the Promised Land and hence died in the wilderness without inheriting the blessing, not so much for a specific act of disobedience or for fear of the battles that lay ahead, but rather for the simple fact of their unbelief. They failed to trust in God."¹⁷⁷

This section of text teaches us important lessons about *inadequacy* and *adequacy*. The 10 spies, who did not want the Israelites to enter the land, *felt inadequate* (cf. John 15:5). In this, they were being realistic. However, they should have compensated for their feelings of personal inadequacy, by reminding themselves of God's *complete adequacy* (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9; Luke 1:37; Matt. 19:26; Phil. 4:13).

God was teaching the Israelites a basic lesson of the life of faith, namely, that the *real power* in the lives of God's people is *God's*. As we trust and obey God, He releases His power through us. We are never adequate in ourselves, but God empowers the obedient and trusting. Jesus taught His disciples the same lesson when He multiplied the loaves and fishes—twice.

Moses' intercession for the people 14:13-19

Moses interceded again, much as he had done at Sinai (cf. Exod. 32:11-13). Moses based his appeal on God's reputation among the Egyptians (vv. 13-14) and the other nations (vv. 15-16). He also cited God's promise that He would be patient ("slow to anger . . . forgiving iniquity"; vv. 17-18), and His past loyal love to Israel ("the greatness of Your

¹⁷⁷Sailhamer, p. 388.

lovingkindness"; v. 19). Moses' words proved effective ("The LORD said, 'I have pardoned them according to your [Moses'] word"; v. 20). This was God's testing of Moses, and was similar to the test that Abraham faced when God told him to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22).

God's punishment of the people 14:20-38

The fact that God granted the people "pardon," in response to Moses' intercession, is another indication of His grace (vv. 20-21).

"Here is a whole nation rescued from ruin by the effectual fervent prayer of one righteous man [cf. James 5:16]."¹⁷⁸

The failure of the Israelites would not frustrate God's purpose to manifest His "glory" throughout "the earth," through the seed of Abraham (v. 21). Even though the present generation would die in the wilderness, Caleb (and Joshua, not mentioned here in v. 24, cf. v. 30) would enter the Promised Land.

The "ten times" the Israelites tested God (v. 22) by complaining were probably these:

1. At the Red Sea (Exod. 14:11-12)
2. At Marah (Exod. 15:23)
3. In the wilderness of Sin (Exod. 16:2)
4. In the wilderness of Sin (Exod. 16:20)
5. In the wilderness of Sin (Exod. 16:27)
6. At Rephidim (Exod. 17:1-2)
7. At Horeb (Exod. 32)
8. At Taberah (Num. 11:1-3)
9. At Kibroth-hattaavah (Num. 11:4-34)
10. At Kadesh (Num. 14:1-3)

Another, less likely view, is that the Lord was referring to the ten spies, not to ten historic instances of testing.¹⁷⁹ It is noteworthy that in Egypt, God sent *10 plagues to build the faith* of His people, but in the wilderness, they complained against Him *10 times in unbelief*. Evidently the measure of their iniquity had reached its full capacity, from God's viewpoint, with this tenth rebellion (cf. Gen. 15:16).

Because the adult generation had failed to trust God, He would not defeat their enemies. Therefore He instructed them to march southeast toward the Gulf of Aqabah, and *away* from the "Amalekites" and the "Canaanites" (v. 25). Since they wanted to return *to Egypt*, God sent them *back* toward where they had been. Since they *feared* their children *would die in Canaan*, God would *preserve* those very children in the wilderness—and give them

¹⁷⁸Henry, p. 156.

¹⁷⁹Smick, p. 132.

a home in Canaan ("they will know the land which you have rejected"; v. 31). Since the adults had rejected Canaan, God would give it to their "children" (v. 31). Since they feared dying in Canaan, God would let them die in the wilderness ("your corpses will fall in this wilderness," vv. 32-33; cf. v. 2).

"Typical of the irony in this story, their punishment is made to fit their crime."¹⁸⁰

"When the Lord asked 'How long?' [v. 27] he meant this was the end. The oath formula 'As I live' [v. 28] was the strongest denial conceivable. The things he said next were irrevocably going to happen. That is what lies behind verses 28, 30, and 35."¹⁸¹

The Bible nowhere specifies a particular age of accountability for children. However, the fact that God judged all the Israelites who were 20 years old and older, for this sin of *unbelief*, seems significant. He evidently regarded those who had lived 20 years as responsible adults (v. 29). In later Judaism, Jewish boys became "sons of the covenant" on their thirteenth birthdays. This is what the *bar mitzvah* (lit. "son of duty") celebrates.

The 40-year duration of the punishment was based on the 40-day duration of the expedition by the spies (v. 34). These "40 years" included the two years already spent in the wilderness, since complaining characterized the people from the time they first departed from Egypt—which means that 38 years of wandering still lay ahead.

"The round number forty (v. 34) may refer to a human lifetime: generally speaking, everyone above the age of twenty would die in the wilderness in a period of forty years, because very few people lived beyond the age of sixty. There is a curious connection between the forty days of preparation for an entry that did not take place and forty years of awesome preparation for an entry that would take place—but only for a new generation."¹⁸²

"Israel's downfall at Kadesh is a reminder to us today that it's a dangerous thing to trifle with the will of God. You may end up spending the rest of your life wandering around, just waiting to die."¹⁸³

"In Numbers, disobedience often results from disbelief (cf. Heb. 3:7-19). God used suffering to alert his people to their lack of faith, as seen in their disobedience. Some suffering allows time for God's people to repent."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰G. Wenham, p. 123.

¹⁸¹Maarsingh, p. 50.

¹⁸²Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁸³Wiersbe, p. 331.

¹⁸⁴Stephen J. Bramer, "Suffering in the Pentateuch," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*, p. 96.

"It took only forty hours to get Israel out of Egypt; but it took forty years to get Egypt out of Israel!"¹⁸⁵

The 10 spies who brought the "majority opinion" apparently "died" shortly after God pronounced their sentence, as a result of "a plague" He sent (v. 37):

"As an unmistakable evidence that God's word of judgment would be literally fulfilled, the spies, except Joshua and Caleb, at this moment were struck dead with a plague from the Lord."¹⁸⁶

The presumption of the people 14:39-45

Having received their sentence from the Lord, the people then presumptuously proceeded to go up on their own to take the land (vv. 40-42).

"They are like children who had broken a valuable vase and decided to 'make it better' by gluing it back together. The result of such action looks nothing like the original."¹⁸⁷

The Israelites refused to accept God's discipline, just as they had refused to accept (believe) His promise. Thus they rebelled against Him again, even though Moses sounded the ominous warning, "the LORD will not be with you" (v. 43). They tried to gain His blessings without Him, which is human effort and manmade religion without God, a form of unbelief. Consequently God allowed their enemies to rout them. The key to success would not be their military might or psychological power, but their obedient trust in God.

It is also possible for us Christians to fail to enter into our full reward, if we fail to continue to trust and obey God (1 Cor. 9:24—10:13; Heb. 3:12—4:14).¹⁸⁸ Every genuine Christian will eventually go to heaven, but only "the faithful" will receive all the rewards God wants each Christian to possess. God will give or withhold these at the "judgment seat of Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; et al.).

"This rather large section of narrative [i.e., chs. 13—14] introduces an important element in the development of God's covenant with Israel: the theme of the faithfulness of God in keeping the covenant and the unfaithfulness of humans in not trusting him.

"Following the account of the people's failure to believe in God in chapters 13 and 14, the writer has attached a further and rather large set of laws dealing with sacrifice and the priesthood (15:1—19:22). Thus, as has been the case throughout the earlier parts of the Pentateuch, after an

¹⁸⁵Baxter, 1:179.

¹⁸⁶Jensen, p. 67.

¹⁸⁷Ashley, p. 270.

¹⁸⁸Philip, pp. 166-67.

account of Israel's unbelief, more laws are added within the narrative [cf. Exod. 32; Gal. 3:19-23]."¹⁸⁹

Two battles, this one and the battle with the Canaanites in 21:1-3, frame the following section of laws and the Lord's discipline of the Israelites in the wilderness during the next 38 years.¹⁹⁰

"The people ceased to be pilgrims, and became nomads."¹⁹¹

Laws given during the 38 years of discipline chs. 15—19

Moses recorded few events during the years of Israel's wandering in the wilderness, but those he did preserve have instructive value. Most important among them is the rebellion of Korah's group against Moses and Aaron, and God's confirmation of the Aaronic priesthood that followed (chs. 16—18). The *wilderness* was part of God's necessary child-training of His redeemed people, but the wanderings would not have been necessary had the Israelites believed and obeyed. Nevertheless, God still used these years to further educate His people.

"These thirty-eight years simply mark time without making history."¹⁹²

The section that follows contains more regulations that look back to Kadesh and forward to Canaan. Their "revelation" is a confirmation that God had not cast off His people, but would bring them into the Promised Land eventually.

Regulations concerning offerings and the penalty for defiant sin 15:1-31

"Chapter 15 is another collection of texts designed to prepare the people for their life in the land. Hence this chapter is one of promise. Though a great deal has happened, and the results are overwhelming for the adult population involved; nonetheless there is a sense in which we may say that nothing has happened. God has pardoned his people (14:20), the second generation will enter the land (14:31), and preparations still need to be made for that period after the Conquest and the achieving of 'normalcy' in Canaan.

"It seems that the connecting thought between chapters 14 and 15 is the phrase in 15:2: 'when you enter the land of your dwelling places that I am giving to you' (pers[onal] tr[anslation]). This ties to 14:31: 'I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected.'"¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹Sailhamer, p. 387.

¹⁹⁰Ashley, p. 274.

¹⁹¹Baxter, 1:180.

¹⁹²Ibid., 1:181.

¹⁹³Allen, p. 824.

"Lest there be the mistaken notion that the laws of Sinai, including the laws of offerings, had been abrogated or replaced, the Lord explicitly cited some of them again . . ." ¹⁹⁴

The Lord supplemented and completed the laws of sacrifice He had given formerly. These laws relate to life in the land (vv. 1-2).

There are really seven laws in this pericope (vv. 3-5, 6-7, 8-16, 17-21, 22-26, 27-29, and 30-31). The first three are closely related, and we will consider them as one law. We can also combine the fifth and sixth laws and regard them as one, which I will refer to as the third.

15:1-16 "The *first* of these laws had reference to the connection between meat-[meal-]offerings and drink-offerings on the one hand, and burnt-offerings and slain-[peace-]offerings on the other." ¹⁹⁵

The Israelites were to accompany every burnt offering and every peace offering with a meal offering and a drink offering of wine. The amounts of meal and wine varied, and these variations are clear in the text. An ephah was about half a bushel, and a hin was about a gallon. Since grapes were large and abundant in Canaan (cf. 13:23), wine would play a significant part in Israel's offerings. The drink offering expressed gratitude for the *grapes* of the land. The priests *poured out* drink offerings; they did not *drink* them.

The Apostle Paul spoke of his life as "a drink offering poured out" as a sacrifice "to God" (Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6).

15:17-21 The *second* law required the presentation of "a cake" made from the "first fruits" of the land to God. The offerer was to "lift it up" before God, and then give it to the priest. This offering expressed gratitude for the *grain* of the land.

15:22-29 The *third* law dealt with the burnt and sin offerings. Here, sins of *omission* are in view, whereas the law in Leviticus 4:13-21 dealt more with sins of *commission*. In both cases, the sin offering covered sins committed "unintentionally." This law also covered some *deliberate* sins, if the sinner offered public confession, full restitution, and a sin offering (Lev. 6:1-7).

15:30-31 These offerings did not cover sins committed in *defiance* of God. In these cases, the sinner was to die ("that person shall be cut off"; vv. 30-31). Moses recorded a case involving such a sin in the next section.

¹⁹⁴Jensen, p. 69.

¹⁹⁵Keil and Delitzsch, 3:100.

The case of the defiant Sabbath-breaker 15:32-36

This incident illustrates the fate of any Israelite or foreigner in Israel who deliberately violated the law of Sabbath observance. It clarifies the meaning of "defiant sin," as well as what it means to be "cut off from among his people" (vv. 30-31). Violation of this law drew the death penalty (Exod. 31:14-15; 35:2). It was like the "unforgivable sin" in the New Testament, in that there was no forgiveness for it.¹⁹⁶ God revealed on this occasion that such an offender was to die by stoning (cf. Lev. 20:2). Whereas Moses had previously recorded the penalty (being "cut off"), he had not explained the method of execution (v. 34). Other occasions on which Moses had to ask God for guidance in difficult cases appear in 9:7-8; 27:1-11; and Leviticus 24:10-23.

"The purpose of these narratives is to show that God's will is not expressed in a once-for-all way. In Israel's ongoing relationship with God, he continued to make his will known to them, and they continued to play a part in the process."¹⁹⁷

Sabbath observance was the outward sign of the Mosaic Covenant. To violate the Sabbath law *deliberately* amounted to repudiating God's sovereignty.

"There are eleven offenses punishable by stoning according to the Old Testament: idolatry (Deut. 17:2-7); encouragement of idolatry (Deut. 13:6-10); child sacrifice (Lev. 20:2-5); prophecy in the name of another god (Deut. 13:1-5); divination (Lev. 20:27); blasphemy (Lev. 24:15-16); breaking the Sabbath (here); murder by an ox (Exod. 21:28-29); adultery (Deut. 22:22ff.); rebellion by a son (Deut. 21:18ff.); violation of God's ban on plunder devoted to him (Josh. 7:25)."¹⁹⁸

"When the German poet Heine said on his deathbed, 'Of course God will forgive me; that's His job,' he understood neither the awfulness of sin or the high cost of God's grace."¹⁹⁹

Visual reminders to keep the law 15:37-41

Perhaps God initiated this command in response to the incident of Sabbath-breaking just mentioned. The Israelites were to wear "tassels" on the *four* "corners" of their upper outer "garments" (Deut. 22:12). The text does not explain the size of the tassels, but old pictures of tassels on garments that ancient Near Easterners wore show that they were about six inches long.

"The tassels were in fact extensions of the hem, as we learn from innumerable illustrations in ancient Near Eastern art.

¹⁹⁶Mark Rooker, *Leviticus*, p. 55.

¹⁹⁷Sailhamer, p. 390.

¹⁹⁸Riggans, p. 125.

¹⁹⁹Wiersbe, p. 338.

"To understand the significance of the tassel, we must first understand the significance of the hem. . . . The hem of the outer garment or robe made an important social statement. It was usually the most ornate part of the garment. And the more important the individual, the more elaborate and the more ornate was the embroidery on the hem of his or her outer robe. . . .

"The significance of the hem and of its being cut off is reflected in a famous biblical episode [namely, when David cut off the hem of Saul's robe; 1 Sam. 24]. . . .

"The requirement of a blue cord . . . in the tassels lends further support to the notion that the tassels signified nobility because the blue dye used to color the threads was extraordinarily expensive. . . .

"The Bible apparently assumed that even the poorest Israelite could afford at least four blue threads, one for each tassel. . . . Thus, weaving a blue thread . . . into the tassel enhances its symbolism as a mark of nobility.

"The tassel with a thread of blue signified more than royalty or nobility, however. It also signified the priesthood."²⁰⁰

The article just quoted also contains reproductions of ancient Near Eastern pictures of people wearing garments with tassels on them. The Israelite was to fasten the tassel to the garment with a "blue" thread (or "cord"), or it had to contain a blue thread. The blue color, as noted in our study of the tabernacle coverings, probably symbolized heavenly origin and royalty. Thus God apparently wanted the blue thread to remind the Israelites of their holy calling as "a kingdom of priests." These tassels reminded the Israelites of their privileged position in the world and their noble and holy calling.

The "tassels" were clearly a visual aid for the Israelites, and probably produced a conditioned response in the minds of pious Jews (cf. Deut. 6:6-9). They did not bring to mind any particular commandment, but were meant to remind the observer that he should observe *all* of God's laws. The Jew was distinct by virtue of his calling, as was the garment he observed. Perhaps, also, God chose the *outer* garment because the Israelites were like *His outer garment*, by which the world recognized Him. His people were to be an adornment to Him (cf. Titus 2:10). Thus God specified something that would warn His people *before* they sinned; He did not just specify punishment *after* they sinned.

"There is an intentional selection behind the collections of laws found throughout the Pentateuch. The purpose of that selection appears clear enough. In reading through these laws we can readily see that God is concerned about every detail of human life. Nothing is too small or unimportant. It all has to be made available and dedicated to him."²⁰¹

²⁰⁰Jacob Milgrom, "Of Hems and Tassels," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 9:3 (May-June 1983):61-65.

²⁰¹Sailhamer, p. 391.

This legislation is the basis for the custom of wearing a "tallis" or "prayer shawl," that modern observant Jews still wear. It is also the basis for the blue color of the Jewish "star" in modern Israel's state flag.

The rebellion of Korah and his followers ch. 16

"As the laws increase and the constraints grow, the people seem less willing or less capable of following them. At this point in the narrative we see that the whole order of the priesthood is thrown open to direct confrontation. God's Word revealed at Sinai, which at first seemed so final and authoritative, is now being challenged on every side."²⁰²

"In 16:1—17:28 (Eng. [17:]13), three stories illustrate the need for and legitimacy of the Aaronic priesthood [i.e., 16:1-35; 16:36-50; and ch. 17]. As there had been challenges to Moses' leadership in chs. 11—14, so here there are challenges to Aaron's."²⁰³

It is not possible to determine, from the text, *where* or *when* during the 38 years of wandering this incident took place. This story ties in with what precedes, in that Korah and his non-priestly companions failed to appreciate their calling and became discontented. The tassels on their garments should have reminded them of their high calling and privilege. It was not the "rabble" or even the ordinary Israelites, who instigated this rebellion, but some of the Levites (cf. 8:5-26).

16:1-3 The leaders of this rebellion were "Korah"—a Levite of the Kohathite branch of the tribe and thus a kinsman of Moses and Aaron—and "Dathan," "Abiram," and "On," who were Reubenites. Perhaps these Reubenites felt slighted because their tribe had lost the rights of the firstborn, and they wanted a larger role in the nation.²⁰⁴ These four men gained the support of "250" other men (perhaps a rounded number) from the other tribes, who were "leaders" among the Israelites.

These men intended to overthrow the constitution that God had handed down for Israel, and to replace it with one that seemed better to them. This is a good example of "high-handed" sin in Israel. They based their action on the *truth* that the whole congregation was "holy" (Exod. 19:5-6). They wrongly inferred from this that every Israelite therefore had the right to serve in the priesthood. They failed to appreciate the fact that God had chosen *only* the *Levites* for special priestly service, because the nation as a whole had apostatized at Sinai (Exod. 32). They also failed to see that divine election to priestly service, which had been the privilege of the entire nation, did not in itself constitute qualification for priestly service. It also depended on obedience to God's covenant (Exod. 19:5). To be useful

²⁰²Ibid.

²⁰³Ashley, p. 295.

²⁰⁴Ibid., p. 303.

to God, we must not only be obedient but called. Calling plus obedience equal usefulness. All Christians have been called (John 15). We are the elect of God, His "priests" in the world today (1 Pet. 2:9).

The rebels attributed Moses and Aaron's prominence in the leadership of Israel to personal ambition, rather than to obedience to God's commands. We, too, need to be careful about judging the motives of God's servants. Josephus attributed the following motive to Korah:

". . . if God had determined to bestow that honour [of the priesthood] on one of the tribe of Levi, I am more worthy of it than he [Aaron] is; I myself being equal to Moses by my family, and superior to him both in riches and in age . . ." ²⁰⁵

16:4-7 Moses "fell on his face" (v. 4) in great distress, and took the matter to God in prayer (cf. 14:5).

The test to determine priesthood involved offering "incense," because this was the *most holy* responsibility of the priests, that also brought them the closest to God. The LORD had already shown how He felt about those who took this privilege on themselves, in the case of Nadab and Abihu (10:1-3).

16:8-14 The rebels viewed Israel's experiences since leaving Egypt in a purely carnal, *natural* way. They attributed those trials to Moses, personally, rather than to their *supernatural* God. This failure to perceive the will of God, as such, led them to regard Moses' leadership as inadequate and unacceptable.

"It was not that Moses was in error or that Aaron was at fault. It was simply that these wicked men wanted their positions.

"Anytime one begins so heavily to emphasize 'my ministry,' then such a one is in danger of standing in Korah's sandals." ²⁰⁶

"In v. 10b Moses comes to the nub of the matter—not being satisfied with the position to which God has called one, but wanting more for the sake of power and prestige. It is clear that the Levites' call was to ministry or service of the people, not to power and position over them. This misunderstanding is near the heart of that which makes

²⁰⁵Josephus, 4:2:2.

²⁰⁶Allen, p. 837.

Korah's rebellion so tragic: a misunderstanding of God's call as to privilege and not to service."²⁰⁷

16:15-35 God's method of judging Korah, Dathan, and Abiram—being "swallowed" up by "the earth"—was a graphic lesson to the rest of the nation that God would "bury" those who rebelled against His will. Sin always leads to death (Rom. 6:23).

"Sheol, the abode of the dead, is pictured as lying immediately under the surface of the ground . . ."²⁰⁸

"The point is that rebellion against those whom Yahweh has chosen is rebellion against him. This does not mean simply that leaders are always right. It says that *if* the leader is appointed by God, rebellion against the leadership is rebellion against God."²⁰⁹

"The same glory that appeared to install Aaron in his office at first (Lev. ix. 23) now appeared to confirm him in it, and to confound those that oppose him."²¹⁰

The "men who belonged to Korah" (v. 32) were apparently his *followers*, since some, if not all, of his sons did not die with their father (cf. 26:58; 1 Chron. 6:18-22; 9:19). God destroyed "the 250" leaders with "fire" that proceeded from Himself, as He had dealt with Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:2).

