

In the Desert

The Book of Numbers

by

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Preface

Numbers, the fourth scroll of the Torah, describes the departure of the Israelites from Mt. Sinai after spending a full year there, their long sojourn in the desert of an additional 39 years, and their arrival on the east side of the Jordan River. The census near the beginning of the book and the one taken four decades later near the end function like book-ends. Between them are narrated a variety of events that provided the Israelites with important lessons for living out their lives as the people of God. This sojourn in the desert is characterized by movement beginning with the departure from Mt. Sinai to the various encampments en route to the promised land. The people of Israel are always either moving or preparing to move. The narratives are punctuated by legal material in addition to and sometimes in expansion of the laws they received at Mt. Sinai. The book serves as a bridge between Mt. Sinai and the border of Canaan, and throughout, Israel is always looking toward the ultimate promise of the land originally deeded to Abraham by divine oath.

In more recent times, this travel narrative has been capsulized in Christian worship through great hymns, such as, “Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah” by William Williams Pantycelyn in the 18th century and “All the Way My Savior Leads Me” by Fanny Crosby in the 19th century. Here, the ancient Israelite trek through the wilderness is a paradigm of the Christian’s journey through life with its temptations, trials, suffering, and ultimate arrival at the heavenly country promised by God to all who are faithful (cf. He. 11:13-16). It is a distinct and bitter irony that when the writer of the Book of Hebrews enumerates the roll call of the faithful, conspicuous by its absence is any mention of the sojourn in the desert. He moves from the Red Sea to the attack upon Jericho without so much as a word (He. 11:29-30). The sojourn in the desert recounted in Numbers was largely marked by unfaithfulness, and the spiritual survival of Israel was due to God’s grace, not Israel’s constancy.

As the reader works through this ancient material, it is well to bear in mind the advice of St. Paul, who wrote: *...these things occurred as examples, to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ...these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come* (1 Co. 10:6, 11). Later, the writer of Hebrews adds: *For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. ...it still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience* Heb. 4:2, 6).

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INTRODUCTION

What I Will and Won't Do

In any commentary on a biblical book, the author must choose between various approaches and content him/herself with the one that best suits the intended purpose. I am no exception, and in this commentary, I hope to explore the Book of Numbers in the context of the Israelite sojourn in the desert, paying attention to the book as a bridge between Mt. Sinai (Exodus and Leviticus) and the final speeches of Moses (Deuteronomy). Along the way, we will encounter various narratives of Israel's failure in the desert. Indeed, it was their failure at Kadesh Barnea, in particular, that lay behind their sojourn in the desert for a long four decades, but there are a number of other failures as well. We will examine some repetition and expansion of laws formerly given as well as discover some new legislation altogether. We will explore the spiritual implications of what it means to be a covenant people. We will also interact with the Hebrew text from time to time, where it seems appropriate for a better understanding, as well as explore the connections between ancient Near Eastern culture and the emerging family of Israel. Especially, we will try to place the contents of the book in its proper context, whether in the larger framework of the Torah, the religious and culture framework of the ancient Near East, or the flow of ideas as the book progresses. We shall also approach the book from the classical position of Christian theology, which is to say, we regard the book as the true Word of God. This latter point of view is essential, since it brooks no neutrality: either Holy Scripture is God's Word or it isn't, but one cannot remain agnostic on the issue. How one decides will significantly affect the way one reads and interprets the book. This is not to say that there may not be issues internal to the book with which classical Christians must wrestle. That is a given in any piece of ancient literature. But it is to say that even if there remain unanswered questions (and there will be some), the commentator still must acknowledge that God and his Word are faithful, even if our human limitations prevent us from full comprehension. As St. Paul reminds us, we "see through a glass darkly."

There are several approaches we will not use in this commentary. We will not explore the various contemporary options for the emergence of Israel. We shall assume from the beginning that there was a historical Moses, an historical exodus, and that the experience at Mt. Sinai and the sojourn in the desert were essential to the formation of the nation prior to the Israelite entry into the land of Canaan. (If the reader wants to engage in this issue, please consult my commentary on the Book of Exodus, pp. 8-12;

www.dkonos.org). We also will not engage in the moral question of war against the desert dwellers encountered during the sojourn nor the invasion of the Canaanites. This, without doubt, is a sticky question, but lies outside our purview in this commentary. (If the reader wants to engage in this issue, please consult my commentary on the Book of Joshua, pp. 20-24; www.dkonos.org).

