

THE GENERATION IN THE DESERT

(Numbers)

The fourth book of Torah takes its English name from its two military censuses (1, 26). Its Hebrew name, “In the Desert,” is more descriptive, for the book begins with the Israelites still at the foot of Mt. Sinai and ends with them on the eastern border of Canaan. Various laws relating to the movement of the community are contained in this book along with their travelogue. In terms of time, the book occupies the thirty-nine years the people lived in the Sinai desert after spending a year at the sacred mountain. A direct route from Egypt to Canaan would have taken only a few days, and even an indirect route would not have consumed more than a couple of weeks. However, the long stay in the desert was a punishment and waiting period for all the first generation to die off. Thus, the expression “sojourn in the desert” is more precise than the popular phrase “the wandering in the wilderness.” The period was occupied mostly with prolonged encampments (33).



Later versions of the two silver trumpets became spoils of war when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. Here, in the Arch of Titus, the two trumpets pillaged from the 2nd Temple are taken to Rome.

From Sinai to Kadesh (1-14)

The people prepared to leave Mt. Sinai by conducting a military census (1-4). Moses reviewed for them the purity laws (5:1-4) and instituted the requirements for Nazirite vows, a special type of dedication to service that later would be taken up by Samson, Samuel, John the Baptist, and St. Paul (6). He also gave them the famous priestly blessing, still used by Christians more than three millennia later (6:22-27). When the tabernacle was dedicated, the various clans brought gifts for its support (7). The Levites were now set apart for service (8). It had been one year since they arrived at Sinai, and now they celebrated their first Passover since the departure from Egypt (9:1ff.). Also, they prepared trumpets for mustering the units for war (10:1-10).

Traveling northeast in battle formation, they arrived at Kadesh on the southern border of Canaan (11-12). Along the way, they were punished at Taberah (= the burning) for complaining about their hardships and at Kibroth-Hattaavah (= graves of craving) for complaining about their food. Miriam and Aaron, also, were punished for criticizing Moses' choice of an Ethiopian wife. Finally, however, they arrived at Kadesh near the southern border of Canaan. Here,

they sent twelve spies into the land to reconnoiter and report on the prospects of an invasion (13). Due to the negative report of ten of the spies, the people were afraid to engage in war and rebelled against Yahweh and Moses (14). As a judgment, Yahweh condemned everyone 20 years old and

THE PROBLEMATIC CENSUS FIGURES

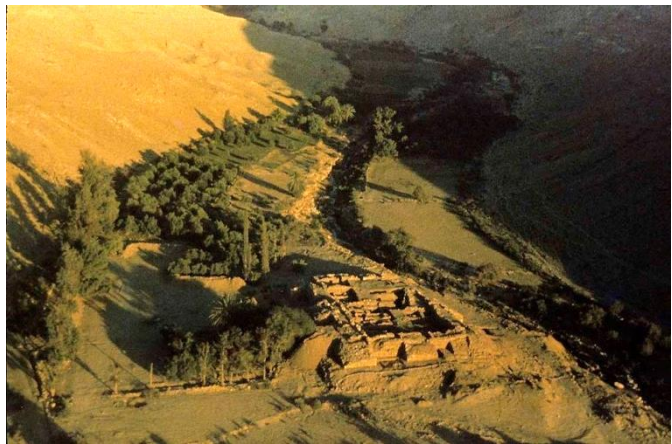
The two census figures of about 600,000 fighting men (1:46; 26:51; cf. Exod. 12:37) raise logistical problems. The total population of Egypt at the time was hardly more than 3 million, and there is lack of archaeological evidence for a depopulation of Egypt. Other logistical problems include the difficulty of communication, the fact that only two midwives served the whole population (Exod. 1:15), the improbability of such a huge group crossing the Red Sea in one night, birth rate logistics for this amount of people growing from only 70 in just a few generations, issues of fodder, sanitation, camping and travel (e.g., Dt. 23:12), and the lack of archaeological remnants in the Sinai for such a large group. Known armies in Moses' day only averaged around five to six thousand soldiers, and the largest army Egypt ever fielded, according to their own records, was only about 20,000. Furthermore, Moses' own testimony was that the Israelites were "the fewest of all peoples" (Deut. 7:7).