"Others' ruins should be our warnings."²¹¹

16:36-50 The LORD created another visual aid to remind the Israelites that offering incense was a ministry of the priests alone. The priests overlaid "the altar" of burnt offerings with a second layer ("plating") of "bronze," that they hammered out of the rebels' "censers" (cf. Exod. 27:2).²¹²

"As we think about the notion of the 'holy,' we recognize that things are made holy in Scripture, not because people are holy, but because the things are presented to the Lord, who is holy. Since these wicked men presented their censers to the Lord, the censers are holy, despite the men's own wickedness."²¹³

²⁰⁷Ashley, p. 309.

²⁰⁸G. Wenham, p. 137.

²⁰⁹Ashley, p. 318.

²¹⁰Henry, p. 159.

²¹¹Ibid.

²¹²See Jonathan Magonet, "The Korah Rebellion," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24 (October 1982):3-25.

²¹³Allen, p. 843.

God's judgment of Korah's company did not persuade the congregation as a whole to submit to God's will through Moses and Aaron. The people instead charged Moses and Aaron with killing ("causing the death of") their leaders (v. 41). But on the contrary, Moses had been responsible for God *sparing the nation*—through his intercession—on several occasions. The fact that the people called Korah's company "the LORD's people" (v. 41) shows how they failed to appreciate what it really meant to be "His people" (cf. 11:29; Judg. 5:11; 1 Sam. 2:24; 2 Sam. 1:12; 6:21; 2 Kings 9:6; Ezek. 36:20; Zeph. 2:10).

"The one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history, and that includes church history."²¹⁴

Moses and Aaron "fell on their faces" when they heard God's intention to judge the whole congregation with death ("that I may consume them instantly"; vv. 43, 45). Since incense symbolizes prayer in Scripture (cf. Exod. 30:8; Ps. 141:2; Luke 1:10; Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4), Aaron apparently moved among the people ("ran into the midst"), interceding for them. The "plague" (v. 46) was obviously a divine judgment involving *sudden death*, but Moses did not reveal more than this. A total of "14,700" people "died" (v. 49).

Why did Moses himself not intercede again here?

"All the motives which he had hitherto pleaded, in his repeated intercession that this evil congregation might be spared, were now exhausted. He could not stake his life for the nation, as at Horeb (Ex. xxxii. 32), for the nation had rejected him. He could not [*sic*] longer appeal to the honour of Jehovah among the heathen, seeing that the Lord, even when sentencing the rebellious race to fall in the desert, had assured him that the whole earth should be filled with His glory (chap. xiv. 20 sqq.). Still less could he pray to God that He would not be wrathful with all for the sake of one or a few sinners, as in chap. xvi. 22, seeing that the whole congregation had taken part with the rebels. In this condition of things there was but one way left of averting the threatened destruction of the whole nation, namely, to adopt the means which the Lord Himself had given to His congregation, in the high-priestly office, to wipe away their sins, and recover the divine grace which they had forfeited through sin,—viz. the offering of incense which embodied the high-priestly prayer, and the strength and operation of which were not dependent on the sincerity and earnestness of subjective faith, but had a firm and immovable

²¹⁴Wiersbe, p. 340.

foundation in the objective force of the divine appointment."²¹⁵

Another explanation is that the writer did not record Moses' prayer of intercession and God's reply, in the text, in this case.

The confirmation of Aaron's high-priesthood ch. 17

The fact that God halted the plague, in response to Aaron's atoning action with his censer (16:47-48), should have proved that God accepted *him* as the high priest—and not the rebels. God gave the miracle of the "budding rod," in chapter 17, to make an even greater impression on the people, in order to discourage further rebellion (v. 5).

"A man's rod was the sign of his position as ruler in the house and congregation; with a prince the rod became a sceptre, the insignia of rule (Gen. xlix. 10)."²¹⁶

"Almond blooms early with white blossoms and its fruits were highly prized (Gen. 43:11). White in Scripture symbolizes purity, holiness, and God Himself (e.g., Is. 1:18; Dn. 7:9; Rev. 20:11). Jeremiah associates the almond . . . with watching . . . (Je. 1:11-12). All these qualities were personified by Aaron and the tribe of Levi. They were the holy tribe *par excellence*, who represented Israel before God and God to Israel, and they were responsible for watching over the people by instructing them in the statutes of the Lord (Lv. 10:11)."²¹⁷

Aaron's "rod" fairly *burst* into "buds," "blossoms," and "ripe almonds"—all three stages of fruitfulness—because God gave it vital *power* ("sprouted . . . put forth buds . . . produced almonds, and . . . bore ripe almonds"). This must have helped the Israelites to appreciate that God had chosen the *Aaronic* family, because He had sovereignly chosen to impart His divine life to Aaron and his sons *by His Spirit* (illustrated by the budding rod). Moses had symbolized this bestowal when he had consecrated Aaron to his office, and anointed him with oil.

"The message was clear: just as God could make an apparently dead rod miraculously bear fruit, so he could elect a line of descendants like any other and enable it to render priestly service fruitfully."²¹⁸

"The founders of the non-Christian religions were dead rods, and so are the systems they originated. Christ is the rod which has budded and blossomed in resurrection life and glory; and His resurrection is the Divine attestation that He is the one true Saviour-Priest of men."²¹⁹

²¹⁵Keil and Delitzsch, 3:112.

²¹⁶Ibid., 3:114.

²¹⁷G. Wenham, p. 140. See also idem, "Aaron's Rod (Numbers 17:16-28)," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93:2 (1981):280-81.

²¹⁸Maarsingh, p. 63.

²¹⁹Baxter, 1:184.

God ordered that the Israelites place Aaron's rod "before the ark (testimony)," which contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments, along with the jar of manna (cf. Exod. 16:33-34). He did this in order to help them realize that His choice of the Aaronic priesthood would continue in Israel. There is no reason to believe that the buds, blossoms, and fruits remained perpetually fresh. They probably wilted, and the rod most likely assumed the condition it had before the miracle. The fact that the rod was there *before the ark*, in whatever condition it appeared over time, would nevertheless testify to the Israelites that God had chosen Aaron and his sons as His priests.

The people's *terror* (vv. 12-13) probably arose as a result of the miracles and judgments that had befallen the Israelites after Korah rebelled. God had vindicated His holiness, the people realized their sinfulness, and they were full of fear: "Behold, we perish, . . . we are all dying! Everyone who comes near [to worship] . . . must die. Are we to perish completely?"

The service and income of the priests and Levites ch. 18

A complete and comprehensive explanation of the official duties and revenues of the priests and Levites, in chapter 18, appropriately follows the confirmation of Aaron's priesthood in chapter 17. This was God's reply to the frightened cries of the people in 17:12-13.

". . . the modern reader comes to chapters 18—19 with a sense of foreboding; what, we may wonder, is in these chapters for me? The answer to that question is fivefold:

"1. The reader of Scripture needs to have general knowledge about the major institutions of the biblical period just for Scripture to make sense.

"2. Our understanding of the true worship of God begins with the sense that he controls and directs true worship; who the priests are and how they function are first his concerns. This means that worship is not a game where we may make up the rules as we play.

"3. A general knowledge of the work of the priests in the Hebrew Bible gives many insights to the modern reader as to the interests of God in our own worship. Often we think of worship in terms of what we like and appreciate. This misses the mark; worship is principally for God's pleasure.

"4. A general knowledge of the work of priests in the time of Hebrew worship gives the Christian reader significant insights into the priestly work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Book of Hebrews has an intense priestly orientation in its presentation of the Lord Jesus Christ, priest of God in the manner of Melchizedek.

"5. In contrast with the highly regulated, highly strictured patterns demanded of the priests of the Hebrew economy, the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ today has a direct access to God through the Savior that is nearly unbelievable. We are all priests; we can come near the presence of the Lord without an intermediary. Yet our privilege as believer-priests can only really be appreciated against the background of priests in the biblical period."²²⁰

18:1-7 God evidently gave these instructions "to Aaron" (v. 1). They deal with the boundary lines between: Israelites who were not Levites, the Levites, and the priests.

The priestly office carried great responsibility as well as great privilege. The priests "bore the guilt" of what *all the Israelites* did, as well as what *they themselves* did. The sacrifices, of course, covered this guilt.

God "gave" the Levites to the priests as their assistants, to help them with certain aspects of the work of the sanctuary ("they are a gift to you"; v. 6). "Outsiders," non-priests, and Levites could not intrude on the priestly office or they would die ("be put to death"; v. 7).

"The study of the cultic use of *qrb/ngs* demonstrates that its meaning goes beyond simple, physical approach to the more abstract amplifications: 'have access to,' 'be admitted to,' 'be associated with.' In prohibitions . . . it means 'encroach.'"²²¹

"A key phrase of this chapter is 'I give you' (18:7; cf. vv. 12, 19, 26, etc.). God takes care of His own."²²²

18:8-13 God gave Aaron these instructions too (v. 8). The priests received all the "heave offerings" (their "portion" of the fellowship and wave offerings) that the Israelites brought to the tabernacle. These were all "the holy gifts" that the people presented to God (vv. 8-9; cf. 5:9). They included parts of the meal, sin, and trespass offerings (vv. 9-10). The skin of some burnt offerings became the priests' too, but Moses did not mention this, probably because its value was negligible. These were also called "most holy" offerings (v. 9). The priest also received a portion of what the offerer waved before the Lord in the peace (fellowship) offering (their portions were called "heave" offerings; v. 11) and the gifts of "first fruits" that the people offered each year (v. 12; cf. 2 Chron. 31:5; Neh. 10:36, 38).

²²⁰Allen, p. 850.

²²¹Jacob Milgrom, "The Cultic Use of *qrb/ngs*," in *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 1:84.

²²²Jensen, p. 77.

18:14-19 Everything placed under the ban ("every devoted thing"; v. 14), and "the firstborn" of every "man or animal" that the people redeemed or offered ("every first issue of the womb of all flesh"; vv. 15-18), were "holy" offerings (vv. 10, 19). The "everlasting covenant of salt" (v. 19) was an indestructible covenant, similar to salt in its qualities of duration and preservation (cf. 2 Chron. 13:5). The ancients used salt in the ritual of making some covenants in the Near East.

"At a meal in which a covenant between two parties was sealed, people in ancient times occasionally used salt to signify the incorruptible, firm, and lasting quality of the agreement."²²³

"The meaning appears to have been that the salt, with its power to strengthen food and keep it from decay, symbolized the unbending truthfulness of that self-surrender to the Lord embodied in the sacrifice, by which all impurity and hypocrisy were repelled."²²⁴

God gave the priests five gifts: their office, a spirit of responsibility, helpers, every provision for earthly needs, and Himself.²²⁵

18:20 Aaron, the high priest, received a *special portion* ("I [the LORD] am your portion and your inheritance").

"Still more than the marriage image, that of the inheritance is a two-way one: if Israel is Yahweh's inheritance, Yahweh is also Israel's inheritance, in a particular sense for the Levites (Num. 18.20; Dt. 10.9; 18.2), in a general sense for the body of the faithful (Ps. 16.5-6)."²²⁶

18:21-24 The *tithes* of the Israelites became the Levites' possession ("all the tithe in Israel"; vv. 21-24; cf. Lev. 27:30-33). God gave the instructions for receiving the tithes to Moses (v. 25).

18:25-32 The Levites themselves were to give "a tithe of the tithe" (a tenth of the people's tenth, equaling a hundredth of the total Israelite tithe), that they received from the people, to the priests. This "Levite tithe" was to include "the best" of the tithe offerings that the other Israelites gave to them (vv. 30, 32).

²²³Maarsingh, p. 65.

²²⁴Unger's *Bible Dictionary*, 1957 ed., s.v. "Covenant of Salt."

²²⁵Jensen, pp. 78-79.

²²⁶Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 203.

"On occasion I've met people in Christian service who don't give to the Lord's work because they consider themselves exempt. 'We're serving the Lord and all that we have belongs to Him,' they argue, but their argument doesn't hold water. The Levites were serving God full time, yet they tithed what they received."²²⁷

"Whereas in heathen states, where there was an hereditary priestly caste, that caste was generally a rich one, and held a firm possession in the soil (in Egypt, for example; see at Gen. xlvii. 22), the Levites received no hereditary landed property in the land of Israel, but only towns to dwell in among the other tribes, with pasturage for their cattle (chap. xxxv.), because Jehovah, the God of Israel, would be their inheritance."²²⁸

Had the Israelites been faithful in their tithing, the Levites would each have received about *five times* as much as the average Israelite *actually* "tithed" (cf. Gen. 43:34). Unfortunately the Jews were not completely obedient to these laws.

"What is to be made of the writer's exclusion of Moses in these matters that relate so closely to the duties of the priests? Why is Moses so conspicuously left out of the picture [until 18:25]? The answer perhaps lies in the author's desire to tell us something about the role of Moses as leader of God's people. His role is not limited to the work of a priest. Aaron is shown here assuming most of that responsibility. In the view of the writer, then, it appears that the role of Moses was becoming more distinct from the office of priest. Thus the writer attempts to show that Moses' role as mediator of the covenant, already well established throughout these narratives, was not merely a priestly one. There is a concern to show that he also functioned in the role of prophet as well as king, two themes that will receive further development in the book of Deuteronomy (Dt 18:15; 33:5). Hence as the picture of Moses develops within the Pentateuch, it more closely resembles the future messianic ruler, who is anticipated already in the Pentateuch as a prophet, a priest, and a king."²²⁹

The law of purification from the uncleanness of death ch. 19

God gave this law so the nation might maintain purity as the older generation died off in the wilderness. Its purpose was not to remove sin itself, but to remove the uncleanness that death represented because of its connection with sin. It was especially appropriate that God gave this law after the death of the approximately 15,000 who died as a result of

²²⁷Wiersbe, pp. 342-43.

²²⁸Keil and Delitzsch, 3:119.

²²⁹Sailhamer, p. 393.

Korah's rebellion (ch. 16). Special provisions for cleansing were necessary in view of the large number of corpses.

19:1-10 The Israelites were to slaughter a "red heifer," then burn it, in order to collect and store its ashes, from which they would use the ashes as needed to add to the water of purification, to make it more ritually effective as a cleansing agent. A heifer is a young female cow older than a calf. The priest killed it as a sin offering (vv. 9, 17). Probably God required a female because the female was the bearer of life, and continued life is what this sacrifice provided. The Lord may have intended the red color to emphasize sin or perhaps the vitality of the heifer's life. This is the only case in which the color of the victim was specified. The animal was in its full strength, having never borne a yoke. Of course, it was to be without a blemish (v. 2).

The Israelites were to slay the animal *outside* the camp because of its connection with sin and death. The high priest was to observe the slaying, making sure the person in charge did it properly. This was a very important sacrifice. The sprinkling of the blood shows that this slaying was a sin offering. The red heifer died for the sin of the congregation, specifically their defilement from contact with dead corpses (v. 4).

The offerers burned every sin offering for the whole congregation, including this one, outside the camp (v. 5). This one provided cleansing from the contamination of death that the nation had contracted through the death of its people. The heifer represented the Israelites who had died as a result of sin.

"Cedar wood" was not as subject to decay as most other woods, and so represented the continuance of life. It was also aromatic when burned, and was probably either the common brown-berried cedar or the Phoenician juniper.²³⁰ "Hyssop" stood for purification from corruption, and the priests used it to apply blood, as in the Passover ritual. "Scarlet [wool]" symbolized the strong, vital energy connected with blood (cf. Lev. 14:6). All of these elements combined to signify everything that strengthened life. The person in charge added these elements to the heifer ashes while the heifer was burning.

The priest collected and kept the ashes of the heifer for the purification ritual. He combined them with the cleansing water as needed (v. 9) for the purification of unclean individuals in the nation. The sacrifice symbolically strengthened the life of the living Israelites, and removed the uncleanness caused by contact with their dead brethren. "Ashes," which normally defiled the clean, in this case purified the unclean. God, who is sovereign, has the authority to abrogate what is normal.

²³⁰*The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Trees," by F. N. Hepper.

19:11-22 Verses 11-13 explain the general rules for the use of this purification water. Verses 14-22 give a more specific description of the application of the general rules. Verses 17-19 record the ceremony of purification.

"Animals are clean and unclean, not because they necessarily will or will not make a person sick if they are used as food; they are clean and unclean primarily because God desired his people to live in a world of discrimination (see esp. Lev 11:44-47). We may look back from a twentieth-century understanding of infection and disease and remark, 'How kind it was of God that some of the animals he declared to be unclean to Israel are foods that might be conveyers of disease.' But the principal issue is distinction, discrimination, the marking out of that which is different from something else."²³¹

Nonetheless we should not discount God's care for His people's physical welfare, even though that may have been His secondary reason for legislating as He did.

"God recognized that the incubation period for most bacteria is within seven days. This means that after exposure to a disease, a person will know within seven days whether the disease is contracted. . . .

". . . the 'unclean' provision of seven days was practical for most acute, bacterial diseases fatal in that day.

"Hand washing and clothes washing with proper drying were prescribed in Numbers 19:19 . . . Verse 21 notes that 'anyone who touches the water of cleansing will be unclean till evening.' These provisions recognize that not only is washing important in mechanically cleansing one from microbes, but drying ('until evening') is also essential. Pathogenic microbes can live in moisture that remains on skin, dying when the skin is eventually dried. Furthermore Numbers 19:13, 18-21 refers to the provision of 'sprinkling' the water, which indicates the need for running water, not stagnant water. Again this is a more effective means of cleansing, though more cumbersome.

"Did the average Israelite understand the significance of this preventive medical standard God imposed? No doubt he did not. However, God knew and in His wisdom cared for His people."²³²

²³¹Allen, pp. 861-62.

²³²Jay D. Fawver and R. Larry Overstreet, "Moses and Preventive Medicine," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:587 (July-September 1990):280-81.

This sacrifice, then, represented a kind of instant sin offering, because it provided in its ashes the cleansing of those who had become ceremonially unclean through contact with a corpse. The unclean person who refused to purify himself would suffer death (vv. 13, 20). To refuse cleansing was to repudiate the divine revelation concerning the relationship of sin and death. This sacrifice kept the Israelites free from the defilement that would hinder their fellowship with God (cf. 1 John 1:7-9; Heb. 9:13-14). Jacob Milgrom believed this offering was thought to exorcize a demon that came with corpse contamination.²³³

"This chapter provides an alternative remedy which marked the seriousness of the pollution caused by death, yet dealt with it without the cost and inconvenience of sacrifice. Instead, those who have come in contact with the dead can be treated with a concoction of water that contains all the ingredients of a sin offering."²³⁴

"The writer's concern for the ritual of the red heifer at this point in the narrative . . . finds its roots in the earliest narratives of Genesis where death itself is viewed as the ultimate defilement of God's good creation. As such his point appears to be to show that just as in the beginning, so now among God's covenant people, death is the arch enemy."²³⁵

This sacrifice is similar to the sacrifice of Christ that cleanses the Christian from the defilement that we contract as we live in the world (1 John 1:9).

The departure from Kadesh ch. 20

Here begins the fourth and last leg of the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

1. From Egypt to Sinai (Exod. 12—19)
2. From Sinai to Kadesh (Num. 11—12)
3. At Kadesh—38 years of wilderness wandering (Num. 13—19)
4. From Kadesh to Transjordan (Num. 20—21)

The first two of these segments each began with triumph but ended in tragedy. The third and fourth each began with tragedy but ended in triumph.

"The focus of the narratives in chs. 13—19 has been the sin of the people and the trouble caused by it. In chs. 20—21 this focus is still present, to be sure (20:2-13; 21:4-9), but it is beginning to shift to victories given by Yahweh as the people approach Canaan (21:1-3, 21-35). It should be remembered that these victories were given to the old generation that was

²³³Jacob Milgrom, "The Paradox of the Red Cow (Num. xix)," *Vetus Testamentum* 31:1 (1981):62-72.

²³⁴G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 146.

²³⁵Sailhamer, p. 395.

under a death sentence in the wilderness. A new day is coming for the Israelites."²³⁶

Moses' rebellion at Kadesh 20:1-13

Finally, the Israelites departed from the "wilderness of Zin" and "Kadesh."

"There were not *two* comings to Kadesh-barnea—one at the beginning of the thirty-eight years of 'wandering' and the other at the end. There was only one coming. The Tabernacle and all connected therewith stayed at Kadesh-barnea throughout the thirty-eight years, while the people spread in roving bands pasturing in the open country [cf. 33:36-38; Deut. 1:46]."²³⁷

Kadesh was not only a town, but included a large area of desert located on the edge of the wilderness of Zin. God had previously judged the older generation of Israelites for not believing Him (ch. 14). Now He judged Moses for the same sin ("you have not believed Me," v. 12). In this chapter, Miriam and Aaron were judged as well, but they also died in the wilderness for their sins. The leaders succumbed to the same temptation as the people.

"Failure to enjoy God's promises was the result of unbelief. At this point in the narrative the writer shows that it was not a failure to keep the law that led to their death in the wilderness."²³⁸

"Miriam" was a significant person in the Exodus drama. The writer recorded her death as having occurred in the "first month," but he did not give the year. Perhaps this was the fortieth year, because the next dated event, the death of Aaron, occurred on the first day of the fifth month of the fortieth year (cf. vv. 27-28; 33:38).