I also will not employ what today has become a standard in the academy when producing commentaries on biblical books, the use of source, form, and redaction criticism. Source criticism is the process of evaluating ancient texts by exploring the sources to which the original author might have had access. That the Book of Numbers was composed sometimes using supplementary sources seem clear enough (e.g., 21:14),¹ but in the academy, the use of source criticism comes with a much wider application, especially with the dominance of the JEDP theory for the past century and a half. (If the reader wants to engage in this issue, please consult my commentary on the Book of Exodus, pp. 6-7; www.dkonos.org). Form criticism concerns literary patterns in the Bible and often attempts to isolate various units, tracing each to its origin, either in text or oral tradition, and especially, how the story may have changed as it was passed down. Redaction criticism explores how editors have brought together these pre-existing sources and shaped the final form of the narrative to achieve certain theological or ideological goals. Obviously, these three disciplines are interrelated, and while they have value in academic study, it is easy for the reader to miss the forest for the trees. Often enough, such approaches lead the reader away from the primary meaning of the book (or change it), rather than toward it. Insofar as these disciplines sometimes include assumptions that are in direct conflict with classical Christianity, such as the rejection of divine inspiration, the historical Moses, and the event of the exodus as described in the Torah, their use has limited value for what I intend in this commentary. Whatever comments I make along these lines will be limited and non-technical.

What the Book of Numbers is About

While the Book of Numbers clearly describes narratives and laws from the Israelite sojourn in the desert, these accounts were more than just stories, for they embodied a profound theological purpose. Later, Moses will say to the people that these experiences were “to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his [Yahweh’s] commands” (Dt. 8:2). As such, the Book of Numbers finds its place in the sequence of the five books of the Torah, linked to God’s covenants with Abraham (Genesis) and Moses (Exodus) in the past and the living out of this covenant life as they traveled toward the land of Canaan God had promised.

¹ Scholars also see the possibility of sources in the variety of literary genres in Numbers, such as, narrative, law, poetry, genealogy, priestly material, and so forth. Be that as it may, it is unnecessary to assume that the compilation of such materials is necessarily post-exilic, cf. E. Carpenter, “Numbers, Book of,” *ISBE* (1986) 3.562-563.

They were now to be the people of God, called as a kingdom of priests to be a holy nation (Ex. 6:6-9; 19:3-6). Through the Tabernacle, Yahweh now dwelt in the midst of Israel (Ex. 40:34-38). Just as he was holy, they were to be holy (Lv. 19:1-2; 20:7-8, 26; etc.). However, as the Book of Numbers will illustrate, there was a great disparity between what the people were intended to be and what they actually turned out to be. It was one thing to take Israel out of Egypt and quite another to take Egypt out of the Israelites. Their repeated lack of trust, complaints, and outright rebellion demonstrated that they largely failed in this regard. Even Moses had his moments of shortfall, which would ultimately restrict him from entering the promised land (Nu., 20:12). Hence, the Book of Numbers is a continuing saga of stubbornness and unbelief. Because of their rebellion, the Israelites were consigned to this sojourn in the desert until everyone 20 years old and older had died (Nu. 14:28-33). Indeed, as one New Testament writer would later summarize, they could not enter the promised land “because of unbelief” (He. 3:16-19).

Against this dismal backdrop of Israel’s covenant failure shines the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh, a contrast that would be captured in an early Christian “trustworthy saying” (2 Ti. 2:11-13).

*If we died with him;
 we will also live with him;
 If we endure,
 we will also reign with him.
 If we disown him,
 he will also disown us;
 If we are faithless,
 he will remain faithful,
 for he cannot disown himself.*

Despite Israel’s repeated failures, Yahweh guided the people, blessed them repeatedly, disciplined them for their disobedience, provided for them, protected them, and ultimately enabled a second generation to survive by his divine grace. The Balaam stories, especially, demonstrate Yahweh’s favor toward Israel. Each time the Mesopotamian prophet sought to pronounce a curse upon the people, he could only utter blessing (22:12; 23:11; 24:1, 9-10). It is this aspect of divine grace that shows through most clearly. As Moses would succinctly put it in his intercessory prayer to God, “In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.” And Yahweh replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked” (Nu. 14:19-20).