What is especially problematic comes from the census itself, where it says there were 22,273 firstborn males over a month old (3:39-43). To account for this relatively small number for a group of 2 million or more, this would mean that each household would need to produce 27 sons and additional daughters, and each mother would need to bear about 50 children.

One possible solution may be that the Hebrew word אלף, usually translated as "thousand," should be translated as "clan," as in the Book of Judges (6:15). If so, then six hundred families would yield a much more realistic total than the traditional 2 million or more.

older to a forty-year sojourn in the desert, a year for each day the spies were in the land.¹ Thus, the generation that left Egypt would not be the generation that eventually entered the land of Canaan.

This judgment on the older generation is one of the seeds for an important idea that arises many times in the Old Testament, the concept of a remnant. A remnant is the part "left over," and the second generation of Israelites would now comprise the remnant who would enter the land of Canaan (26:65). Later, this language would be employed especially by the prophets in view of the exile.



The oasis at Kadesh Barnea with the ruins of Ain el-Qudeirat

From Kadesh to Moab (15-21)

Gradually, the older fighting units began to die off as the nation camped near Kadesh (15-19). In addition to some additional legal obligations, the story of Korah's rebellion is recorded (16). Korah led a protest against Moses and Aaron and their claim to be the chosen mediators between Yahweh and the people. As a judgment for this arrogance, God caused Korah and his compatriots to be swallowed alive by the earth. This judgment culminated in the divine affirmation of Aaron's family as the sole source for high priests (17). Also, the red heifer purification

¹ The total of the forty years was to be reckoned from the Israelite's departure from Egypt a year earlier (cf. Deut. 1:3).

TORAH SURVEY

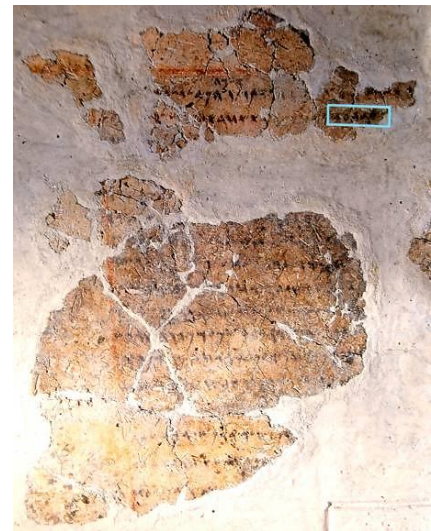
ordinance was instituted for those contaminated by a corpse (19).

At last, they took up their journey again, this time circling around the southern tip of the Dead Sea. Along the way, Moses once more brought water from a rock, though this time, because he struck the rock out of his frustration with the people, God punished him by restricting him from entering the land of Canaan (20). Both he and Aaron would die with the older generation in the desert (20:12). As the Israelites traveled to the south of the Dead Sea, the Edomites prohibited them from passing through their land, forcing them to detour in their route (20:14-21). As God had promised, Aaron died and was succeeded by his son (20:22-29). In another early war effort, the desert fortress of Arad in the Negev was destroyed (21).