". . . Aaron, representative of the priesthood, could not lead Israel into the promised rest; nor could Miriam, representative of the prophets; nor could Moses, representative of the Law. This was reserved for Joshua, who in a unique way was a type of our heavenly Saviour and Captain, the Lord Jesus Christ."²³⁹

The root of Moses' sin in disobeying God (v. 11) was unbelief (v. 12). Quite clearly this was not a failure to believe that God could or would provide water for the people. Rather, it was a failure to believe that simple obedience to God's command was best (cf. Gen. 4:1-7). In this, Moses acted like the older generation of Israelites had repeatedly done since they left Egypt.²⁴⁰

²³⁶Ashley, p. 375.

²³⁷Baxter, 1:203.

²³⁸Sailhamer, p. 397.

²³⁹Baxter, 1:185.

²⁴⁰See also Martin Emmrich, "The Case against Moses Reopened," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46:1 (March 2003):53-62, for additional insights.

Moses did *more* than God told him to do. He failed to believe that God's way was best, and took matters into his own hands. His motives may have been one or more of the following: He may have had a desire for the greater glory of God. He may have been proud, or may have relied on his own ability to work miracles. We know he was impatient with the Israelites' complaining, and felt frustrated by their slowness to learn the same lesson God had previously taught them (cf. Ps. 106:32-33). In any case, he failed to accept God's will as best, and this is unbelief.

"Faith is the correct response to God's word, whether it is a word of promise or a word of command."²⁴¹

Instead of speaking "to the rock" (v. 8), Moses spoke *to the Israelites* ("to them"; v. 10) "rashly" (Ps. 106:33; cf. Lev. 5:4). He struck the rock "twice," with the very same rod with which he had done so many miracles (v. 11), as though this miracle required his own power—rather than simply the power of God. In doing so, he failed "to treat (God) as holy"; he gave the people the impression that God needed him to provide for them. Had Moses simply *spoken* to the rock, it would have been clearer to the people that the miracle had come from God.

One interpretation is that Moses' short speech in verse 10b, not the striking of the rock, was the actual transgression.²⁴² The text does not seem to bear this out. Evidently Moses, in his frustration with the people, thought that he was the performer of the miracle rather than only God's instrument. This is a common error in modern ministry, and it still produces great frustration: thinking that we need to be manufacturers rather than simply distributors of blessing to others.²⁴³

"The promise was that the moment the word was spoken to the lifeless rock, the miracle would occur before the eyes of all the people and the water would gush from the rock in amounts sufficient to quench the thirst of man and beast. This was God's intention, a change from his attitude in the case of earlier rebellions: here mercy won over judgment. To accept this kindness toward a sinful people demanded even more faith from Moses (especially when we recall Num. 16:15, in which we read that he asked God to turn away from the people who so seriously but falsely accused him). God's power and God's mercy—these are the two focal points that were to be brought once more to the attention of the people."²⁴⁴

Perhaps there was a measure of sacrilege in *striking* the rock, since "rock" was a symbol of *God* (cf. Deut. 32:4, 15, 18; Ps. 18:2; 31:3; 42:9; 1 Cor. 10:4; et al.). However, I doubt that this was a significant factor (cf. Exod. 17:6).

²⁴¹G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 151.

²⁴²See M. Margalith (Windreich), "The Transgression of Moses and Aaron—Num. 20:1-13," *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, p. 225.

²⁴³For development of this insight, see Warren W. Wiersbe, *On Being a Servant of God*, pp. 5-8.

²⁴⁴Maarsingh, p. 71.

"It was not God but Moses who was angry at the people. Therefore the pronoun *we* [v.10] was a form of blasphemy."²⁴⁵

Moses' *anger* complicated his unbelief. He was a faithful servant of God except on this occasion. If another person had committed this sin it might not have been so serious, but it was very serious, because the *man in Moses' office* (as the people's prophet, priest, and king) committed it. God therefore shortened the term of Moses' service (and lifetime) as his punishment. Moses would not ultimately bring the nation into the Promised Land (cf. 1 Sam. 13:14; 15:26). Leaders of God's people lose their ability to lead when they cease to rely on God, and thereby impede the manifestation of God's power and holiness.

Exactly *what* was Moses' sin, which the text calls "unbelief"?

"Judging from the passage alone, the faithlessness of Moses does not appear to have consisted in his striking the rock or in his harsh words but rather lies just out of reach somewhere in the numerous 'gaps' of the story. We should stress that this is not a result of a deficiency in the story. It rather appears to be part of the story's design. It is just at the point of recounting the nature of their sin that the author abbreviates the narrative and moves on to the divine speech (Num 20:12). Moreover, it is just this divine speech that 'fills the gap' with the word about faith, giving the story a sense far larger than that of its own immediate concerns. . . . The rebellion of Moses and Aaron (. . . , 20:24), which appears at some point to have been an important feature of the narrative, has been replaced with the focus on their faithlessness (. . . , 20:12). Such an interpretation has raised the actions of Moses and Aaron in the narrative to a higher level of theological reflection—the issue of faith versus obedience to the law. Their actions epitomize the negative side of the message of faith. Moses and Aaron, who held high positions under the law, did not enjoy God's gift of the land. They died in the wilderness because they did not believe."²⁴⁶

To summarize, Moses harshly rebuked the people (v. 10), took credit for what God had done (v. 10), resented the Israelites (v. 10), lost his temper (v. 11), disobeyed God (v. 11), did not trust God's power (v. 12), failed to glorify God (v. 12), and rebelled against God (v. 24).

Aaron was guilty of "unbelief" as well (v. 12), because he did not prevent Moses from sinning. Evidently he could have done this, and God punished him because he did not. Both men inappropriately took God's place as the center of attention.

"Meribah" ("Contention") is the name the Israelites gave the water that came out of the rock ("waters of Meribah"). It is also the name of the site where this incident took place (v. 13). The people had already named another place "Meribah" (Exod. 17:7), where God

²⁴⁵Smick, p. 138.

²⁴⁶John H. Sailhamer, "The Mosaic Law and the Theology of the Pentateuch," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (Fall 1991):258-60.

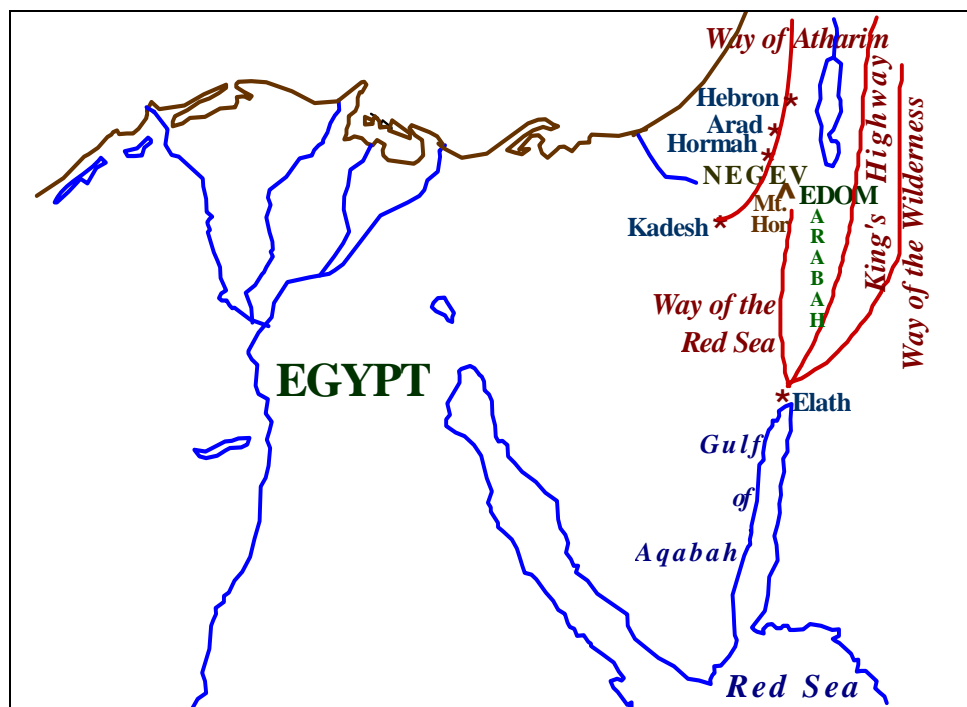
had provided water out of another rock (Horeb). The present incident doubtless brought the former to memory.

In spite of Moses' disobedience, God still provided for the people by giving them water. God blesses people even through His disobedient servants. For example, some people have come to faith in Christ through the preaching of preachers who do not even believe the Bible. However, God's *grace* should not lead us to take a light view of sin. Moses experienced severe discipline for his unfaithfulness to God. He lost part of his reward, but not his salvation (cf. 2 John 8).

"The lesson is clear: grace is never a ground for complacency or presumption. By our carelessness, by our sinful neglect, we can sin away forever some of the privileges of our calling—not salvation itself, but our opportunities for service, our possibility for usefulness, our contribution to the ongoing purposes of God."²⁴⁷

The Edomites' resistance 20:14-21

The cloudy pillar led the Israelites, but apparently Moses had reason to believe that God was directing them eastward, into the territory of Edom, and from there north to Transjordan. Consequently he sent messengers to the King of Edom, requesting permission to pass through his land (v. 14).



²⁴⁷Philip, p. 225. Cf. Rom. 11:20.

The Edomites were Israel's "brother" (v. 14), in that they were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's (Israel's) brother. The "king's highway" (vv. 17, 19) was a major thoroughfare through Edom that caravans and armies as well as private citizens traveled. It was a trade route connecting the Gulf of Aqabah and Syria.²⁴⁸ The Israelites did not take this route.

Moses took an irenic approach in dealing with the Edomites, because they were the Israelites' relatives. They were not *Canaanites*, whom God had commanded His people to attack and destroy. However, in spite of Moses' peaceful request, the Edomites refused to let Israel pass. This antagonistic attitude characterized Edom's approach to Israel throughout the history of these two nations, and finally drew God's judgment upon Edom (cf. Obad. 10-14).

"It's tragic when a family feud is kept alive from generation to generation, poisoning hearts and minds and keeping brothers from helping one another."²⁴⁹

The Israelites remained in the area west of Edom, temporarily, and then proceeded to circle around Edom, first taking a generally southeasterly course toward the Gulf of Aqabah (cf. 21:4).

"A close reading of these narratives shows that the pattern in the account of Israel's failure to believe (Nu 14) is repeated in this account of Moses' unbelief. The complaints of the people (14:1-4; 20:2-5) lead the Lord to conclude that Israel (14:11) and Moses (20:12) are lacking in faith. Moreover, both narratives are followed by an account of Israel's aborted attempt to gain immediate entrance into the Promised Land. In chapter 14, it was Israel's defeat by the Amalekites (14:40-45), and in the present passage it is Edom's refusal to let Israel pass through their land (20:14-21). In these various ways, the author seems intent on showing the similarities between Israel's failure of faith and that of Moses. Both failed to believe God and hence could not go into the land."²⁵⁰

The death of Aaron and the succession of Eleazar 20:22-29

"Mount Hor" seems to have stood on the western border of Edom (v. 23).²⁵¹

Aaron died on the first day of the fifth month in Israel's fortieth year (33:37-38). He was 123 years old (33:39). His death signaled the end of the older generation of Israelites. It is, therefore, arguably "the most important time-mark in the whole book of Numbers."²⁵² Before Aaron died, Moses formally removed his brother's high priestly vestments and clothed Eleazar, Aaron's son, with them. Israel now had a new high priest. Similarly, before Moses died, God installed Joshua as Israel's new leader (cf. Deut. 34:9).

²⁴⁸*The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., "King's Highway," by D. J. Wiseman.

²⁴⁹Wiersbe, *The Bible . . .*, p. 345.

²⁵⁰Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 399.

²⁵¹Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, pp. 41-42.

²⁵²Baxter, 1:161.

"As John Wesley used to say, 'God buries His workmen but His work goes on.'"²⁵³

God has not revealed *how* Aaron died. His disobedience to God at Meribah (Contention), near Kadesh, evidently led to a premature death (v. 12). Aaron appears to have been a man of weak will, whom the people rather easily influenced to compromise his obedience to God's word. Nevertheless he was an extremely important individual, because of his ministry as Moses' spokesman, his office of high priest, and his role as founder of the Aaronic priesthood. His great responsibilities before God were second only to his privileges under God.

"So ends the dark chapter. In it has been recorded the death of a prophetess, the critical sin of Moses and Aaron, the refusal of negotiation, the death of Aaron, and the mourning of the people. The chapter has emphasized the limitations of man—even God's leaders! Now with a brighter spotlight on the grace and glory of God, Numbers resumes its story of advance."²⁵⁴

2. The climax of rebellion, atonement, and the end of dying chs. 21— 25

The destruction of Arad 21:1-3

"Arad was a large town in the northern Negeb, about 17 miles . . . south of Hebron."²⁵⁵

"Atharim" means "spies" (v. 1). Evidently this is the route the Israelite spies had taken into Canaan.

The Canaanites ("the king") "of Arad took the offensive ('fought') against (attacked) Israel." Perhaps they did so because, 38 years earlier, the Israelites had suffered defeat at Hormah (which means "Destruction"). "Hormah" was very close to Arad. The Israelites had experienced this defeat on their first attempt to enter the land, right after God had sentenced them to wander in the wilderness for 38 more years (14:45).

"As being at Kadesh forms a framework for the wilderness wanderings, so does being at Hormah. After this victory at Hormah, where there had once been defeat, the Israelites are victorious regularly (21:21-35)."²⁵⁶

This was the Israelites' first victory over the Canaanites, and it was undoubtedly a great confidence builder for them. It came after the Israelites vowed to obey God completely, by exterminating these particular Canaanites ("I [Israel] will utterly destroy their cities,"

²⁵³Wiersbe, *The Bible . . .*, p. 345.

²⁵⁴Jensen, p. 87.

²⁵⁵G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 154. See *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Arad," by Siegfried H. Horn; Ze'ev Herzog, Miriam Aharoni, and Anson Rainey, "Arad," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13:2 (March-April 1987):16-35; and Ruth Amiran, Rolf Goethert, and Ornit Ilan, "The Well at Arad," *ibid.*, pp. 40-44.

²⁵⁶Ashley, pp. 398-99.

v. 2), if He would give them victory as He had promised. In this vow the Israelites were merely promising to obey God, only in what was already expected, what He had already commanded them to do. The conquest of Canaan must have seemed more certain to the Israelites now than ever before.

This narrative is similar to the one that described Israel's previous victory over the Amalekites (Exod. 17). An account of the people's murmuring due to lack of water introduced both stories (Exod. 17:1-7; Num. 20:1-13). In both cases an enemy attacked the Israelites, but Israel proceeded to defeat each one with the Lord's help brought down by prayer (Exod. 17:8-13; Num. 21:1-3). Perhaps the writer intended us to learn from this that it was common for unbelieving nations to be hostile toward God's people. They opposed them both at the beginning and toward the end of their sojourn in the wilderness (cf. vv. 10-20). Nevertheless God enabled the Israelites to be victorious in answer to prayer, despite their unworthiness.

The bronze snake 21:4-9

The Israelites next traveled southeast to go around the southern border of Edom. They took "the way of the Red Sea" (v. 4), a road to the town of Elath that stood at the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqabah.²⁵⁷ This route took them through the Arabah. The "Arabah" was a low-lying plain that runs all the way from north of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee), through that Sea, the Jordan Valley, and the Dead Sea, south to the Gulf of Aqabah. Steep mountain walls border the Arabah to the south of the Dead Sea.

It is, ". . . a horrible desert, with a loose sandy soil, and drifts of granite and other stones, where terrible sandstorms sometimes arise from the neighborhood of the Red Sea . . ." ²⁵⁸

It is easy to understand why the Israelites grumbled again (vv. 4-5), though this is the last mention of their complaining during the march to the Promised Land.

The "serpents" that the Lord sent to discipline the people were "fiery"—probably because their bite caused intense burning and or inflammation.²⁵⁹ However, poisonous snakes with red spots on their bodies still afflict the Bedouins in this desert.²⁶⁰

God's discipline moved the Israelites to confess their sin and to request Moses' intercession ("we have sinned . . . intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents"; v. 7; cf. 11:2). As usual, this proved effective (v. 8).

The "serpent" that God told Moses to make was probably copper or bronze ("*fiery*" looking), in order to resemble the color of the real snakes. It was not a real snake but an

²⁵⁷See Denis Baly, "Elath, Ezion-geber, and the Red Sea," *Biblical Illustrator* 9:3 (Spring 1983):66-69.

²⁵⁸Keil and Delitzsch, 3:138-39.

²⁵⁹Ashley, p. 404; Keil and Delitzsch, 3:139; Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 157; A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, p. 193.

²⁶⁰Keil and Delitzsch, 3:139.

image, ". . . in which the fiery serpent was stiffened, as it were, into dead brass, as a sign that the deadly poison of the fiery serpents was overcome in this brazen serpent."²⁶¹

"I suggest that the clue to the symbolism should be sought in the general principles underlying the sacrifices and purificatory rites in the Old Testament. Animals are killed, so that sinful men who deserve to die may live. Blood which pollutes when it is spilled can be used to sanctify and purify men and articles. The ashes of a dead heifer cleanse those who suffer from the impurity caused by death. In all these rituals there is an inversion: normally polluting substances or actions may in a ritual context have the opposite effect and serve to purify. In the case of the copper serpent similar principles operate. Those inflamed and dying through the bite of living snakes were restored to life by a dead reddish-coloured snake. It may be that copper was chosen not only because its hue matched the inflammation caused by the bites, but because red is the colour that symbolizes atonement and purification."²⁶²

We see a similar inversion in some of Jesus' healing miracles. Rather than becoming unclean by touching those who were unclean, Jesus' touch cleansed them. Rather than physically touching the substitute sacrifice, as God normally required, *visual* "contact" (with the bronze snake) was all that was necessary in this case ("everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live"). Again, believing a promise from God (v. 8) and obedience to His word proved to be the key to deliverance (v. 9).

The Israelites preserved this metal serpent, and later in their history, offered incense to it (2 Kings 18:4). King Hezekiah finally had it broken up and destroyed, since the Israelites were venerating it as a holy relic.

This narrative, as the previous one, also has a parallel earlier in the Pentateuch, namely, when Moses threw down his staff in Pharaoh's presence and it became a snake (Exod. 4:3, 30). The context of both incidents was the people's complaining.

"The purpose of such parallels is to underscore the basic themes of the book. In both narratives, the writer emphasizes the necessity of the people's response of faith in the sign. They must look to the sign in faith before they can be delivered."²⁶³

Jesus Christ identified the copper serpent as a *type* of *Himself* (John 3:14). Like Christ was "lifted up," someone lifted this serpent up from the earth on a pole. Both Christ and this serpent were completely harmless as they hung on their poles. Furthermore, if a fatally wounded person wanted deliverance, he or she only had to "look to (at)" the serpent or to Christ *in faith*, relying on God's promise of salvation. The result, in both cases, was victory over a serpent.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹Ibid., 3:140.

²⁶²G. Wenham, *Numbers*, pp. 157-58.

²⁶³Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 402

²⁶⁴See Baxter, 1:202, for more parallels.

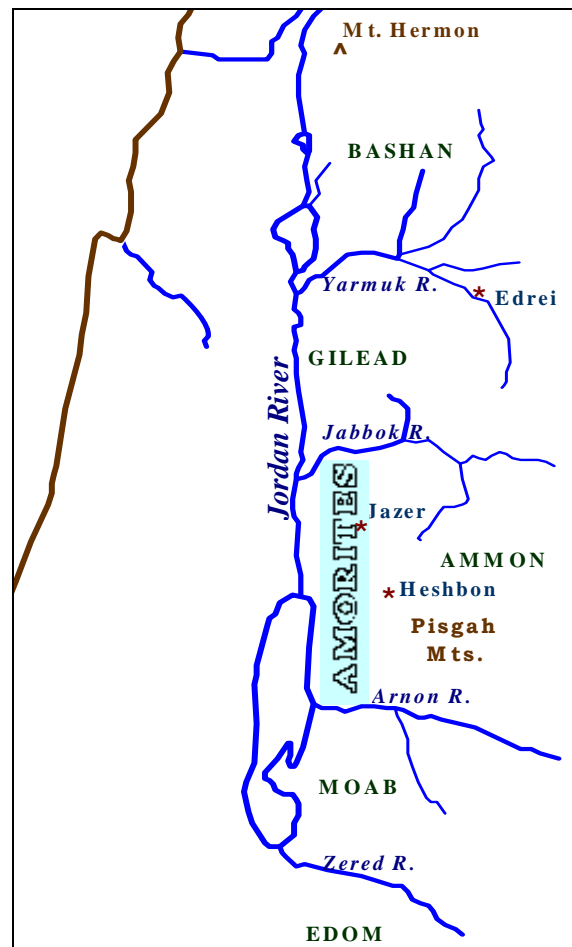
"If ever there were a less expected pairing of types, this would be it. The manna was an altogether gracious gift of God, which the people turned against with stomach revulsion. The snakes were an instrument of God's judgment because of the peoples' ingratitude and rebellious spirits; yet it was a metal copy of just such a snake that became the means for their deliverance.

"The bread is a picture of Jesus; as the Bread of Heaven he is the proper nourisher of his people. The bronze snake is a picture of Jesus, who became sin for us as he hung on that awful tree. The manna had to be eaten. The snake had to be seen. The commands of Scripture are for doing. The manna was no good if left to rot. The metal snake would not avail if none looked at it. The manna and the snake are twin aspects of the grace of God."²⁶⁵

The journey toward Moab 21:10-20

The list of stopping places that Moses recorded here differs from the one in 33:41-49. Apparently neither list is complete, but both are selective. Archaeologists have not yet identified most of the sites Moses mentioned here. The route of the Israelites was *around* Edom, in a counter-clockwise direction, until they came to the Wadi Zered (v. 12).²⁶⁶ A "wadi" (Arabic, Heb. *nahal*) was a river or streambed that was dry during most of the year, but became a rushing torrent during the rainy season. The Israelites took the "Way of the Wilderness," a route that ran generally parallel to, but east of, the King's Highway (20:17, 19). The Zered flowed westward, in the rainy season, into the Arabah near the south end of the Dead Sea. It constituted the boundary between Edom and Moab.