In this larger context of serving as the holy people of God, the Book of Numbers accentuates the importance of cult and ritual. Issues of uncleanness and purification

were paramount if the people were to remain near this holy God who lived among them. Through cult and ritual, the unholy people were made fit. While much of this ritual is described in the Book of Leviticus in a more theoretical way, the Book of Numbers fleshes out this ideal in narratives. As the primary leader, Moses represented the authority of Yahweh, and this authority was passed down through him to Aaron, the priests, the judges, the military commanders, and the prophets.

Ultimately, the Book of Numbers functions as the bridge between Sinai and Canaan. The divine promise was that God would give the land to the Israelites, though paradoxically they also were to “take it” (Nu. 13:1; 14:8; 32:7-9; 33:53). The Book of Numbers takes the Israelites to the border of Canaan east of the Jordan River.

Author

I believe that Moses was a real historical person. To those imbued with classical Christianity, such an assertion may seem beside the point, but in the present academic environment, it is not a given. William Hallo of Yale University coined the expressions minimalism and maximalism to describe the spread of scholarship in this regard. Minimalism is the scholarly point of view that the Bible is not a privileged text and must be treated on the same level or even a reduced level (since it is believed to be heavily biased) as all other ancient texts. As such, large portions of biblical history, including Moses and the Book of Numbers, are treated as legend or heroic myth.² If something in the Bible cannot be demonstrated by corroborating evidence from outside the Bible, its historical veracity is suspect if not rejected outright. Maximalism, on the other hand, is the scholarly point of view that biblical historical statements can be generally accepted unless flatly contradicted by outside data.³

The attempt to correlate biblical data with ancient Near Eastern data in texts, monumental inscriptions, and archaeological investigation has led to major revisions with respect to the biblical record. Often, patriarchal history, for which there is a paucity of outside evidence, is widely regarded as irrecoverable and better attributed to the genre of legend than historiography, and this includes the person of Moses himself. To be sure, sometimes scholars are compelled to revise their opinions, and it is not impossible that something from the ancient world might emerge to stimulate a reconsideration of Moses. This certainly has been the case with regard to the 9th century BC Tel Dan stele discovered in 1993 that references “the [ki]ng of the House of David.” David, also, had been regarded by some as a mythical figure, but the

² Major “players” embracing this point of view include Philip Davies (University of Sheffield), Niels Peter Lemche (University of Copenhagen), Thomas Thompson (Marquette University), and Margaret Steiner (University of Leiden).

³ Major “players” embracing this point of view include Kenneth Kitchen (University of Liverpool), Alan Millard (University of Liverpool), William Hallo (Yale University), and Andre Lemaire (Sorbonne University).

excavation of this inscription has compelled many if not most to now regard David as a historical figure.

In Rabbinic tradition, Moses was regarded as the author of the Pentateuchal material, so of course, this includes the Book of Numbers. This assumption gave rise to the alternative designation of the Torah as the “Books of Moses,” and the rabbinical tradition passed into the Christian church from there. There is no question but that Moses is described as writing certain texts that appear in the Torah (Ex. 17:14; 24:4; 34:27; Nu. 33:2; Dt. 31:9, 22, 24). In the sayings of Jesus in the gospels, he speaks of what Moses “wrote” (Mk. 10:5; Jn. 5:46-47), and repeatedly he speaks of laws and ideas in the Pentateuch which he links with Moses. When Paul quotes from Deuteronomy, he says, “Moses says...” (Ro. 10:19). Within the Pentateuch itself, there are literally hundreds of instances describing God communicating directly with Moses.⁴ Further, in Deuteronomy, Moses speaks in a 1st person voice (Dt. 1 and following). Still, it must be conceded that in the larger sphere of the Torah texts, the five scrolls are formally anonymous, and in no passage does the Bible say directly that Moses “wrote” the Torah. Of course, “writing,” which is a physical act of inscription, may not be precisely the same thing as the originator of the ideas, so while everywhere both the Old and New Testaments view Moses as the mind behind the Torah, it still could be the case that other hands were involved, and indeed, there seems to be some indications that this was so.