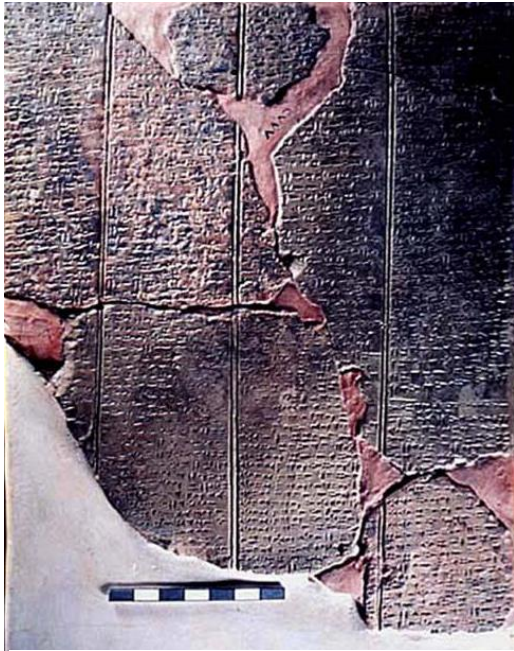
Along their way, when the people continued to complain, God judged them with venomous snakes. Here, at God's instruction, Moses constructed a bronze snake on a pole to which the people could look for healing if they were bitten (21:4-9). In the New Testament, Jesus used this story to illustrate the meaning of his death on the cross, so that anyone who would look to the cross would be saved (cf. Jn. 3:14-15). Two other desert peoples from the Transjordan attacked the Israelites, but both were defeated by Yahweh's power (21:21-35). Finally, the people camped in the Plains of Moab, near the Jericho fords of the Jordan River.

Here, the indigenous Moabites hired a Mesopotamian prophet named Balaam to curse them. Four times he tried to deliver a curse on the Israelites, but each time his evil intent



was thwarted by Yahweh's intervention, and he pronounced a blessing instead (22-24). In his last oracle, he predicted that a "star" and "scepter" would rise out of Israel (24:17), a prediction that anticipated the rise of David, and later for both Jews and Christians, the messianic kingship. Since the Moabites were unsuccessful in casting a curse on the Israelites, they resorted to seducing them into Ba'al fertility worship. This would mark the first direct encounter of the Israelites with the religion of Canaanites. The Canaanite religions were fertility cults using imitative magic to induce fertility in the land, livestock, and people. The pantheon consisted of both male and female deities. In Canaanite mythology, Ba'al (god of rain, lightning, and storm) descended to the underworld each fall, imprisoned by Mot (god of death), which in turn caused the dry season. In the spring, Ashtaroth (goddess of sex and war) rescued Ba'al from the power of Mot, enabling Ba'al and Ashtaroth to mate. The mating

A most remarkable artifact was discovered in 1967 on a plastered wall in the Transjordan, and it actually names [Ba]laam the [son of Beo]r, describing him as a seer of the gods.



Discovered in Ugarit, this text contains the myth of Ba'al and his role as "Lord of the Earth" (responsible for fertility).

The text describes the construction of Ba'al's palace on Mt. Zaphon after he defeated Yamm, god of the sea, as well as his return from the underworld after being imprisoned by Mot, god of death.

the Transjordan Israelite tribes, as having "always dwelt" in the Moabite territory.

The Book of Numbers closes with a final summary travelogue (33), a description of the boundaries of Canaan which the Israelites were to invade (34), the designation of certain cities for the Levites who would receive no tribal land assignments, and the listing of six asylum cities for those guilty of involuntary manslaughter (35). The final chapter resolves a dispute regarding tribal inheritance that might be compromised by intermarriage between the tribes. Tribal members were to marry only within their own clans (36).

of the deities was believed to cause fertility. To induce the union of deities, the Canaanites participated in sacred prostitution at the high places as a form of imitative magic. This form of religion was a perennial temptation to the Israelites, and they would fall into this pagan ritual, as later described by Jeremiah, "...on every high hill and under every green tree" (Je. 2:20b). Because of the Israelites' apostasy at Baal Peor, Yahweh again judged them with a severe plague (25).

The Second Census (26)

Finally, the forty years were at an end, and Moses conducted a new military census (26). Joshua was selected to be Moses' successor (27), and following a review of several more laws, yet another desert enemy, Midian, was defeated (31). With the Transjordan now firmly in Israelite control, two and a half tribes, Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh, were granted permission to take up residency to the east of the Jordan so long as they pledged support for the war effort on the other side of the river (32). The discovery of the famous Moabite Stone in the Transjordan names the "men of Gad," one of



The Stele of Mesha (popularly called "The Moabite Stone") was discovered by an Anglican missionary in 1868.

The Louvre, Paris