Moving farther north, through Moab, the nation crossed the "Arnon" Wadi, that feeds into the east side of the Dead Sea, about at the sea's mid-point north-to-south. The "Arnon" was the border between the



²⁶⁵Allen, p. 879. See James Van Oosting, "Moses, Hezekiah, and Yale's gang of four," *Reformed Journal* 33:11 (November 1983):7-8, for some comments on the hermeneutics of this passage.

²⁶⁶See J. Maxwell Miller, "The Israelite Journey through (around) Moab and Moabite Toponymy," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108:4 (1989):577-95.

Moabites and the Amorites (v. 13). This crossing brought Israel to the threshold of the Promised Land.

The Amorites were, ". . . the mightiest of all the tribes of the Canaanites."²⁶⁷

The "Amorites" controlled most of Transjordan. Abraham was from Amorite stock.²⁶⁸ Here the Israelites received direction from God to make war with Sihon, a king of the Amorites, and to possess his land. God promised them that they would be victorious (Deut. 2:24-25). This revelation filled the Israelites with joy and courage.

The "Book of the Wars of the Lord" (v. 14) was a collection of songs that commemorated God's glorious acts on behalf of the Israelites. Apparently Moses (or one of his contemporaries) wrote or edited it. The fragment of one of these songs, that the writer included here (vv. 14-15), describes the Arnon. The fact that Moses inserted this strophe reflects the joy that the Israelites felt on this occasion.

At "Beer" (lit. "Well") God provided water for the people—but this time by instructing them to dig wells (vv. 16-18). This proved to be another occasion of great rejoicing, since God *again* provided for His needy people.

Moses mentioned several other sites that were camping places they stopped at on their way, before the nation settled down on the tableland of the "Pisgah" range of mountains. This area lay east of the place where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea. The "wasteland" (Heb. *Jeshimon*) is the desert directly to the northeast of the Dead Sea.

Israel's defeat of Sihon 21:21-32

This account fits chronologically after 21:13. It records two great victories that God gave His people over two of the mighty Amorite kings. The Israelites were able to take control of a large area in Transjordan when they defeated Sihon and Og.

"The term Amorite has various meanings in the OT: Canaanites generally (e.g., Gen. 15:16), inhabitants of the land west of the Jordan (e.g., Josh. 5:1), inhabitants of the regions of Judah (e.g., Josh. 10:5-6), inhabitants of the Negeb and the region to the southeast of the Dead Sea (e.g., Gen. 14:7), and very often, as here, the inhabitants east of the Jordan under the rule of Sihon and Og . . ."²⁶⁹

Moses made his peaceful request for permission to pass through Sihon's territory and into the Promised Land (v. 22), realizing that Sihon would not allow this (cf. Deut. 2:24-26). Compare Moses' request of Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, in Exodus 5:1 (cf. Exod. 3:19).

²⁶⁷Keil and Delitzsch, 3:145. See Siegfried Schwantes, "The Amorites as Rulers of Mesopotamia," chapter 4 in *A Short History of the Ancient Near East*, for more information about these powerful and influential people.

²⁶⁸See *The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Amorites," by A. R. Millard.

²⁶⁹Ashley, pp. 418-19.

" . . . this was done simply to leave the decision of his fate in his own hand . . ." ²⁷⁰

Sihon then attacked Israel (v. 23), but Israel defeated his army (v. 24). Moses had very little to do with the acquisition of any land for Israel.²⁷¹ This victory gave the Israelites possession of all of Sihon's territory. It extended south to the Arnon and north to the Jabbok, which flows into the Jordan River from the east about halfway between the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee) and the Dead Sea.²⁷² It included "Jazer," a town that the Israelites defeated (v. 32). This victory, over one of the most powerful of the Canaanite city-states, "Heshbon," inspired poets in Israel to write proverbs (v. 27), and to compose songs commemorating God's deliverance (vv. 27-30).

"The summons to come to Heshbon and build this ruined city again [v. 27], was not addressed to the Israelites, but to the conquered Amorites, and is to be interpreted as ironical . . ." ²⁷³

"Chemosh" (v. 29) was the chief Moabite deity, and was similar to the Ammonite god Molech (cf. Judg. 11:24; 1 Kings 11:7).²⁷⁴ See Deuteronomy 2:16-37 for another account of this victory. John Van Seters argued that Numbers 21:21-25 derives from the conflation of Deuteronomy 2:26-37 and Judges 11:19-26.²⁷⁵ John R. Bartlett countered that the Numbers passage is the source of the other two accounts.²⁷⁶

Israel's defeat of Og 21:33-35

Heshbon was a city, but "Bashan" was a *territory*. Bashan lay north of the Yarmuk Wadi. Evidently at the time of Israel's conquest, "Og" controlled the territory south of the Yarmuk, as far as the Jabbok, that is, the area known as "Gilead."²⁷⁷ Og's entire domain was north of the Jabbok Wadi, and extended north as far as Mt. Hermon, about 60 miles north of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee). The town of "Edrei" (v. 33) stood near the southern border of Bashan. See Deuteronomy 3:1-17 for a fuller description of this victory.

The Israelites moved their camp from Mt. Pisgah (21:20), farther west and a little north, to the "plains of Moab" (22:1), between Beth-jeshimoth and Abel-shittim (lit. "meadow of acacia groves"; 33:49). This site was closer to the Jordan River, and opposite Jericho, which stood about five miles west of the Jordan. The people stayed at this location until

²⁷⁰Keil and Delitzsch, 3:150.

²⁷¹See George W. Coats, "Conquest Traditions in the Wilderness Theme," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95:2 (1976):177-90, for discussion of Moses' lack of prominence in Israel's battles during this period.

²⁷²See Finegan, pp. 189-190, for information about Dibon (v. 30).

²⁷³Keil and Delitzsch, 3:152.

²⁷⁴*The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Gods, False," by Andrew K. Helmbolt.

²⁷⁵John Van Seters, "The Conquest of Sihon's Kingdom: A Literary Examination," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91:2 (June 1972):182-97.

²⁷⁶John R. Bartlett, "The Conquest of Sihon's Kingdom: A Literary Re-examination," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97:3 (September 1978):347-51.

²⁷⁷Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 89.

they crossed the Jordan under Joshua's leadership (Josh. 3:1). The remaining events that Moses recorded in Numbers, and all those that he penned in Deuteronomy, took place here.

These victories gave the Israelites possession of all the land east of the Jordan River, west of the border Ammonite border, north to Mt. Hermon, and south to the Arnon. The Israelites defeated all the "Amorites" who occupied this area. They did not fight the Edomites, Moabites, or Ammonites, however, by the command of God—because these people groups were their relatives. They were not *Canaanites*. This great victory over Og further assured the Israelites that God would give them complete victory on the other side of the Jordan as well (v. 34).

"Giants are but worms before God's power."²⁷⁸

Moab's attempts to curse Israel chs. 22—24

This section of the book illustrates how great a threat Israel had become, to the other peoples in the area they passed through, on their way to the Promised Land. The Moabites' failed attempts to frustrate the fulfillment of God's promise *to give Israel the land*, demonstrate His power in overcoming these enemies, and His faithfulness (cf. Gen. 12:3).

Balak's arrangement with Balaam ch. 22

22:1-20 Moab had not attacked Israel while the people of God had moved north along Moab's eastern border. In fact, the Moabites sold the Israelites bread and water (Deut. 2:28-29). The Moabites probably counted on Sihon, who had formerly defeated Moab, to "take care of" Israel too (21:26; cf. Judg. 11:25). When Sihon lost, Balak looked for other help. He allied with his neighbors to the southeast, the Midianites.

Israel's victories over the two mighty Amorite kings filled "Balak," the "king of Moab," with fear ("Behold, a people came out of Egypt . . . they cover the surface of the land"; vv. 5-6). He allied with "Midian" and "sent messengers" to "Balaam," a famous "magician" (diviner, conjurer), to "curse" the Israelites. Balaam's town, "Pethor" (v. 5), was probably the Mesopotamian village of "Pitru," located "near the [Euphrates] River" (cf. Deut. 23:4).²⁷⁹

"Camping peacefully in the valley, the Israelites had no idea that Balaam was trying to curse them so that the Moabites and Midianites could defeat them. This scenario reminds us of Paul's warning in Ephesians 6:12, 'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against

²⁷⁸Henry, p. 165.

²⁷⁹*The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Balaam," by A. van Selms Cf. Josephus, 4:6:2.

principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world [age], against spiritual wickedness in high [heavenly] places."²⁸⁰

Balaam has been a problem for Bible students. On the one hand, he appears to have been a pagan, but on the other hand, there are indications that he may have been a believer. Some commentators believe he was an idol-worshipping *false prophet*, whom God compelled against his will to bless Israel. Others hold that he was a *true prophet* of Yahweh, who simply fell before the temptations of ambition and money. Josephus called him "the greatest of the prophets"²⁸¹—but whether he was a true prophet or a false prophet remains debatable.

"As a biblical character . . . Balaam appears to be neither fish nor fowl."²⁸²

"Was he a sinner or saint? . . . The text of chs. 22—24 is not concerned to pronounce on the matter. Balaam's character is incidental to the story. . . ."

"As the old saying goes, 'The Lord can strike a mighty blow with a crooked stick,' . . ."²⁸³

Balaam's name probably came from a Hebrew root meaning "destroyer" or "devourer." His father's name, "Beor," apparently came from another word meaning "to burn," "eat off," or "destroy." The name of Balaam's father (Beor) suggests that he may have been a sorcerer, and may have given Balaam his *powers* as well as his *name* at birth. However, Balaam may have received his name later in life, when his powers with the spirit world became known. In either case, Balaam's name suggests that he was a veteran conjurer of curses.

The Old Testament never calls Balaam a prophet or a seer, but a "diviner" ("soothsayer"; Josh. 13:22). This title never describes *true* prophets of Yahweh elsewhere. God prohibited "divination" in Israel (Deut. 18:10-13), and the Israelites regarded it as a serious sin (1 Sam. 15:23; Ezek. 13:23; 2 Kings 17:17)—as well as a telling sign of a false prophet (Ezek. 13:9; 22:28; Jer. 14:14). Balaam customarily sought "omens" (24:1) to understand the future by divination. He also had a reputation for being able to persuade the gods to take a particular course of action.

²⁸⁰Wiersbe, *The Bible . . .*, p. 351.

²⁸¹Josephus, 4:6:2; Smick, p. 141.

²⁸²Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 405.

²⁸³Ashley, pp. 435, 436.

Nevertheless, according to the text, Balaam *knew* Yahweh, submitted to Him, and received revelations from Him (22:8, 13, 18-20, 38; 23:5, 12, 16; 24:1, 13). There are many indications in the narrative that Balaam genuinely feared Yahweh (the LORD God of Israel). He seems to have been sincerely sympathetic with the Israelites, and he even *praised* them (23:10). But when he referred to Yahweh as "my God" (v. 18), he was probably claiming to be an agent for Israel's "god" in the same way he spoke for other gods.

"But what of Balaam's *character*? He is a walking paradox—a true prophet and a false prophet both in one. He is a true prophet in that he knows the true God, has a real faith in Him, has real dealings with Him, receives real communications from Him, conveys real messages from Him. Yet he is a false prophet in that he also resorts to the use of magical arts, is called a soothsayer (Joshua xiii. 22), and prostitutes his strange prophetic gift for base gain."²⁸⁴

Balaam's behavior is similar to the Jewish exorcists of Jesus' day, who cast out demons in Jesus' name, but did not follow Him (Mark 9:38-39; Luke 9:49). He also resembles Simon Magus, who was a *sorcerer* before he professed faith in Christ and submitted to baptism. Simon's fascination with supernatural powers and desire for personal gain diverted him from his Christian commitment (Acts 8:13).

"Balaam is the pagan counterpart to Moses the man of God. The recovery of prophetic texts of Balaam in Aramaic from the sixth century at Deir-'Allah in Jordan shows how very famous this man was in the ancient Near East, even centuries after his death."²⁸⁵

Whether Balaam was a true believer or not, his love of money got him in trouble (2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11). He served Yahweh, but he also wanted the reward that Balak offered him. At best he was "double-minded" (cf. James 1:8). This characteristic accounts for the instability of his character, and makes Balaam hard to classify with certainty (cf. Lot). Balaam later died in the Israelites' battle with the Midianites (31:8).

"In 2 Peter ii. 15 we read of 'the *way* of Balaam.' In Jude 11 we read of 'the *error* of Balaam.' In Revelation ii. 14 we read of 'the *doctrine* of Balaam.' The *way* of Balaam is the

²⁸⁴Baxter, 1:200.

²⁸⁵Allen, p. 887. See also Jacob Hoftijzer, "The Prophet Balaam in a 6th-Century Aramaic Inscription," *Biblical Archaeologist* 39:1 (March 1976):11-17; "Prophecy of Balaam found in Jordan," *Bible and Spade* 6:4 (Autumn 1977):121-24; Andre Lamaire, "Fragments from the Book of Balaam Found at Deir Alla," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 11:5 (September-October 1985):27-39; Charles H. Savelle, "Canonical and Extracanonical Portraits of Balaam," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:664 (October-December 2009):387-404.

prostitution of a spiritual gift for base gain. The *error* of Balaam is the secret idea that the will of God may be circumvented under cover of an outward respect for His word. The *doctrine* of Balaam is the counsel to ruin by seduction the people who cannot be cursed by permission (see Num. xxxi. 16)."²⁸⁶

Balaam's importance in Numbers should be obvious, in view of the amount of text Moses devoted to his activities (chs. 22—25). His oracles are the centerpiece of this revelation. God announced through these revelations given to Balaam that He would bless Israel, and that He would fulfill His promises to the patriarchs. The restatement of these promises was especially appropriate at this moment in Israel's experience. The nation received a reminder that God would also give them the land of Canaan west of the Jordan, not just the territories of Sihon and Og. That these messages had come through a man who was not an Israelite, but who received pay *from their enemies* to curse Israel, would have given the Israelites even greater confidence. The oracles, therefore, not only weakened the will of Israel's enemies in Moab, Midian, and the other Canaanite nations, but they encouraged the Israelites.

Balak acknowledged Balaam's power to bring a real curse.

"Balak believed, in common with the whole of the ancient world, in the real power and operation of the curses, anathemas, and incantations pronounced by priests, soothsayers, and *goetoe*."²⁸⁷

This power was *real*, as is clear from the narrative, though the heathen world may have distorted it.

"The custom of cursing an enemy before battle was widespread in the ancient world"²⁸⁸

"In the ancient Near East it was believed that an enemy could be combatted in two ways: with arms or by means of incantations, and if possible by means of a combination of the two. The incantations are based on the concept that a people and its deity constitute a unit; they seek to force, by means of various kinds of magic, the deity of the enemy to withhold his power from his people. Thus the enemy will be powerless and become an easy prey for the opponent. Moab does not dare use the first means, since Israel has

²⁸⁶Baxter, 1:201.

²⁸⁷Keil and Delitzsch, 3:165.

²⁸⁸Philip, p. 243.

already proven to be superior in military power to Sihon, whom Moab had been forced to acknowledge as their superior in the past. This leaves only the second means; they must find the kind of man who in the Euphrates-Tigris valley is called a *baru* ('seer'). The *baru* belongs to the priestly class, and his specialty is 'seeing' what will happen on the basis of phenomena that escape the common person, but are found e.g., in the liver of a ritually slaughtered animal, or in the configuration of drops of oil on water, or in the stars, or in the shape of the clouds. Such *barus* were believed to be able to influence the will of the gods because of their secret knowledge and mysterious manipulations, and to force the gods to do, or not to do, a given thing."²⁸⁹

Had Balaam been completely faithful to Yahweh, he would not only have sent the messengers home, but also *refused to entertain them again* (vv. 7-14). Unfortunately, his love for reward led him to compromise later (cf. 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11).

". . . from the early part of the narrative, when he first encounters the true God in visions, and in the humorous narrative of the journey on the donkey, Balaam begins to learn what for him was a strange, bizarre, even incomprehensible lesson: An encounter with the God of reality was fundamentally different than anything he had ever known."²⁹⁰

Several types of divination were common in the ancient Near East:

1. "Extispicy" was the examination of the entrails of a sacrificed sheep by a trained specialist to decipher messages from the gods. The intricate arrangements of the internal organs are what believers in this form of divination regarded as indicative of divine revelation.
2. "Astrology" studied the arrangements of the moon, sun, meteors, planets, and fixed stars to discover the future. *Eclipses* were particularly significant.
3. "Augury" was the study of the appearance, movements, and behavior of birds. The seers believed that the direction and manner of the flight of birds was revelatory.

²⁸⁹Noordtzi, p. 199. See also Morris Jastrow Jr., *Aspects of Religious Belief and Practice in Babylonia and Assyria*, p. 162-74.

²⁹⁰Allen, p. 887.

4. "Kleromancy" was divination by means of *lots*. The various configurations of symbolic objects, actors, and areas yielded a binary ("yes" or "no") answer to a given question.
5. "Oneiromancy" was revelation by dreams, that contained either verbal or non-verbal communication, supposedly from a god. In the latter type, certain colors, animals, or activities corresponded to types of misfortune, happiness, or success.

In all the types of divination, fortunetellers used tricks to deceive and impress their clients. They often clothed their predictions in mysterious and ambiguous language to cover possible error. Devout Israelites were to reject divination as a way of discovering the likely outcome of events, and to rely instead on God to make known what He wanted them to know.²⁹¹

Balaam's mind had apparently been dwelling on the *reward* that Balak's messengers had mentioned, since he named his price in a clever way ("Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold . . . "; vv. 18-20). He would not go for a large sum, but when his visitors offered a sum larger than what he had mentioned would be inadequate, he probably later reconsidered ("I [Balak] will indeed honor you richly, and I will do whatever you say to me," in other words: "I'll give you however much you want," v. 17).

God evidently allowed Balaam to go with the messengers because He intended to bless Israel (v. 20). God had previously prohibited him from going (v. 12), because He would not have allowed Balaam to curse Israel. Verse 12 contains the *directive* will of God, and verse 20 the *permissive* will of God. The change was due to God's yielding to Balaam's desire, but only within His sovereign plan and purpose. Compare God's yielding to Moses' intercessory prayers, and God's giving the Israelites meat. The permission of verse 20 constituted a test for Balaam, which he failed. Balaam knew the will of God (v. 12), but God gave him permission to obey or disobey (v. 20).

"God often gives up men to follow the impulse of their own lusts; but there is no approval in thus leaving them to act at the prompting of their own wicked hearts (Josh. [sic John] 13:27)."²⁹²

Strangely, Balaam was aware that he must be *obedient* in revealing God's message—whether for good or ill ("only the word which I speak to you shall you do," v. 20). This conviction apparently came to him as a result of

²⁹¹See Harry A. Hoffner Jr., "Ancient Views of Prophecy and Fulfillment: Mesopotamia and Asia Minor," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30:3 (September 1987):257-65.

²⁹²Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 129.

God's changed permission. God seems to have been teaching Balaam, by these two words ("Do not go" and "[R]ise up and go"; vv. 12, 20), that He is the true God who is flexible but all-powerful. Balaam was learning that Yahweh was not like the lesser spirits with whom he had dealt previously.

"The story of Balaam is thus an example of the folly of attempting to destroy the eternal blessing of the people of the Lord."²⁹³

"As God sometimes denies the prayers of his people in love, so sometimes he grants the desires of the wicked in wrath."²⁹⁴

22:21-41

Balaam was sensitive to the spirit world, of course, which was consistent with his profession. So either he did not sense the presence of "the [A]ngel of the LORD," or his greed had blinded him to the Angel's presence. The Angel had "drawn" His "sword" (v. 23), symbolic of God's wrath against Balaam, for acting as he was doing (cf. Gen. 3:24; Exod. 12:12). God finally caught Balaam's attention by speaking through the donkey (v. 28; cf. 1 Cor. 1:27). Then Balaam saw the Angel, and "bowed" in submission before Him ("bowed all the way to the ground"; v. 31).

". . . even a beast is more capable of discerning things from the higher world, than a man blinded by sinful desires."²⁹⁵

Hopefully Balaam appreciated the contrast, between his own lack of insight and his donkey's ability to discern God's will, and learned some humility from the event.

"We see the prophet Balaam as a blind seer, seeing less than the dumb animal. . . . The long shadow of Moses falls across the pages of the Balaam story even though Moses is never named once. Moses spoke face to face with God (see ch. 12); Balaam does not even know that God is near—but his donkey does!"²⁹⁶

Why did Balaam answer his donkey as though it was a normal conversation (v. 29)? Perhaps spirits had spoken to him through animals previously (cf. Gen. 3:1, 4).²⁹⁷ Maybe the donkey exasperated him to the point that he answered before he realized what he was doing.

²⁹³Allen, p. 888.

²⁹⁴Henry, p. 166.

²⁹⁵Keil and Delitzsch, 3:173.

²⁹⁶Allen, p. 893.

²⁹⁷Wiersbe, *The Bible . . .*, p. 352.

"The donkey's acts and words anticipate the problems Balaam is about to face. The ass was caught three times between the angel's sword and Balaam's stick. Soon Balaam will find himself trapped between Balak's demands and God's prohibitions. Through his third encounter with God, Balaam was reminded that God wields a sword and that disobedience means death. So he goes on his way fully committed to declaring God's words rather than submitting to Balak's wishes (35)."²⁹⁸

"The Lord tells Balaam to continue on his journey but to 'speak only what I tell you' (v. 35). This is the point of the whole chapter: Balaam the pagan mantic will not be able to speak cursing as he had planned. Instead, he would be the most surprised of all; he would be the most remarkable instrument of God in the blessing of his people, Israel."²⁹⁹

"As in 22:20, God told Balaam to go. He was not, therefore, angry because the prophet went but because of his motive for going."³⁰⁰

Some ancient and modern interpreters have pointed out the similarities and differences between the stories, of Balaam's donkey in this pericope, and Abraham's binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:1-19).³⁰¹ The stories appear in inverse form, as a reflection in a mirror. God, through Moses, may have subtly been contrasting Balaam with Abraham, in order to put Balaam in a bad light and to glorify Abraham.

Balak was a bit put out with Balaam for delaying his arrival. He assumed that Balaam's hesitancy was due to doubts concerning Balak's ability to pay him ("Am I really unable to honor you?"; v. 37). Balak's "oxen and sheep" (v. 40) were probably "sacrificed" in order to secure the favor of Balak's gods.

"The pieces given to Balaam presumably would have included the livers; for as a *baru* diviner, Balaam was a specialist in liver divination."³⁰²

Balak assumed that Balaam would be more susceptible to receiving supernatural power, and that "it" (his power to curse Israel) would be more effective, if he had the Israelites within sight. This is why he took Balaam

²⁹⁸G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 171.

²⁹⁹Allen, p. 894.

³⁰⁰Smick, p. 142.

³⁰¹See Jonathan D. Safren, "Balaam and Abraham," *Vetus Testamentum* 38:1 (January 1988):105-13.

³⁰²Allen, p. 895.

to "the high places of Baal," where he could see parts of the Israelite camp.

"In order to lay a spell on a people, it was considered necessary to be able to see them, if only in part."³⁰³

None of the sites mentioned are identifiable with certainty, but all were around the area where Israel lay camped.

Verse 41 contains one of the first references to *Baal worship* in the Old Testament ("the high places of Baal").

"Israel struggled with Baal and his worshippers from the beginning to the end of her national history. Baal worship was the most serious challenge and threat to the worship of Yahweh of all the pagan religions in the ancient Near East. This was true because some similarities and some vast differences existed between Baal and Yahweh."³⁰⁴

Balaam's seven oracles chs. 23—24

"Chapters 23 and 24 are two of the brightest chapters in the book of Numbers. Scores of wonderful things are said about Israel, mainly prophetic. The dark sins of the past were forgotten; only happy deliverance from Egypt was cited."³⁰⁵

23:1-12 Balaam offered "seven . . . burnt offering[s]" to God on "seven" separate "altars." Pagans as well as Israelites regarded "seven" as a divine and complete number, based on the seven days of creation and seven days of the week. Pagans commonly offered sacrifices on important occasions, as did the Israelites, to secure divine favor and help.

"The most arresting element of the introductory section is in the words 'God met with him' (v. 4) and 'the LORD put a message in Balaam's mouth' (v. 5). Despite the pagan and unsavory actions of this ungodly man, the Lord deigns to meet with him and to speak through him. This is utterly remarkable. We often say that God will never use an unclean vessel. This is not quite accurate. God may use whatever vessel he wishes; the issue concerns what happens to an unclean vessel when God has finished using it for his purposes."³⁰⁶

³⁰³Maarsingh, p. 84.

³⁰⁴Ralph L. Smith, "Baal," *Biblical Illustrator* 10:2 (Winter 1984):15.

³⁰⁵Jensen, p. 99.

³⁰⁶Allen, p. 896.

"Aram" (v. 7) is Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in northern Syria (cf. Paddan-aram in Gen. 28:2; et al.). Israel was "not . . . reckoned among (counted, included, or listed with) the nations" (v. 9) because of her divine vocation in the earth that set her apart from all other peoples.

Israel had increased in number as God had promised Abraham. The Israelites were as *numerous* as "dust" from Balaam's perspective (v. 10; cf. Gen. 13:16). The "fourth part of Israel" refers to that quarter of the camp that was closest to Balaam as he prophesied. He could not even count the quarter of the nation that was closest to him. This is another indication, besides the number of Israelite males counted in each tribe, that the population of Israel was great at this time.

"The account of Pharaoh's first attempt [to suppress God's blessing of Israel in Egypt] (Ex 1:11-14) is intended to show that 'the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread' (Ex 1:12). In his first oracle Balaam focused precisely on this point: 'How can I curse those whom God had not cursed?' (Nu 22[sic 23]:8), and he concluded by stressing the phenomenal growth of God's people: 'Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?' (22[sic, 23]:10)."³⁰⁷

". . . there are many who desire to die the death of the righteous [v. 10], but do not endeavor to live the life of the righteous."³⁰⁸

Balak became disappointed and angry because he expected that Balaam would control the gods. Balaam acknowledged that the God of Israel ("the LORD") controlled him. Balak concluded that the *site* was not conducive to his purpose, so he took Balaam to another place, hoping that the "spirits" might be more favorable there.

This first oracle was not as specific as those that follow, but it did reveal that Yahweh was backing Israel rather than Moab. The fulfillment of the promise to multiply Abraham's *seed* stands out in this oracle (v. 10).

23:13-26

A new site afforded a better view of Israel, though the whole nation was still not in view ("you will only see the extreme end of them and not all"). Balak repeated the same ritual of sacrifice.

God does not change His ultimate purposes or go back on His solemn promises ("God is not a man that He should lie . . . will He not make it good?"). He does, however, respond to the words and actions of people by

³⁰⁷Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch* . . . , p. 407.

³⁰⁸Henry, p. 167.

adjusting His plans. It is only from God's larger purposes that He does not "repent" (v. 19).³⁰⁹ The point is that God is not fickle. No one can induce Him to curse those whom He has chosen to bless.

"Balaam is constantly shifting, prevaricating, equivocating, changing—he is himself the prime example of the distinction between God and man."³¹⁰

"It may be of interest to note that Pharaoh's plans were stymied by the apparent deception of the Hebrew midwives and that in Balaam's second oracle he states, 'God is not a man, that he should lie' (Nu 23:19)."³¹¹

God had "not observed misfortune [iniquity] in Jacob" to the extent that He would curse rather than bless the nation (v. 21). Obviously Israel had *sinned*, but her sins were not sufficient to change God's ultimate purpose to bless her.

"Only in the family is the sinfulness of the people addressed. Since Yahweh the King is in their midst, they are invincible from outside attack."³¹²

Israel would be victorious in battle, as well as enjoy God's blessing ("will . . . [drink] the blood of the slain"; v. 24; cf. Gen. 49:9-11; Mic. 5:8-9). This was the opposite of what Balak wanted to hear. No one can curse someone whom God has blessed.

Since Balaam's "curses" had turned out to be "blessings," Balak instructed Balaam to say nothing rather than continue to prophesy ("Do not curse them at all nor bless them at all").

This oracle, as the first, began with a criticism of Balak's theological assumption that people can manipulate God. In this oracle, Balaam saw Israel as "blessed" and God as their "[K]ing" walking among His people (vv. 20-21). The Exodus was the supreme example of God's care for Israel ("He brings them out of Egypt," v. 22). Israel's future would be bright, just as her past had been (vv. 23-24). Balaam also alluded to Israel's possession of the *land* as God had promised Abraham (v. 26).³¹³

³⁰⁹See Thomas L. Constable, "What Prayer Will and Will Not Change," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 99-113; idem, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer*, pp. 147-52; Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (October-December 1995):387-99; idem, "Does God Deceive?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:617 (January-March 1998):11-28; and Ashley, p. 478.

³¹⁰Allen, p. 901.

³¹¹Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 407.

³¹²Allen, p. 902.

³¹³For more detailed study of the first two oracles, see Angelo Tosato, "The Literary Structure of the First Two Poems of Balaam (Num. xxiii 7-10, 18-24)," *Vetus Testamentum* 29:1 (January 1979):98-106.

23:27–24:14 Still hopeful, Balak took Balaam to a third site, this one from which he could view the whole of the Israelite camp ("Balaam . . . saw Israel camping tribe by tribe," 24:2). Again he offered sacrifices as before.

Balaam had learned that God would *bless* Israel, even though Balak had not. Consequently, this time he did not "seek" indications of God's will in "omens," as he had done previously (v. 1). He simply proclaimed the message that the Holy Spirit had revealed to him ("the Spirit of God came upon him"; v. 2). Balaam intended his opening words (vv. 3-4) to impress upon Balak that "the Almighty God" had inspired his oracle.

The phrase "falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered" (found also in v. 16), ". . . has usually been interpreted as describing the particular state in which the prophet-seer received his revelations (e.g., that he was in a prophetic trance or sleep . . . or was falling down in awe, or in the overpowering presence of the spirit of prophecy . . .)." ³¹⁴

In the article just cited, the author went on to suggest the translation "pared or peeled of eye(s)" (vv. 4, 16), which is possible grammatically.

Balaam pictured Israel as a man carrying two "buckets" overflowing with "water" (v. 7). *Water* was the source of physical refreshment and blessing in the hot and arid Near East. Israel's seed would enjoy the richest blessing (i.e., would *grow up*—like "gardens," "aloes," and "cedars"—"beside [many] waters").

"In an ironic reversal of the evil intended by Pharaoh's order to cast the seed of Abraham into the river, Balaam's third oracle uses the well-watered gardens that spread out along the banks of a river to speak of the abundance of Israel's 'seed.' A literal reading of Balaam's remark in Numbers 24:7 is 'Their seed is in the abundant waters' . . . Thus what was once the intended means for the destruction of the promised seed, that is, the 'abundant waters,' has now become the poetic image of God's faithfulness to his promise." ³¹⁵

"Agag" (v. 7) was either the title of the kings of the Amalekites, or the name of several Amalekite kings, or perhaps a dynastic name (cf. Abimelech in Gen. 20:1-2; 26:1; and Jabin in Josh. 11:1; Judg. 4:2). Balaam may have used "Agag" here as the personification of Israel's enemies. King Saul later defeated another "Agag," but disobediently spared his life (1 Sam. 15:8).

³¹⁴J. M. Allegro, "The Meaning of *nophel* in Numbers xxiv. 4, 16," *Expository Times* 65 (July 1954):317.

³¹⁵Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 407.

"It is clear from Numbers 23:24 that Balaam is speaking about the people of Israel and the exodus from Egypt. In 24:8, however, Balaam repeats the same line and applies it, using singular forms, to the king he has introduced in 24:7: 'God brought him [singular] out of Egypt; he has the strength of a wild ox.'

"The writer's purpose appears to be to view the reign of the future king in terms taken from God's great acts of salvation in the past. The future is going to be like the past. What God did for Israel in the past is seen as a type of what he will do for them in the future when he sends his promised king."³¹⁶

"There seems to be a dual prophecy here [i.e., of David and Christ], for during the reign of Jesus Christ over the promised messianic kingdom, the land of Israel will become like the Garden of Eden (Isa. 35)."³¹⁷

"The stunning climax is in the blessing of God on all who bless Israel [v. 9; cf. v. 17; Gen. 12:3; 27:29; 49:9]. This, of course, takes us back to the original promise of God to Abram. The irony cannot be missed by Balaam or by any who hear his words. In his actions he brings a curse on his own head, even as he speaks blessing!"³¹⁸

Balak sent Balaam home without pay (the LORD has held you back from honor"), because he failed to produce the curse Balak had hired him to deliver.

This oracle is even stronger than the preceding two. As Balaam had alluded to other aspects of the Abrahamic promises previously (23:10, 24), here the *blessing* aspect concludes this oracle (v. 9; cf. Gen. 12:3; 27:29).

"Like Pharaoh before him, Balak also made three attempts to thwart God's blessing for Israel (23:1-12, 13-26; 23:27—24:9), and each attempt was turned into a blessing (23:11-12, 25-26; 24:10-11)."³¹⁹

24:15-19 Before Balaam departed, he gave Balak four more revelations from God. They dealt with the future of Israel, Moab, and Israel's other neighbors. They were entirely futuristic prophecies. Each one began with the phrase

³¹⁶ibid., p. 408.

³¹⁷Wiersbe, *The Bible . . .*, p. 355.

³¹⁸Allen, p. 907.

³¹⁹Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 406.

"took up his discourse and said." In all, Balaam made seven discourses that Moses recorded in the text.

The fourth oracle dealt with Israel, Moab, and Edom. Balaam seemed to sense that what he predicted would take place in the distant future: "I see him, *but not now*, . . ." (v. 17). Saul and David partially fulfilled these prophecies. However, Jewish and Christian interpreters have seen them as looking beyond the early monarchy—to *Messiah*—at both His first and second advents.

The "star" (v. 17) was a common symbol for a king in biblical and non-biblical ancient Near Eastern literature (cf. Isa. 14:12; Ezek. 32:7; Rev. 22:16).³²⁰ This identification finds support in the reference to the "scepter" in the next line (cf. Gen. 49:10; Amos 1:5, 8; Ps. 45:6). One wonders if it might have been this specific prophecy that was in the minds of the three wise men, who came from *Balaam's own country* to Bethlehem, to look for the promised King of the Jews (Matt. 2:1-2).

"If . . . we compare Balaam's prophesy of the star . . . and the sceptre . . . with the prediction of the patriarch Jacob, of the sceptre that should not depart from Judah, till the *Shiloh* came whom the nations would obey (Gen. xlix. 10), it is easy to observe that Balaam not only foretold more clearly the attitude of Israel to the nations of the world, and the victory of the kingdom of God over every hostile kingdom of the world; but that he also proclaimed the Bringer of Peace expected by Jacob at the end of the days to be a mighty ruler, whose sceptre would break in pieces and destroy all the enemies of the nation of God."³²¹

"An interesting implication of the parallels presented here between the account of the birth of Moses in Exodus 2 and the announcement of the 'star' to arise from the family of Jacob in Numbers 24 is that Moses thus appears to be portrayed in these narratives as a prototype of the 'star of Jacob.' Such a view of Moses is consistent with the fact that elsewhere in the Pentateuch Moses is cast as a figure of the coming king (Dt 33:5) and prophet (Dt 18 and 34). This is also consistent with the fact that later biblical writers often saw in Moses a picture of the future Messiah (e.g., Hos 2:2[?])."³²²

³²⁰See Riggans, p. 186; and Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Bible . . .*, p. 244.

³²¹Keil and Delitzsch, 3:201.

³²²Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, pp. 406-7.

"Seir" (v. 18) is another name for "Edom." Mt. Seir was the principle geographical feature of Edom. God at first commanded Israel not to wage war with Edom, because the Edomites were her "kinsmen." As time passed, though, the Edomites became bitter antagonists of the Israelites. God punished them for this enmity, beginning in David's reign and after that (2 Sam. 8:14; 1 Kings 11:15-16; 1 Chron. 18:12-13). In the years following David's reign, Edom was alternately subject to Israel's kings or free. Edom attacked Israel several times, but John Hyrcanus eventually conquered her in 129 B.C. Thereafter, Edom ceased to exist as a nation. Edomites lived among the Jews until Titus the Roman destroyed the Jewish nation in A.D. 70. The Greeks called the Edomites "Idumeans." Herod the Great was an Idumean. He tried to kill the infant Messiah, just as Pharaoh had tried to slay baby Moses (Matt. 2:1-12).³²³

24:20 This oracle deals with the "Amalekites," who lived in southern Canaan and the Sinai peninsula, and were implacable foes of Israel (cf. Exod. 17:8-16; Num. 14:43-45; Judg. 6:3, 33; et al.). Saul and David both defeated the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:20; 30:17), but this nation finally suffered complete destruction in King Hezekiah's time—in fulfillment of this prophecy (1 Chron. 4:43).

24:21-22 The "Kenites," who were identical to, or at least a segment of the Midianites, were Israel's neighbors to the southwest of the Dead Sea (cf. 10:29; Judg. 1:16; 1 Sam. 15:6; 27:10; 30:29). The "Asshurites" who lived in the northern Sinai (Gen. 25:3, 18; 2 Sam. 2:9), and the Assyrians, eventually defeated them.

"The term Kenite refers to the roving 'smiths,' especially coppersmiths from the copper-rich valley of the Arabah. Their presence among the people of Israel fits in with the making of the brazen serpent (Num 21:8, 9) and the metal work of the Tabernacle."³²⁴

"Asshur" may refer to either to the Kenites or the Midianites, or to both of these nations. Another possibility is that "Asshur" refers to an Arab tribe that lived near the Kenites (cf. Gen. 25:3).³²⁵ Probably Balaam was prophesying about the future great Assyrian Empire.

"Why the Kenites come under attack here is not sure, except that it is possible that they became associated with the Midianites who come under the scourge of Israel (Num 31). The mention of Assyria is also a surprise, as its ascendancy to power in the ancient Near East was centuries

³²³See *The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Edom, Edomites," by J. A. Thompson.

³²⁴Smick, p. 126.

³²⁵Ibid., p. 144.

away from Balaam's day; yet Assyria was known as a powerful city-state even in Abraham's day."³²⁶

24:23-25 The final prophetic oracle deals with the overthrow of other powers of the ancient world. "Kittim" refers to "Cyprus," as representative of the western powers (the Philistines, Greeks, Romans, and others at various times). "Asshur" here probably refers to the eastern Semites including the Assyrians. "Eber" includes the western Semites descended from Eber (Gen. 10:21) who settled in Canaan, excluding the Israelites. Thus verse 24 is a very broad prophecy ranging over thousands of years, foretelling the ultimate destruction of these Semites by western powers. Final fulfillment awaits the Tribulation period and the second advent of Messiah.

Balaam returned to "his place," perhaps in Ammon or Mesopotamia (31:8, 16; Deut. 23:4).³²⁷

In summary, the first three oracles were a reconfirmation of the Abrahamic promises to Israel, and a testimony to their partial fulfillment thus far in Israel's history:

- Oracle 1: seed promise (23:10)
- Oracle 2: land promise (23:24)
- Oracle 3: blessing promise (24:9)

In each case, the allusion to the promise concludes these oracles. The writer showed that God's promise, to bless those nations that blessed Abraham's descendants, and curse those who cursed them, was reliable. The key to the future prosperity of Israel's neighbor nations was their treatment of God's chosen people.

The fourth through seventh oracles differ from the others, in that they looked farther down the corridors of time. These prophesied the success of Israel in the years ahead, culminating in Israel's ultimate glory under her great Messiah's reign.

"Not only do the Balaam narratives play an important role in developing the themes of the Abrahamic covenant, but they also serve as an *inclusio* to the Exodus-wilderness narratives. That is, the Balaam narratives restate the central themes of these narratives at their conclusion in a way that parallels the statement of these themes at their beginning.

"The Balaam story, which lies at the close of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, parallels many of the events and ideas of the story of Pharaoh at the beginning of the book of Exodus."³²⁸

³²⁶Allen, p. 912.

³²⁷See idem, "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles," in *Tradition and Testament*, pp. 79-119. For a sermon on Balaam, see John Marshall, "The Prophet Balaam," *The Banner of Truth* 275-76 (August-September 1986):41-54.

³²⁸Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 43.

Israel's final rebellion and the termination of the older generation ch. 25

This chapter contains one of the great failures of Israel that followed one of her great blessings. Compare the giving of the Mosaic Law and the making of the golden calf, the consecration of Aaron and the failure of his sons, etc. We are often most vulnerable to failure after we have experienced a great success. While God was preparing to bless His people, they were preparing to disobey Him.

"So now we come to the ultimate rebellion of Israel in the desert. The time is the end of the forty-year period of their desert experience. The place is the staging area for the conquest of the land of Canaan. The issue is that of apostasy from the Lord by participation in the debased, sexually centered Canaanite religious rites of Baal worship—that which would become the bane of Israel's experience in the land. This chapter is an end and a beginning. It marks the end of the first generation; it also points to the beginning of a whole new series of wicked acts that will finally lead to Israel's punishment But this chapter is unique in the record of the experience of Israel in their move from Sinai to Moab—it describes their involvement in the worship of another deity [cf. Exod. 32]."³²⁹

"The chapter is placed between the Balaam oracles and the second census account for theological and literary reasons. In relation to the Balaam oracles it shows that, even while God was blessing Israel through Balaam on the heights of Peor, below on the plains of Moab Israel was showing its weak and sinful character. The parallel between this incident and that of the Torah at Sinai and the golden calf (Exod. 20—32) is obvious."³³⁰

25:1-5 The Moabites and Midianites were partners in the spiritual and sexual seduction of the Israelites. Ironically the Midianites, among whom Moses had found refuge from Pharaoh, and from whom he had taken his wife, became one of the instigators of Israel's major religious apostasy since she left Sinai. The plan to curse Israel had failed, so now these enemies undertook a second approach that proved successful. Compare Pharaoh's three plans to suppress the Israelites in Egypt (Exod. 1). In chapters 22—24, the Moabites took the lead in overthrowing Israel while Midian played a minor role, but in this chapter, the Midianites take the lead with the Moabites supporting them. The Moabites seduced the Israelites into idolatry. Balaam had counseled them to intermarry with the Israelites (31:16). The Midianite princes led in this plot. "Cozbi" (v. 15) was the daughter of a Midianite prince. The worship of Moab's gods involved "sacred prostitution" and eating sacrifices offered to the dead (Ps. 106:28).

"It was the assumption of the [Baal Peor] cult that the fertility of people, cattle, and crops depended on the sexual linkage of a god and goddess. By imitating this union of the

³²⁹Allen, "Numbers," pp. 914-15.

³³⁰Ashley, p. 515.

gods, men and women would seek to induce the gods to grant a greater measure of fertility. Such cultic practices were common in all of the nations surrounding the Israelites."³³¹

This violation of the heart of the Mosaic Covenant, which demanded total and exclusive allegiance to Yahweh, resulted in a plague that killed "24,000" people (v. 9; cf. Exod. 32:35). To stop the plague, God ordered the making of atonement by sacrificing the leaders within Israel. Since the whole nation had sinned, God executed punishment on its leaders, who stood for the people, and should have restrained their apostasy. Israel's judges carried out this order (v. 5).

"As the animals and birds had been cut in half in the covenant ceremony at the beginnings of Israel's history (Gen 15:10), so the bodies of these rebels were to be dismembered and displayed in an awful symbol of divine judgment.

"Chapter 25 is the nadir of the Book of Numbers. It is worse even than the sins of chapters 12—14. Here is the great sin at the end of the road."³³²

". . . it is not enough for us to have an outward law or ideal, however high and pure it may be. What we need is an inward change to strike down the inbred perversity of our fallen nature!"³³³

25:6-9 The situation took a turn for the worse when "Zimri" ("one of the sons of Israel"; cf. v. 9) "brought" Cozbi into the camp. Until now, the sinning had taken place in the Moabite and Midianite camps. Evidently Zimri had contempt for the covenant, the tabernacle, Moses, the priests, and God's judgment on the leaders of Israel—including his father (v. 14). He took Cozbi into "the tent" and had intercourse with her there. They did this according to the custom of Baal worship. One view is that Zimri took Cozbi into the *tabernacle* ("in the sight of all the congregation"; cf. v. 6). But he probably he took her into his own tent ("to his relatives") after coming into the camp past the "doorway of the tent (tabernacle)," in full view of everyone.

"The rare term *qubba*, meaning 'vaulted tent,' designates the bedchamber where Phinehas caught them in the act (Delitzsch)."³³⁴

³³¹Maarsingh, p. 92.

³³²Allen, "Numbers," p. 917.

³³³Baxter, 1:192.

³³⁴Smick, p. 145. Cf. Keil and Delitzsch, 3:205; Henry, p. 169; Wiersbe, *The Bible . . .*, p. 356.

We should view Phinehas' act as *divine judgment* (or capital punishment) on Zimri and Cozbi's attitude and action, not as "murder." He slew them "in the act" of intercourse, by driving his spear through both their bodies (lit. "bellies"). Thus "Phinehas" (an Egyptian name meaning "the dark-skinned one"), the son of the high priest, "made atonement" for this sin (v. 13).

"The point was that in joining the sexual frenzies of the sacrificial feasts of Baal, the man and his priestess-partner now act to transform the worship of the Lord into the type of sexual rites that were the mode of Canaan. Had this outrage not been stopped, there could never have been true worship in the Holy Place again. They were making the place of entrance into a bordello, the entrance of the meeting of God and man into a trysting spot.

"We may observe that while priests were always male in Israel, priests could be women in the pagan religions that surrounded Israel. In fact, the sexually centered religions of Canaan would have catered to women in their priesthood. Women priests were so very closely tied to the sexual outrages of Baal and Asherah worship that the very notion of a women [*sic*] priest conjured up images of sexual worship. Perhaps this is the principal reason that Israel had no women priests."³³⁵

"Amid the time of apostasy, the writer points to . . . the need for new forms of leadership. . . . In this narrative, Moses is remarkably ineffective in the face of a blatant transgression (v. 6). The day was saved, however, by the decisive action of one from the next generation of priests, Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron."³³⁶

25:10-13 The priests were to represent God to the people. This is exactly what Phinehas did on this occasion. He executed God's wrath against sin by punishing the sinners; this "turned away [God's] wrath." In so doing, he *atoned* for the sin by representing Israel before God, and he *restored* the covenant. God rewarded him by promising that his "descendants" would enjoy "peace" and would occupy the office of the high priest *forever* ("covenant of perpetual priesthood"; cf. Ps. 106:30-31). This they did (cf. Judg. 20:28), with the exception of a short interruption in Eli's days. The Romans finally broke up the Israelite priesthood.

This *everlasting* "covenant of peace" guaranteed a privileged position of service to God, to Phinehas and his descendants. It will find final fulfillment when the descendants of Phinehas, through Zadok's branch of

³³⁵Allen, "Numbers," pp. 919, 920.

³³⁶Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 410.

Phinehas' family, serve God in the millennial system of worship, by offering memorial sacrifices in the temple.³³⁷

25:14-18 This incident, as the others in which Israel departed from God, shows the inveterate sinfulness of humans—even when God blesses them greatly! It also demonstrates the holiness of God, the seriousness of sin in the way it utterly destroys fellowship with God, and the necessity of atonement by blood to restore sinners to fellowship with God.

"This chapter is a pivotal section in the theology of the Torah."³³⁸

II. PROSPECTS OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION IN THE LAND CHS. 26—

36

The focus of Numbers now changes from the older, unbelieving generation of Israelites, doomed to die in the wilderness, to the younger generation that would enter the Promised Land.

"The transition between chapters 25 and 26 reminds us of the transition from chapter 14 to chapter 15, for in both of them the Lord moved from judgment to mercy, from punishment to promise."³³⁹

"The parallels and contrasts between this narrative and the book of Ruth suggest that both texts are dealing with similar ideas. In fact, the picture of Ruth provides an excellent counterexample to that of the men of Israel in this episode. Ruth the Moabitess married an Israelite man and forsook her nation's gods to follow the Lord. For this she was given an inheritance in Israel. In this respect she is also like the daughters of Zelophehad in the next chapters of Numbers who also gained an inheritance among the men of Israel (Nu 27:1-11)."³⁴⁰

A. PREPARATIONS FOR ENTERING THE PROMISED LAND FROM THE EAST CHS.

26—32

The first section of this second part of the book records God's gracious preparation of the younger generation for their entrance into their inheritance.

1. The second census ch. 26

Before going into battle against the Midianites, as God had commanded (25:18), the Lord directed Moses to take another census of the Israelites.

³³⁷See Ronald Rushing, "Phinehas' Covenant of Peace" (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1988).

³³⁸Allen, "Numbers," p. 922.

³³⁹Wiersbe, *The Bible . . .*, p. 359.

³⁴⁰Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 410.

"Moses did not number the people but when God commanded him. David in his time did it without a command, and paid dearly for it [cf. 2 Sam. 24; 1 Chron. 21:1-17]."³⁴¹

Evidently the 24,000 who died in the recent plague (25:9) were the last of the generation who had refused to enter the land 38 years earlier. Only Caleb, Joshua, and Moses remained from the older generation (vv. 64-65). Leon Wood calculated that if 1,200,000 of the older generation died in 38 years, there would have been an average of 85 funerals per day in the wilderness.³⁴² Of course, on some occasions, many more died at once, due to divine judgments such as the one described in 25:9.

Moses again counted the men 20 years of age and older, in all the tribes except Levi, as in the census taken just before Israel departed from Sinai (chs. 1—4). The primary purpose of this census was military, namely, to organize the nation for its battles with the Canaanites as well as with the Midianites. However, a second important purpose was to determine the size of each tribe, so Moses could allocate territory in the Promised Land proportionately (vv. 53-54). This list also had historical value for later generations, enabling them to trace their genealogies. Notice that this is a list of families or clans, not individuals. The preservation of the nation is a monument to God's faithfulness to His promises concerning Israel.

". . . His covenanted promises to the patriarchs might be delayed by human sin, but they could not be ultimately frustrated."³⁴³

A table of the sizes of the 12 tribes when Moses took the two censuses follows:

| TRIBE | FIRST CENSUS | SECOND CENSUS | DIFFERENCE |
|---------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Reuben | 46,500 | 43,730 | -2,770 |
| Simeon | 59,300 | 22,200 | -37,100 |
| Gad | 46,650 | 40,500 | -5,150 |
| Judah | 74,600 | 76,500 | +1,900 |
| Issachar | 54,400 | 64,300 | +9,900 |
| Zebulun | 57,400 | 60,500 | +3,100 |
| Ephraim | 40,500 | 32,500 | -8,000 |
| Manasseh | 32,200 | 52,700 | +20,900 |
| Benjamin | 35,400 | 45,600 | +10,200 |
| Dan | 62,700 | 64,400 | +1,700 |
| Asher | 41,500 | 53,400 | +11,900 |
| Naphtali | 53,400 | 45,400 | -8,000 |
| Totals | 603,550 | 601,730 | -1,820 |

³⁴¹Henry, p. 170.

³⁴²Leon Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, p. 119.

³⁴³Philip, p. 275.

Zimri was a Simeonite (25:14). Perhaps the very large number of Simeonites who died, resulted from his kinsmen joining him in his apostasy in chapter 25.

"At the beginning of the forty years the number is roughly 600,000; and again at the end of the forty years the number is 600,000. They are no further forward for the whole period."³⁴⁴

Moses also counted the Levite males from one month old and older (vv. 57-62).

| | | | |
|------|--------|--------|--------|
| Levi | 22,000 | 23,000 | +1,000 |
|------|--------|--------|--------|

Probably there were only about 13,000 males who were 20 years of age or older in Levi. This would have made this tribe the smallest by far.

26:1-51 The writer recorded the numbers of each tribe in these verses. He also included historical notes recalling the *sins* of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (vv. 9-11), as well as those of Er and Onan (v. 19). Probably he included these to remind the Israelites of these sins, so they would not repeat them in the future.

A comparison of the censuses demonstrates that God could still fulfill His promises to the patriarchs, even though the Israelites' failures had postponed their fulfillment. This is one of the most important revelations of the Book of Numbers.

"Man's delay does not mean God's defeat. Greater than man's failure is God's faithfulness."³⁴⁵

"It is utterly remarkable that the total number has remained nearly unchanged even though the people have lived under the most trying conditions for a period of thirty-eight years. . . . God's faithfulness to his people is grandly celebrated with this triumphant chapter of census!"³⁴⁶

26:52-56 Moses apportioned ("divided") the land to (for) each tribe according to its population ("larger" and "smaller" *groups*). The casting of "lots," later, determined the *location* of each tribal (land) inheritance in Canaan (26:54; Josh. 13:7-33).

26:57-62 Here Moses recorded the census of the Levites. Moses and Aaron were *Kohathites* ("Kohath" being their grandfather, and Amram's father; Exod. 6:18-20). Their parents' names were "Amram" (father) and "Jochebed" (mother, v. 59).

³⁴⁴Baxter, 1:193.

³⁴⁵Ibid., 1:183.

³⁴⁶Allen, "Numbers," p. 938.

"Some suggest that Amram and Jochebed were progenitors but not father and mother of Moses. They say that the genealogy of Kohath, Amram, and Moses is too short for there to have been 8,600 Kohathites (3:27, 28) in Moses' day from a month old upward. However, if Moses' father had children by other wives and his uncles each had children by several wives, all of whom had begun another generation (Moses being eighty before he left Egypt), then 8,600 cousins of Moses' age, along with second and third cousins down to those a month old, would not be an unreasonable number to expect."³⁴⁷

26:63-65 The chapter closes with a testimony to the faithfulness of God, and the reliability of His words. All but "Caleb" and "Joshua" had died in the wilderness, just as He had promised. God had faithfully preserved the nation, and would bring her into the land, just as He had guaranteed the patriarchs. Nevertheless He had judged the unbelieving generation.

This chapter looks *backward*, over the past 38 years, and *forward* to the entrance into Canaan.

2. Provisions and commands to observe in preparation for entering the land chs. 27—30

"Just as the censuses of chs. 1, 3, and 4 led to a flurry of preparations for departure from Sinai, so the second censuses in ch. 26 lead to preparations for departure from the plains of Moab and entry into the land of Canaan."³⁴⁸

The inheritance of women in the land 27:1-11

The writer probably included this incident in the text, because it resulted in a further definition of the laws governing inheritance in the land in a common situation. It also shows the faith of these women, the "daughters of Zelophehad." They believed God would bring them into the land. Furthermore, it reveals the fairness and compassion of God in His provision for these women, whose father had died in the wilderness.

Normally, when a father died, his *sons* divided his property, with the eldest receiving a double portion. *Daughters* did not receive an inheritance before this event, other than their dowry. The "dowry" was a substantial present their father gave them when they married. The term "dowry" also refers to the gift that the groom gave to his father-in-law when he married his daughter.

Notice that after Moses heard the women's complaint, he "brought their case before the LORD" (v. 5). This is another mark of Moses' spiritual leadership.

³⁴⁷Smick, p. 146.

³⁴⁸Ashley, p. 547.

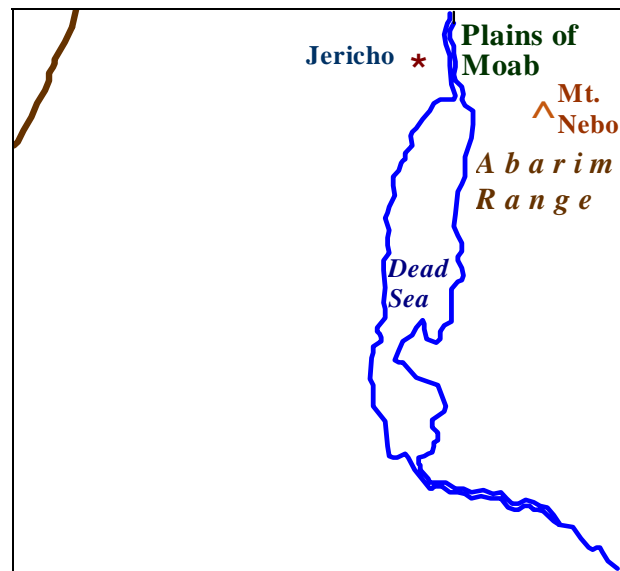
God decreed now that in Israel, when a man had no sons, his daughters would divide his property (v. 8). If he had neither sons nor daughters, brothers, or uncles, then the father's "nearest relative" would receive his inheritance (vv. 9-11). Later (ch. 36) the Lord placed a restriction on daughters who inherited their father's estate. They had to marry within their own tribe, in order to keep the inheritance *within that tribe*, just as it would have remained if the father had had sons.

This passage is interesting, because it shows how case law developed in Israel. When a situation not covered by existing laws arose, like this one, the people who were involved would go to Moses and the high priest—who would then inquire of God. Then God would reveal what the people should do. That revelation would subsequently become precedent for similar cases that might arise later.

Moses' successor 27:12-23

Another preparation for entering Canaan involved appointing a new leader to take Moses' place.

God foretold that Moses would die without entering the land ("When you have seen it [the Promised Land from 'the mountain of Abarim'], you too will be gathered to your people"; cf. 20:1-13). Graciously He allowed His servant to see the Promised Land from Mt. Nebo (Deut. 32:48-52). "Nebo" was one of the mountains of the "Abarim" range, that runs north and south, just east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, in Moab's territory. "Pisgah" (21:20; Deut. 3:27; 34:1) is the name of the northern part of this mountain range. The Plains of Moab sloped down from the Abarim mountains toward the Jordan River.



Moses' reaction to God's announcement of his death was admirable. He did not panic like King Saul (1 Sam. 28:20), or even pray for a few more years like King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:1-3). Instead, he prayed for the *welfare of Israel*, the nation that had caused him so much grief! Many leaders prefer to select their own successor, but Moses asked God to make this crucial choice in his case. In so doing, he gave practical testimony to his acceptance of Yahweh's sovereignty over Israel.

"Joshua" was a likely choice, since he had served Moses and worked closely with him for years. Most importantly, as one of the two loyal spies, he was a man of faith ("a man in whom is the Spirit"). Moses "laid his hands on him" (v. 18), symbolically imputing his "authority" to him (v. 20).

"This spirit was not something that now came upon Joshua, or was temporary (such as the coming of the spirit on the elders in 11:17, 25-26); it already existed in Joshua and was the basis of God's choice of him. Deut. 34:9 applies the phrase 'full of the spirit of Wisdom' to Joshua, confirming the thought here."³⁴⁹

Joshua served as an associate leader of Israel, with and under Moses, from this time until Moses died (v. 20). When Joshua later began his *sole* leadership, he functioned differently from Moses. Whereas God had given Moses directions for Israel "face to face," Joshua would normally receive his divine guidance through the high priest—who would obtain this by using the "Urim [and Thummim]." Only rarely did the Lord speak to Joshua directly. God deals with different people in different ways, and He deals with people differently at different times in history.

Conflict for the leadership of Israel occurred frequently in the later history of the Northern Kingdom, following the split between Judah and Israel. Moses wisely anticipated the problems that might arise, in case God removed him before the Lord had identified his successor. Therefore he interceded again, and again God granted his request by identifying Joshua at this time. So Moses "commissioned" Joshua as his successor, in the presence of the high priest, Eleazar, and the whole congregation (v. 23). This action by Moses was extremely important, because it precluded countless problems for Israel that might have arisen when Moses died.

"God, in answer to his [Moses'] prayer, appoints him a successor, even Joshua, who had long since signalized himself by his *courage* in fighting Amalek, his *humility* in ministering to Moses, and his *faith* and *sincerity* in witnessing against the report of the evil spies."³⁵⁰

"Though it might appear a perpetual slur upon his family, first to ordain Eleazar high priest, and then Joshua, one of another tribe, chief ruler, while his own children had no preferment at all, but were left in the rank of common Levites, this was such an instance of self-denial and submission to the will of God as was more his [Moses'] glory than the highest advancement of his family could have been."³⁵¹

"The portrayal of Moses' passing his authority (splendor or majesty) over to Joshua and Joshua's reception of the Spirit is noticeably similar to the transition of prophetic office from Elijah to Elisha in 2 Kings 2:7-15. It appears that the writer of the book of Kings has intentionally worked some of these themes into his narrative to draw out the comparison. . . . The type of leadership exhibited by Moses and Joshua is the same as that of Elijah and Elisha. It is a leadership that is guided by the Spirit of God."³⁵²

³⁴⁹Ibid., p. 552. Cf. Smick, p. 147.

³⁵⁰Henry, p. 171. Italics added.

³⁵¹Ibid.

³⁵²Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, pp. 412-13.

As Moses secured the Israelites' commitment to Yahweh at Mt. Sinai, so Elijah later revived it during Israel's worst apostasy. Both of these great leaders, as well as their immediate successors, Joshua and Elisha, also had the gift of performing miracles.

Commands regarding offerings chs. 28—29

Another step, in preparing to enter Canaan, involved setting forth a system, in an organized fashion, to regulate all the sacrifices that God required the priests to offer for the whole nation during a year. These offerings maintained fellowship with God. Numbers 28 and 29 contain a list of the minimum number of sacrifices, each year, that the priests were to offer for the nation as a whole. *Individuals*, of course, could and did bring other sacrifices in addition to these.

"The real key to successful conquest of Canaan and happy living within its borders was *continual fellowship with God*. Hence it was that God at this time presented to the new generation by way of Moses a finalized and complete set of regulations for offerings, most of which had already been given at Sinai. Their observance would encourage an intimate worship of God by the people in the land (cf. Exod. 23:14-17; 29:38-42; 31:12-17; Lev. 23; Num. 25:1-12)."³⁵³

"As we, the modern readers of Numbers, think scripturally, this overwhelming emphasis on sacrificial worship has one intent: to cause each reader to think of the enormity of the offense of our sin against the holiness of God, thus driving the repentant sinner to the foot of the Cross. All sacrifices—whether of the morning or evening, of Sabbath or New Moon—have their ultimate meaning in the death the Savior died. Apart from his death, these sacrifices were just the killing of animals and the burning of their flesh with attendant ceremonies. After his death, sacrifices such as these are redundant—indeed, offensive—for they would suggest that something was needed in addition to the Savior's death. But before his death, these sacrifices were the very means God gave his people in love to help them face the enormity of their sin, the reality of their need for his grace, and—in some mysterious way—to point them to the coming cross of Savior Jesus."³⁵⁴

The arrangement in which Moses listed the sacrifices here is by their frequency: daily (28:3-8), weekly (28:9-10), monthly (28:11-15), and yearly, in chronological order, following the Hebrew calendar (28:16—29:38). "Meal" and "drink offerings" accompanied all the "burnt offerings."

"In this cycle of holy periods, regulated as it was by the number seven, and ever expanding into larger and larger circles, there was embodied the whole revolution of annually recurring festivals, established to

³⁵³Jensen, pp. 110-11.

³⁵⁴Allen, "Numbers," p. 949.

commemorate the mighty works of the Lord for the preservation and inspiration of His people."³⁵⁵

The chart below indicates what the priests offered on each special day. Note the prominence of the number seven.

| | Occasion | Day | Burnt Offerings | | | Sin Offerings | References |
|----|------------------|---|-----------------|------|-------|---------------|---|
| | | | Bulls | Rams | Lambs | Goats | |
| A. | Daily | Every Day | | | 2 | | 28:3-8 |
| B. | Weekly | Every Sabbath | | | 2+A | | 28:9-10 |
| C. | Monthly | First of every new month (the new moon) | 2 | 1 | 7+A | 1 | 28:11-15 (cf. 10:10; 1 Sam. 20:5, 25, 29) |
| D. | Passover | 14th of 1st month | | | 1+A | | 28:16 |
| E. | Unleavened Bread | 15th - 21st of 1st month | | | B | | 28:17-25 |
| | | 1st day | 2 | 1 | 7+A | 1 | |
| | | 2nd day | 2 | 1 | 7+A | 1 | |
| | | 3rd day | 2 | 1 | 7+A | 1 | |
| | | 4th day | 2 | 1 | 7+A | 1 | |
| | | 5th day | 2 | 1 | 7+A | 1 | |
| | | 6th day | 2 | 1 | 7+A | 1 | |
| | | 7th day | 2 | 1 | 7+A | 1 | |
| F. | Firstfruits | 4th of 3rd month | 2 | | | 1 | 7+A |
| G. | Trumpets | 1st of 7th month | 1+C | 1+C | 7+A+C | 1 | 28:26-31 |
| H. | Atonement | 10th of 7th month | 1 | 1 | 7+A | 1 | 29:1-6 |
| I. | Tabernacles | 15th - 22nd of 7th month | | | B | 2 | 29:7-11 |
| I. | Tabernacles | 1st day | 13 | 2 | 14+A | | 29:12-38 |
| | | 2nd day | 12 | 2 | 14+A | 1 | |
| | | 3rd day | 11 | 2 | 14+A | 1 | |
| | | 4th day | 10 | 2 | 14+A | 1 | |
| | | 5th day | 9 | 2 | 14+A | 1 | |
| | | 6th day | 8 | 2 | 14+A | 1 | |
| | | 7th day | 7 | 2 | 14+A | 1 | |
| | | 8th day | 1 | 1 | 7+A | 1 | |

³⁵⁵Keil and Delitzsch, 3:218.

"Totally apart from the sacrifices that the people brought in their own personal worship, and the great number of lambs slain at Passover, each year the priests offered 113 bulls, 32 rams, and 1,086 lambs!"³⁵⁶

Each (every) day was to be a "day of worship" for the Israelites. They offered sacrifices *daily* to make it so: a worship day. The "Sabbath" was a special day of worship. It was a *day of rest* for all but the priests, for whom this day meant additional service.

"The Tabernacle's daily offering of two lambs with a few pints of oil, flour and wine is as nothing compared with (e.g.) the *daily* offering of 5,500 loaves, 54 cakes, 204 jugs of beer, up to 50 geese, an ox, and a variety of other items all regularly presented at either of the two Ramesside temples just mentioned [in western Thebes in the thirteenth century B.C.]."³⁵⁷

"Every year in future the priests will have to sacrifice 113 bulls, 32 rams, and 1086 lambs and offer more than a ton of flour and a thousand bottles of oil and wine."³⁵⁸

Commands regarding vows ch. 30

The last chapter of Leviticus (ch. 27) contains instructions regarding how the Israelites were to handle vows under the Mosaic Law. In contrast, this chapter deals with when, and under what circumstances, they could *annul* vows, and when they had to remain in force.

"The reason for the nature of the pentateuchal laws may be that the Israelites *assumed*, with much of the culture around them, that vows were a legitimate expression of devotion to one's god(s), hence only specific ordinances governing the vows were seen as necessary."³⁵⁹

Perhaps Moses included this section in the context of matters dealing with preparations for entering Canaan because, in times of *war*, people tend to make more vows. This is especially true of soldiers and their wives and children. Also, vows are a kind of offering to God, so commenting on them here is fitting, in view of the previous discussion of offerings (chs. 28—29). A festival was an ideal time at which to discharge a vow, since it was to be declared to the priest at the tabernacle.

"Vows" were voluntary promises to do or not do specified things—if God would or would not do something else. Some vows were offered to express thanks when God had done something special. Vows usually involved fasting, or abstaining from other lawful things, or giving God some special gift or offering.

³⁵⁶Wiersbe, *The Bible . . .*, p. 363.

³⁵⁷Kenneth Kitchen, *The Bible In Its World*, p. 86.

³⁵⁸G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 197.

³⁵⁹Ashley, p. 574.

Moses explained the basic principles governing vows first (v. 2): it was a "binding oath"; it must "not be violated"; it must be fulfilled ("he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth"). The Israelites were to take their promises to God seriously and not break them (cf. Eccles. 5:4-5). Then follow four cases, some of which constituted an exception to this rule. Others did not.

A girl or young woman, living under the authority of her father, had a responsibility to *obey* her father, which was more important than her responsibility to keep a self-imposed vow (vv. 3-5). A woman who married a husband *after* she had taken a vow, was to place the importance of her submission to her husband above her vow (vv. 6-8). No other person could cancel a widow's or divorcee's vow, because she was directly responsible to God, not to her father or husband (v. 9). A woman who took a vow after she became married, was under the authority of her husband primarily, and under the authority of the terms of her vow secondarily (vv. 10-12). Since a woman's vow could obligate her father or husband, he had the right to annul a vow that she had made (vv. 5, 8).

Another rule follows (vv. 13-15): A husband could annul his wife's vow immediately, right after he became aware of it, but if he did not annul it when he *first* became aware of it, it would remain in force.

"The assumed culpability of Adam in Genesis 3 may stem from the principle behind this law. In 3:6, Adam's wife makes a rash decision in his presence: 'She took from the tree and ate and gave it to her husband who was with her.' In view of this passage in Numbers, Adam's silence in the narrative makes him culpable for his wife's action."³⁶⁰

This section clarifies the important principle, that one should not regard self-imposed religious obligations as more important than God-given duties. Sometimes a godly child will make an unwise vow to God. Later in life, he or she may realize that the vow is actually keeping him or her from obeying the Lord. In such cases, obedience should trump keeping a vow.

"The matter of vowing a vow or making a pledge was taken very seriously in Israel. If the foundation of the faith was the immovable trustworthiness of God, no wonder a premium was put on being true to one's promises in general."³⁶¹

3. Reprisal against the Midianites and the settlement of the Transjordanian tribes chs. 31—32

Moses' last campaign ch. 31

The writer now recorded the fulfillment of God's instructions to Moses for Israel to destroy the Midianites (25:16-18). In this account, the aftermath of the battle receives more attention than the battle itself. Evidently God included this chapter here for two

³⁶⁰Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 417.

³⁶¹Maarsingh, p. 106.

reasons at least. It records Israel's victory over one of her enemies, and it explains the way she conducted the war and the manner in which she handled the spoils of war. These procedures provided a precedent for the Israelites in their future battles with the Canaanites. This section then gives more information concerning God's preparations of the Israelites for entering the land.

Warriors were not a privileged class in Israel, as they were in the nations that surrounded Israel. God viewed war as an ugly necessity, not something to glorify. Ancient legends glorified war and warriors. God glorifies peacemakers (cf. Matt. 5:9).

31:1-24 The "vengeance" Israel was to take (v. 2) was for the spiritual and sexual seduction the Midianites had led the Moabites to practice with them. This had resulted in the defeat of God's people (ch. 25). Her enemies had lured Israel away from her true husband, Yahweh.

Moses did not give us the name of Israel's military leader in this battle. However, "Phinehas," the high priest's son, is the prominent person in the record (v. 6). This phenomenon points to the nature of the battle as being primarily for spiritual purposes. Israel did not annihilate the Midianites simply because they were her political and military enemies. She did so primarily because she was God's instrument of judgment for the Midianites' spiritual sins (idolatry, sacred prostitution, etc.). This was "holy war."

"The battle . . . had the character of an execution, in the form of a *ban*. The ban was a religious institution exercised for a time in Israel as well as among some of its Semitic neighbors that placed people judged to be hostile to the deity under a sentence of destruction."³⁶²

"The command in holy war to kill women and children seems in modern times a terrible thing to have been done (and it was), and something they ought not to have done. But this criticism fails to understand the situation in the ancient world. The entire life of the ancient world was tribal warfare, necessitating warfare. God's judgment is poured out on whole groups of people who act with moral abandonment and in sinful pursuit."³⁶³

The Israelites "killed every male" Midianite (v. 7), yet we read in Scripture about the Midianites existing *after* this battle. Perhaps Moses only meant that they killed every Midianite *they encountered*.³⁶⁴ Another writer explained this problem as follows:

³⁶²Ibid., p. 107. Cf. Josh. 6—7; 1 Sam. 15.

³⁶³The NET Bible note on 31:17.

³⁶⁴Ashley, p. 592.

"The Midianites were a larger confederation of tribes, associated with various smaller groups such as the Ishmaelites (Gn. 37:28; Jdg. 8:22, 24), the Moabites (Nu. 22:4, 7), the Amalekites (Jdg. 6:3, 33), and Ephah (Gn. 25:4; Is. 60:6). They roamed through the arid lands of Sinai, the Negeb and Transjordan. Here it is those Midianites associated with Moab that are picked out for vengeance (8, 16; cf. chapters 22 and 25), not the whole group."³⁶⁵

Among the men killed were "Zur" and "Balaam" (v. 8). Zur was probably the father of Cozbi (cf. 25:15).

Burning an enemy's cities, and taking spoil and living beings captive, mainly women and children, became standard procedure in Israel's wars with the Canaanites (vv. 10-11). The soldiers "brought" what they had captured to the leaders of the congregation, Moses and Eleazar, rather than personally appropriating these things (v. 12).

Normally Israel spared the enemy women in battle, since the Israelites viewed them as less responsible for the war than the men. However, in this case, the Midianite women had actively solicited the Israelites to idolatry through their prostitution. Therefore God ordered that His people should spare only women who were virgins ("girls who have not known man intimately") in this battle. They brought these virgins into the Israelite congregation, and in due course most of them married Israelite men.

"It is, it seems, essential for the very existence of a new emergent community that discipline be harsh and stringent."³⁶⁶

The Israelite warriors had to undergo the rites of purification ("purify yourselves"), as did the prisoners ("your captives"), because they had contracted ritual uncleanness through contact with dead bodies. They also purified all the *booty* taken as the spoils of war. The objects that were not combustible they passed "through fire" ("gold," "silver," "bronze," "iron," "tin," "lead"), and the others ("every garment," or "wood") they washed "with water." These laws reminded the Israelites that—even in victory over one's enemy—*death* is a terrible disruption of God's creation.

". . . this is the only example of fire being required for purification in the Bible and is therefore highly unique.

³⁶⁵G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 209.

³⁶⁶Philip, p. 313. Cf. Josh. 7; Acts 5.

"Fire, a more intensive form of purification, is chosen to accord with corpse-contamination, a more intensive form of impurity."³⁶⁷

"Moses' speech in vss. 19-20 is based solidly on the prescriptions of Num xix, deviating only in regard to how they apply to the particular war situation. Had Moses continued with vss. 22-23, it would have appeared that he was inventing the new regulations out of thin air. Consequently, Eleazer begins to speak, prefacing his remarks by the statement 'this is the decree of the ritual prescription which the Lord commanded Moses,' showing that what he is about to say is not in fact new, but actually part of the original revelation given to Moses. From a literary point of view, to have Eleazer speak allows the law of Num. xix to be amended or clarified without raising the suspicion of human invention."³⁶⁸

31:25-54 The "warriors" shared the booty equally with the non-combatant Israelites who had remained in the camp. The soldiers were no privileged class, nor did they receive a special reward for their actions. They ("the men of war") simply served one function, and the civilian Israelites ("the sons of Israel") served another, in carrying out the will of God (cf. 1 Sam. 30:24-25). From the warriors' share, "one in 500" went to the priests ("to Eleazar . . . to the LORD"), and from the congregation's share "one out of every 50" went "to the Levites" (cf. 18:26).

The "32 virgins (persons)" that the priests received (v. 40), probably became servants in the tabernacle (cf. Exod. 38:8; 1 Sam. 2:22).

Not one Israelite soldier died in this battle ("no man of us is missing"; v. 49). God gave His people a complete, perfect, and *absolute* victory! This unusual record makes sense, in part because the Midianites were not a warring people. They were *nomads*, and they normally moved on when they encountered trouble. Apparently they were not ready to defend themselves against the attacking Israelites. However, there is a more important reason for Israel's success:

"There is a clear line that runs from Numbers 31:1-24 to the conquest of Jericho according to Joshua 6 and 7. For in fact that city fell not by military violence but by the force of Israel's obedient faith. And the same thing is true of the conquest of Midian described in Judges 7: it was not the

³⁶⁷David Wright, "Purification from Corpse Contamination in Numbers XXXI 19-24," *Vetus Testamentum* 35:2 (1985):222, 223. Cf. Lev. 11:32; Num. 19:11-22.

³⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 223.

military might of Gideon's band that was decisive but rather the power of faith. In all three cases the stories have about them something unnatural, something unreal, something exaggerated, and in all three it was obedience to God's command that turned the tide."³⁶⁹

The grateful "officers" brought a large gift "of gold" to the LORD (presented to Moses and Eleazar), to "recompense" Him with a "[thank] offering" for the lives of the Israelite soldiers He had granted Israel in this victory (v. 50). This payment/"offering" was also an "atonement" (ransom), in that it symbolically replaced the Israelite lives that God had spared. The officers realized that He could have taken many of the Israelites' lives in the battle. The gift consisted of a large quantity of gold jewelry that the soldiers had captured. Midianite traders had a great love for gold jewelry (cf. Judg. 8:26). The people turned this gift into a "memorial" of this victory, and kept it in the tabernacle from then on (v. 54).

In this chapter we have a basic model for Israel's battles with the Canaanites in the land. This battle with the Midianites was a preparation for those later encounters. It was also a great encouragement to the Israelites, as they looked forward to more battles like this one.³⁷⁰

The settlement of the Transjordanian tribes ch. 32

Another instance of incomplete obedience followed the great victory God had just given His people, and the military commanders' sacrificial, voluntary worship of Yahweh.

32:1-19 Maybe the leaders of "Reuben" and "Gad" concluded, in all likelihood, that their "brothers," the rest of the Israelite army, could easily handle the remaining Canaanites without their help. The Israelites had defeated the Midianites, and earlier Sihon and Og, from all outward appearances, "easily." Also, the *pastures* of "Gilead" attracted them ("is a land for livestock"). Their request revealed a selfish desire, that would have cost their brethren dearly. The remaining tribes would have had to fight their battles without help from the Reubenite and Gadite armies.

"In verse 1 the sons of Reuben are mentioned before the sons of Gad, but in subsequent references this order is reversed. The reason is very likely that the tribe of Gad was more important than that of Reuben [cf. Gen. 49:4]. There is an oblique confirmation of this supposition on a stone that King Mesha of Moab set up around 850 B.C.,

³⁶⁹Maarsingh, p. 107.

³⁷⁰On Israel's policy of completely annihilating the Canaanites, see John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God*, especially ch. 8.

following his defeat of the Israelites [i.e., the Moabite Stone]. This stone bears an inscription that refers to Gad as a people that lived there from times immemorial."³⁷¹

Moses saw this request as potentially very "discouraging" to the other tribes, and warned the Reubenites and Gadites against disheartening their brothers.

32:20-32 To preclude another Kadesh-barnea tragedy, Moses commanded the Reubenites and Gadites to first go into battle with their "brothers," the other tribes' armies. If they would do this, they could have their desired land after the fighting ended. Moses' concern was that the *whole nation* needed to enter the land and *carry out God's will* by destroying the Canaanites. If, after they did this, these tribes wanted to live on the other side of the Jordan, that decision would not constitute an act of disobedience to God. Transjordan (featuring Gilead's pasturelands) was part of the Promised Land, but most of the people God commanded the Israelites to destroy lived west of the Jordan River.

"The phrase 'Be sure your sin will find you out' (v. 23) is often used in evangelistic appeals, and it can have that application; but the original intent was to admonish God's people."³⁷²

Moses then instructed his successor, Joshua, on the terms of this agreement (vv. 28-30). So Reuben, Gad, and the (eastern) half-tribe of Manasseh committed themselves to fight alongside the other tribes (vv. 31-32). This is the first mention of the (eastern) "half-tribe of Manasseh" (v. 33). Its leaders were apparently not as aggressive in this plan as the leaders of Reuben and Gad were, judging by Manasseh's lack of earlier mention.

"There was good policy in leaving a sufficient force to protect the conquered region [cf. v. 24] lest the enemy should attempt reprisals; and as only 40,000 of the Reubenites and the Gadites, and a half of Manasseh, passed over the Jordan (Josh. 4:13), there were left for the security of the new possession 70,580 men, besides women and children under 20 years (cf. ch. 26:17)."³⁷³

32:33-42 With this agreement behind them, the two tribes and half-tribe proceeded to settle in Transjordan, until called upon to cross the Jordan River as part of Israel's fighting force.

³⁷¹Maarsingh, p. 110.

³⁷²Wiersbe, *The Bible . . .*, p. 367.

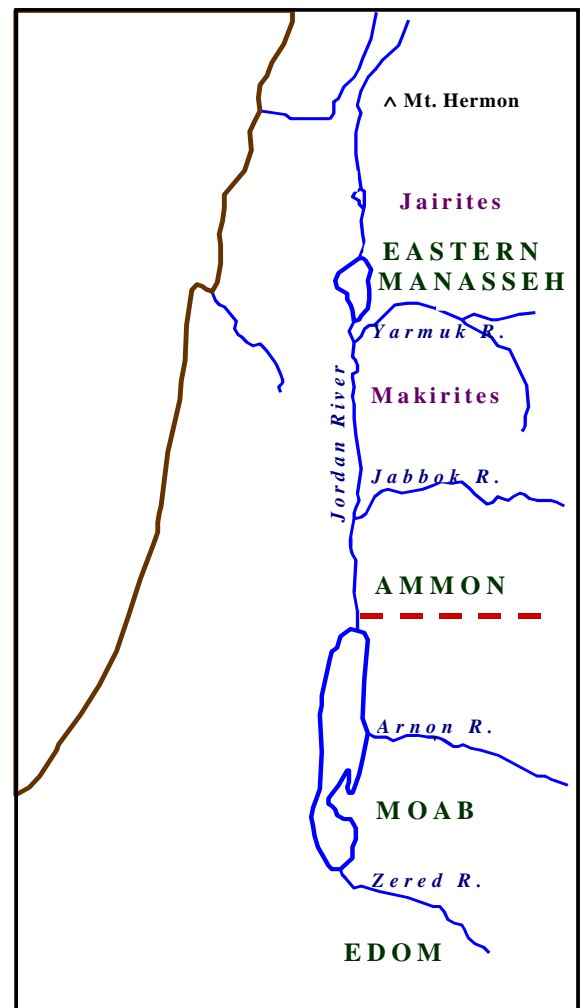
³⁷³Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 136.

"The eastern territory of Manasseh, divided between the clans of Makir and Jair, was essentially identical to the old kingdom of Og. The Makirites took the southern part, that is, Gilead as far south as the allocation of Reuben and Gad. The Jairites received the region north of Gilead, defined more precisely as Og's kingdom of Argob. It presumably extended as far north as Mount Hermon and was bordered on the south by the little kingdoms of Maacah and Geshur, just above the Yarmuk (Deut. 3:13-14). A third entity, Nobah, has no apparent connection with Manasseh, but took in Kenath and the surrounding villages (Num. 32:42). Kenath (Qanawat) was located about sixty miles due east of the Sea of Galilee, deep in the Hauran Desert."³⁷⁴

Though these tribes *did* fulfill their military obligation (Josh. 4:12-13, 22), their plan was not a good one. It created a potential problem of disunity in Israel. Furthermore, it demonstrated a desire for what looked good physically and materially (cf. Lot), in preference to what God had said He would give them—that they had not yet seen. Distance from the other tribes later produced misunderstanding and disunity (Josh. 22). The lack of natural defenses—on the north, east, and south of Transjordan—made this area especially vulnerable to attack by Israel's enemies. This area was often the first to experience invasion, and Israel lost control of it several times in her later history (e.g., 2 Kings 15:29).

Whenever the Bible mentions cities of this area allotted to Reuben, especially Heshbon and Mediba, they regularly appear to be under the control of either Moab or Ammon (Isa. 15:4; 16:8-9; Jer. 48:2, 45; 1 Chron. 19:7). Reuben is seldom even mentioned (only in Judg. 5:15-16; 2 Kings 10:33; 1 Chron. 5:6, 26; 12:37; 27:16) after the Moabite oppression, and never in a way to show that it controlled its allotted land.³⁷⁵

Transjordan was part of the land God included in the Abrahamic Covenant. However, God's purpose for Israel at this time was to drive out the Canaanite tribes that lived primarily west of the Jordan. We may assume that, if these tribes had simply followed Moses' leadership, God would have



³⁷⁴Merrill, *Kingdom of . . .*, p. 91.

³⁷⁵Leon Wood, *Israel's United Monarchy*, p. 37, n. 12.

done something even *better* for them than what their own plan provided. This is what God often does in such situations, ample testimony to which we find throughout Scripture.

B. WARNING AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION CHS. 33—

36

God gave the final laws governing Israel's entrance into the Promised Land (33:50—36:13). However, Moses first recorded, at God's command, this list of places where the Israelites stopped and "camped," after they had set out on their journey from Egypt to Canaan. This is the only statement in Numbers that directly claims Mosaic authorship, though the whole book assumes it (cf. Exod. 17:14; 24:4; 34:28; Deut. 31:9, 22, 24). This list constitutes a memorial to the grace and faithfulness of God in thus far fulfilling His promises to the patriarchs. As a reminder of God's care of His people, it would have been a great encouragement as the Israelites looked forward to taking their final step into the land.

1. Review of Israel's journey from Egypt 33:1-49

Forty-two stations, places where the nation stopped at and "camped," appear in the list. Eighteen do not appear elsewhere in the record of the journey (vv. 13, 19-29), and four mentioned previously are absent in this chapter (cf. 11:3; 21:19). Obviously this is a selective list. What was God's criterion for including what He did here? As one studies this account of Israel's experiences since leaving Egypt, certain patterns begin to emerge. For example, similar events recurred with regularity, such as: judgment by death, victory over enemies, provision of water and food, and opposition from within Israel.³⁷⁶ Evidently Moses intended this record to help the Israelites recognize, first, their failure to learn from their past, and second, God's continuing faithfulness in spite of this inability.

Archaeologists have not yet discovered many of the sites named. They were probably only camping places, known at the time by these names and used by travelers and merchants in the desert.

33:1-49 After introductory comments (vv. 1-2), Moses gave a list of 12 important places where Israel stopped ("camped"), from Egypt to Mt. Sinai (vv. 3-15). Note that he did not describe the *march* itself by identifying the places where Israel stopped, but by citing them as places "they journeyed from," or from which they *set out* ("their journeys according to their starting places," v. 2). This emphasizes the importance of the goal of their journey: the Promised Land. They set out from these places on their trek to the land.

Moses described the journey from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh, and from Kadesh back to Kadesh, next (vv. 16-36). This leg of the travels included the period of 38 years, in which Israel *wandered* while the older generation

³⁷⁶For a further development of the cycles of Israel's experience discernible in the six groups of seven stations, see G. Wenham, *Numbers*, pp. 217-19.

died out. Nothing more is known about this part of Israel's journey (between the two stops at Kadesh), following the defeat at Hormah (14:15). Judging from the comparatively small total number of sites mentioned, it is probable that Israel stayed at some locations for long periods of time. The nation was probably at rest much more of the time than it was in transit, during these years.

Some scholars believe that Israel reversed its direction after leaving Mt. Hor (20:23), and marched *north* to bypass Edom at its north end, rather than going *south* around its south end.³⁷⁷ This view depends on identifying "Punon" and "Oboth" (vv. 42-44; cf. 21:10-11) with modern "Feinan" and "el-Weibah," both of which are on Edom's west side rather than the east. These identifications are not sure, however. Deuteronomy 2:8 says the Israelites "passed beyond (went around) [their] brothers" the Edomites, and "turned" (north) "at (away from) Elath and Ezion-geber," which are many miles to the south—at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Therefore this view seems unlikely.³⁷⁸

The last leg of the journey was from Kadesh, the second time, to the plains of Moab (vv. 37-49; cf. chs. 20-21).³⁷⁹

"His [Aaron's] death [vv. 38-39] came at a great age—a mark of God's blessing in his life. By the mercy of the Lord, his time was extended to the very last year of Israel's desert experience; his own sin (Num 20) kept him from living into the time of the conquest of the land."³⁸⁰

"Within the list of encampments are two short narratives that focus on the work of Moses (vv. 2-3) and Aaron (vv. 38-39). . . . Both narratives have the same comment that Moses (v. 2) and Aaron (v. 38) obeyed 'the command of the LORD.' Thus one of the purposes of this list within the larger strategy of the book appears to be to give a brief review of the work of these two great leaders. God used them and their obedience to lead the people in the wilderness for the forty years."³⁸¹

"One impression cannot escape the student who has followed the account of Numbers up to this point, that is, the long-suffering grace of God in preserving a people as

³⁷⁷E.g., Aharoni, p. 51.

³⁷⁸Wood, *Israel's United . . .*, p. 36, n. 11.

³⁷⁹See Z. Kallai, "The Wandering-Traditions from Kadesh-Barnea to Canaan: A Study in Biblical Historiography," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33:1-2 (Spring-Autumn 1982):175-184.

³⁸⁰Allen, "Numbers," p. 989.

³⁸¹Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 419.

He had originally promised, through all the experiences of this vast number of places."³⁸²

"The way which God takes in bringing his people to himself is always the best way, though it does not always seem to us the nearest way."³⁸³

2. Anticipation of the Promised Land 33:50—36:13

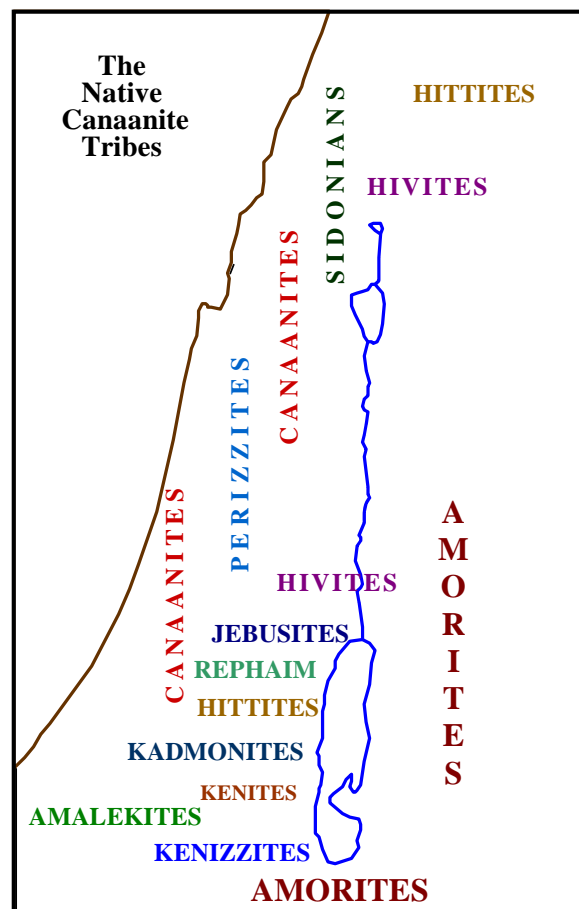
"The section breaks down into two groups of three laws each, carefully introduced by the clause 'and Yahweh spoke to Moses' (. . . , 33:50; 34:1, 16; 35:1, 9; cf. 36:6) and surrounded by the phrase 'on the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho' (. . . , 33:50; 35:1; 36:13)."³⁸⁴

Instructions to drive out the Canaanites 33:50-56

This brief section of instructions introduces specific directions concerning the division of the land and its towns, that follow in chapters 34—36.

The repetition of "all" (v. 52) stresses the importance of completely clearing the land of its idol-worshipping inhabitants and all their religious paraphernalia. God wanted to "clean up" the land *spiritually*, and to make it a "holy land." The land was a *gift* from God to His firstborn son, Israel ("I have given you the land," v. 53). God warned the Israelites what would happen to them if they were not completely obedient (vv. 55-56): The Canaanites would be a constant source of irritation to them ("pricks" and "thorns"), and God would deal with His people as He planned to deal with the Canaanites ("as I plan to do to them, so I will do to you").

"If we do not drive sin out, sin will drive us out; if we be not the death of our lusts, our lusts will be the death of our souls."³⁸⁵



³⁸²Jensen, p. 119.

³⁸³Henry, p. 175.

³⁸⁴Ashley, p. 634.

³⁸⁵Henry, p. 175.

A preview of the land ch. 34

God then instructed Moses regarding the extent of the Promised Land, and how to divide it among the remaining tribes.

The borders of the land 34:1-15

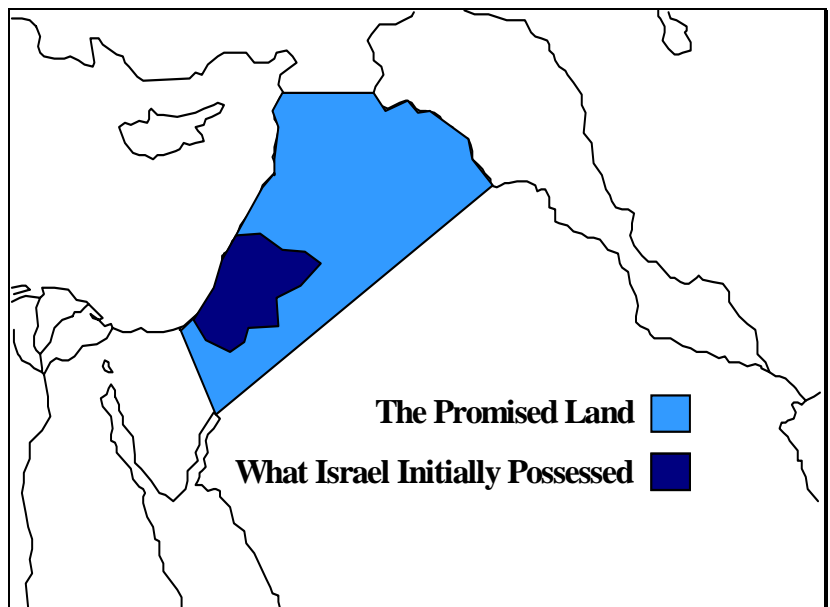
Moses described the boundary of the land: from south (vv. 3-5), to west (v. 6), to north (vv. 7-9), to east (v. 12). This boundary encompassed the territory which the people would divide among the nine and one-half tribes. This was not the same territory promised to Abraham, but was what God gave the Israelites at their entrance into the land. If they had been obedient to Him, He would have eventually enlarged their borders to include the whole area promised to Abraham. Even though they continued to disobey God, He still enlarged their border beyond the boundaries given here—later in their history—though not yet to the extent promised Abraham.

". . . on any estimate and interpretation, the 'Canaan' that was the inheritance given to Israel was larger and more extensive than they were ever able to possess, even in David's and Solomon's time."³⁸⁶

Some of the sites mentioned are still unknown to archaeologists. "Hamath" ("Lebohamath"; v. 8) was both a kingdom and a city, the city being the capital of the kingdom. This reference, however, is probably to the *kingdom* of Hamath, since there is no biblical record that the city of Hamath ever belonged to Israel.

The land included within these boundaries was about 150 miles long by 50 miles wide, and its area about 7,500 square miles. It was the approximate size of New Jersey. One hundred fifty miles is the distance from Dallas to Bryan, Texas. Fifty miles is the distance from West Fort Worth to East Dallas.

"God is portrayed elsewhere in the Pentateuch as one who apportions the boundaries of all the nations (Ge 10; Dt 32:8), and here he is shown doing the same for his own people."³⁸⁷



³⁸⁶Philip, p. 340.

³⁸⁷Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 420.

"How small a share of the world God often gives to his own people."³⁸⁸

"The Israelites never actually possessed all the territory comprised with these boundaries, even when it was most extended by the conquests of David and Solomon."³⁸⁹

The leaders responsible for dividing the land 34:16-29

God next selected ten men, one from each tribe that would settle in Canaan, who would assist Eleazer, the high priest, and Joshua, the military leader of Israel, in apportioning the land. Only Caleb's name is familiar. None of the other men's names appears earlier in the text. These were evidently not the heads of the tribes, but men specifically chosen for this purpose. Moses listed the tribes here in the general order in which they settled in the land, from south to north.

Special cities in the land ch. 35

Next God specified that there were to be 48 special towns set aside in the Promised Land for the Levites, and six of these would serve as cities of refuge.

"The idea of having places of asylum to which the unjustly accused might flee, was familiar throughout the ancient Mediterranean world."³⁹⁰

Levitical cities 35:1-8

The previous chapter dealt with the general borders of the land, and the tribal leaders chosen to divide its boundaries. This chapter gives regulations concerning special towns in the land.³⁹¹ According to the plan of revelation established previously in Numbers, directions regarding the Levites follow directions regarding the other tribes (cf. 1:1-46 and 47-54; ch. 2 and 3:1-49; 26:1-56 and 57-62).

The Levites received four towns for each of the 12 tribal areas. However, there were to be more Levitical towns in the larger tribes, and fewer in the smaller tribes. The writer of the Book of Joshua identified these towns in Joshua 21.³⁹² Very few Israelites lived more than 10 miles from a Levitical town. God provided these so that the Levites, whose responsibilities included the teaching and counseling of the other Israelites in the Law, would not live far from anyone in Israel.³⁹³ In the Book of Judges, we discover that the Levites did not always stay in the cities God gave them. So their disobedience frustrated God's purpose, to some extent. Yet this provision shows God's care for His people.

³⁸⁸Henry, p. 175.

³⁸⁹Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 138.

³⁹⁰W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, p. 124.

³⁹¹See Menahem Haran, "Studies in the Account of the Levitical Cities," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80:1 (March 1961):45-54, and 80:2 (June 1961):156-65.

³⁹²See my notes on Joshua 21 for a map showing these cities.

³⁹³See Jacob Milgrom, "The Levitical Town: An Exercise in Realistic Planning," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33:12 (Spring-Autumn 1982):185-88.

The "pasture lands" provided the Levites with a small agricultural income, but they received most of their support from the tithes and offerings of God's people.

Cities of refuge 35:9-34

"Six" of these Levitical towns would also be "cities of refuge."

The appointment of cities of refuge was a divine provision for the safety of any killer ("manslayer") who was *not guilty* of premeditated murder (cf. Deut. 19:1-13; Josh. 20). God had told the Israelites not to murder (Exod. 20:13). The right and duty of man to execute murderers was ancient (Gen. 4:15; 9:5-6). Ancient Near Easterners practiced capital punishment widely, as part of the "law of retaliation." The Mosaic Law regarding the cities of refuge *regulated* this practice of retaliating—in harmony with God's will.

Three of the cities stood west of the Jordan (Hebron, Shechem, and Kedesh), and three on the east side (Bezer, Ramoth-gilead, and Golan; Deut. 4:43; Josh. 20:7-8; 21:13, 21, 27, 32, 36, 38).

A "manslayer" (i.e., an unintentional killer) could find refuge in any of these six cities, but a murderer (one who premeditated his act) could not. The next of kin to the victim (the "blood avenger," v. 19) was not just *free* to kill the murderer; rather, he had an obligation to do so (vv. 19, 21). This was the duty of the next of kin. Moses called him the "avenger of blood." There was no police force as such in Israel.

When a manslayer fled to a city of refuge, the residents of that city would determine if the killer/refugee was a murderer or a manslayer. The residents mainly would have been Levites, since the cities of refuge were Levitical cities. If they judged him to be a murderer, the residents would turn him over to the avenger of blood, who would then kill him. If he was a "manslayer," he would have to stay and live in the city of refuge until the high priest died. He could not leave the city; it became his *prison*. If he left the city, he would be sinning against God. In that case, the avenger of blood could still hunt him down and kill him—for his double offense of manslaughter and leaving his city of refuge.

"The sanctity of human life is clear both from the fact of capital punishment as the only suitable punishment for murder (Gen. 9:5-9) and, on the other hand, from the prohibition against enacting the death penalty in cases where premeditation cannot be proved. To execute the innocent is as evil in God's sight as to exonerate the guilty."³⁹⁴

The death of the high priest atoned for the sins of manslaughter. The death of the high priest, therefore, had atoning value like an animal sacrifice did. Consequently after the high priest died, the manslayer was free to go home. However, until the high priest died, his act of killing another human being, even though it was unintentional, rendered him guilty before God of *manslaughter*; i.e., of *shedding blood*, but not of murder, since it was unintentional.

³⁹⁴Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Old . . .*, p. 126.

"His death may have been understood as fulfilling the principle that shed human blood can only be expiated by shed human blood (Gen. 9:6). In this case, the high priest's death was on behalf of the killer, much as the priest offers sacrifices on behalf of the people elsewhere."³⁹⁵

God required at least two witnesses to give testimony before anyone in Israel suffered execution as a murderer ("no person shall be put to death on the testimony of [only] one witness"). This was a requirement in the ancient Near East generally.³⁹⁶

In some cases of law-breaking, the guilty party could pay for his redemption. He could substitute a payment of money ("ransom"), that the priest took as a covering for his sin. However, God did not permit this in the case of murderers or manslayers. The reason for this was that "blood pollutes the land" (v. 33). That is, these crimes brought *uncleanness on the land* because they involved killing people without divine authorization. The land needed to be *clean* in this sense, because the LORD Himself resided *in it* among His people (v. 34). Canaan was not only the Promised Land; it was to be the "Holy Land" as well.

These regulations underscore again the uniqueness and value of human life. We see this, both in the consequences for killing another person, and in the safeguards granted the manslayer. The basic human rights of people are extremely important to God. The cities of refuge are also an illustration of Christ, who provides shelter for the sinner from judgment (cf. Rom. 8:1, 33-34; Heb. 6:17-20). Baxter believed that there are three main types of Christ in Numbers: the smitten rock (20:7-11), the brazen serpent (21:4-9), and the cities of refuge.³⁹⁷

A review of the inheritance of women ch. 36

The revelation of the laws of the division of the land, just explained, precipitated the incident that Moses recorded here. What would happen if an heiress to her father's property married someone from a different tribe? In that case, the land owned by her father would become the property of another tribe, and the tribal allotments would become intermixed and confused. The leaders of a family in the tribe of Manasseh brought the problem to Moses, namely, the family of Zelophehad—who had only female heiresses (cf. 27:11).

God responded to the question they raised by giving the following ordinance: In cases like this, the heiresses had to marry within their tribe. This prevented property from "transferring" to another tribe, but it still gave the heiresses some freedom to marry.

The five daughters of Zelophehad did as the Lord directed, and married their cousins, "their uncles' sons," within their tribe of Manasseh. Perhaps Moses recorded the names of

³⁹⁵Ashley, p. 654. Cf. Keil and Delitzsch, 3:265; and Budd, p. 384.

³⁹⁶See the Code of Hammurabi, sections 9-11, in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, p. 166.

³⁹⁷Baxter, 1:201.

these women—"Malah," "Tirzah," "Hoglah," "Milcah" and "Noah"—as a tribute to their commitment to do God's will. This testimony would have encouraged all the Israelites to do the same.

"The reason this passage is placed here rather than with chapter 27 is twofold. First, it concerns the issue of tribal allotments, which is the focus of these last chapters of Numbers. Second, it is customary for large sections of the Hebrew Bible, including whole books, to conclude on a positive note."³⁹⁸

"Rather than being haphazardly separated and/or appended to the end of the book, Num 27:1-11 and 36:1-13 form an *inclusio* that frames the deliberately unfinished story of the second generation. Zelophehad's daughters exemplified the faith that tenaciously clung to the Lord despite adverse circumstances. In contrast to the shortsightedness and concomitant unbelief of the first generation, the daughters' eschatological outlook provided the necessary impetus for obeying the stipulations of the covenant."³⁹⁹

The Book of Numbers closes with the positive example of *obedience* that these women provided for Israel. This book, that is so full of negative examples of unbelief and disobedience, ends optimistically. With people like Zelophehad's daughters in Israel, the future of the nation looked promising.

³⁹⁸Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 422.

³⁹⁹Dean R. Ulrich, "The Framing Function of the Narratives about Zelophehad's Daughters," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41:4 (December 1998):538.

Conclusion

The Book of Numbers is a lesson in the importance of trust and obedience. The Israelites frequently failed to trust and obey God in the hours of their trials, and consequently God postponed His blessing. Most of them never enjoyed the good things that God had for them. Obedience to God is essential on our part.

" . . . the point of the book of Numbers is important for God's people in any age: Exact obedience to God is crucial. Numbers makes the point most especially through examples of *disobedience* such as those found in chs. 11—21."⁴⁰⁰

The book also teaches us that the failures of His chosen human instruments do not frustrate God's plans any more than the opposition of His enemies. The Israelites' unfaithfulness to God did not turn Him back from faithfully carrying out His commitments to His chosen people. I believe the outstanding characteristic of God that Numbers reveals is His *graciousness*.

"Perhaps the most prominent theme is that of the gracious providence of the Lord in caring for all of Israel's needs—militarily, physically, nutritionally and spiritually—in spite of constant rebellions by the people, both leadership and rank and file."⁴⁰¹

The process of *divine discipline* is another important revelation. We see in Numbers how God deals with His people when they fail to trust and obey Him. On the one hand, He does not permit them to enjoy what He has promised. On the other hand, He works with them to prepare them to be stronger when they face the same tests again. Where their sin abounds, His grace abounds even more greatly. He makes the broken bone stronger at the place of the break than it was before the break.

Regarding the Israelites' and our entering into all that God wants us to enjoy, everything depends on one's attitude toward God. If we allow the giants and walls that stand between ourselves and God's will to block our view of God, we will fail. Unbelief will lead to disobedience, that will lead to discipline, that will lead to frustration and death. However, if we see the giants and walls overshadowed by God, as Caleb and Joshua did, we will succeed. Trust will lead to obedience, that will lead to blessing, that will lead to progress and life.

"Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience" (Heb. 4:11).

⁴⁰⁰Ashley, p. ix.

⁴⁰¹Riggans, p. 2.

Appendix

MOSES' INTERCESSORY MINISTRY AFTER THE EXODUS

| PASSAGE | CONTEXT | REQUEST | APPLICATION |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Deut. 9:22, 25-29 | Complaint about water | Spare Israel. | Mercy for complainers |
| Exod. 17:11-12 | Battle with Amalek | Give victory. | Defeat of spiritual enemies |
| Exod. 32:11-13 | Golden calf | Spare Israel. | Mercy for apostates |
| Exod. 32:31-32 | Golden calf | Forgive the people. | Restoration for apostates |
| Deut. 9:20 | Golden calf | Spare Aaron. | Mercy for God's fallen servants |
| Exod. 34:9 | Renewal of the covenant | Stay with Israel. | Renewal of God's favor after failure |
| Num. 10:35 | Whenever the ark set out | Scatter God's enemies. | Defeat of those who oppose God's purposes |
| Num. 10:36 | Whenever the ark would rest | Return to camp. | Constant manifestation of God's glory & presence |
| Num. 11:2; Deut. 9:22, 25-29 | Fire in the camp | Grant mercy. | God's patience with complainers |
| Num. 11:11-15; Deut. 9:22, 25-29 | Complaint about meat | Kill me. | Venting frustration and asking for help |
| Num. 12:13 | Miriam & Aaron's rebellion | Heal Miriam. | Blessing for antagonistic associates |
| Num. 14:13-19 | Return of the spies | Pardon the spies. | Greater faith for the weak in faith |
| Num. 16:15 | Korah's rebellion | Reject their offerings. | Dealing with critics |
| Num. 16:22 | Korah's rebellion | Spare Israel. | God's patience in not overreacting |
| Num. 21:7 | Fiery serpents | Remove the serpents. | Healing of physical afflictions |
| Num. 27:5 | Daughters of Zelophehad | Grant wisdom. | Guidance in solving new problems |
| Num. 27:15-17 | Moses told of his death | Appoint a successor. | Guidance in appointing leaders |
| Deut. 3:23-25 | Defeat of Sihon and Og | Allow me to enter the land. | Requesting personal favors |

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