In the first place, there are various passages in the Torah that can only be understood as having come from a hand other than Moses. Probably the most well-known is the account of Moses’ death, which was hardly written posthumously (Dt. 34). At the end, the statement, “Since then no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses...” surely must belong to a time later than Moses (Dt. 34:10-12). Anachronisms like the reference to the northern migration of the Danite tribe centuries before it happened (Ge. 14:14; cf. Jg. 18:29) or the reference to Ur of the Chaldeans centuries before the Chaldeans lived there (Ge. 11:31) or the statement concerning Edomite kings who reigned prior to any Israelite king (Ge. 36:31) or the references to the land of the Philistines before they arrived in the south coast of Canaan (Ge. 10:14; 21:32, 34; Ex. 23:31) seem to presuppose later hands. Then there are the “until this day” type references describing things like King Og’s iron bed (Dt. 3:11) or what on the face of it seems to be a clear reference to the exile of the northern kingdom and perhaps the Babylonian exile of Judah (Dt. 29:27-28). The point of view in Deuteronomy with its recurring phrase “the other side of Jordan” (Dt. 1:1, etc.) appears several times, and it presupposes a point of view *after* the Israelites have already crossed the river, which was certainly later than Moses. Here, the “other side” refers to the area east of the

⁴ More than 60 times in Numbers alone is the expression, “Yahweh said to Moses...”, cf. T. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers [NICOT]*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), p. 4.

Jordan River, and it could hardly be the “other side” if they were still camped in the Plains of Moab. Then there are passages such as the description of Moses as the most humble man on the face of the earth (Nu. 12:3). Would such a humble man write this about himself (and in the 3rd person)? Finally, Joshua is also said to have drawn up decrees and laws and “recorded these things in the Book of the Law of the God” (Jos. 24:25-26). All these things suggest that the final form of the Pentateuchal texts was far more complicated than simply Moses acting as his own scribe. It is usual for later references to the writings of the Torah to appear in passive voice, i.e., “...as written in the law of Moses” (1 Kg. 2:3; 2 Kg. 14:6; Da. 9:13; 2 Chr. 23:18; 25:4; Ezr. 7:6; 1 Co. 9:9), rather than active voice, “Moses wrote...” In addition, the Book of Numbers also pulls in outside material which depends upon writers other than Moses. The “Book of the Wars of Yahweh” (21:14-15), an ancient source no longer extant, the Amorite song of victory over the Moabites (21:26-30), and the oracles of Balaam (23-24) all belong to hands other than Moses.

In the end, while the biblical text admits no doubt that the mind of Moses stands behind the composition of the Pentateuch, the actual process of encoding what God revealed to him is less clear. Is the historical Moses the man behind the Pentateuch? The biblical answer is an unqualified “yes.” Did he inscribe it all personally? The Bible does not say. Are there additional hands involved? The Bible itself seems to say “yes.”

Date and Audience

So, when did the Book of Numbers reach its final form? Various answers are possible and all are to greater or lesser degrees conjectural. Given the mind and hand of Moses himself behind Numbers, the date of the exodus is the first consideration. Two dates, about two centuries apart, are debated, an early date, ca. 1446 BC, and a later date, ca. 1250 BC. (If the reader wants to engage in this issue, please consult my commentary on the Book of Exodus, pp. 12-15; www.dkonos.org). What was revealed to Moses by God and what was inscribed in the Book of Numbers was first and foremost for the people of Israel in Moses’ own day, composed as a history and warning to the 2nd generation of Israelites that camped in the Plains of Moab east of the Jordan River. Assuming a later date for the exodus, this means the 13th century BC. There is general agreement among most scholars concerning the antiquity of the poetry and narratives that comprise the non-priestly material. A variety of technical terms parallel ancient Mesopotamian terms but did not survive in the post-exilic Hebrew language, which in turn argues for a date in antiquity. In addition, some eleven priestly terms and fifteen priestly institutions, which are present in Numbers, disappear in the post-exilic period and support the conclusion of a date in antiquity.⁵ This conclusion, of course,

⁵ Jacob Milgrom, the eminent Jewish scholar, has assembled lists and descriptions of these terms and institutions. He concludes, “Thus, eleven priestly terms and fifteen priestly institutions mentioned in Numbers disappear from usage

runs against the source critical scholars who attribute the compilation of the material in Numbers to the sources of JEDP and date it not earlier than the 6th or 5th century BC, which is to say, in the post-exilic period. Such late dating efforts, in the opinion of this author, can be safely set aside.

At the same time, a date in antiquity from the period of Moses himself, which seems the best answer for a general dating, must be balanced with the various anachronisms and smaller pieces of material that might well have come from later editorial hands. Still, in the end, the substance of the book is early, not late.

A further word should be said about the audience of the book. If the 2nd generation of Israelites were the initial audience, it does not follow that they were the only audience. Indeed, the later generations of Israel would continue to face the warnings in Numbers against covenant failure and rebellion (Psa. 81:7ff.; 95:8-11; 106:21-33; cf. Nu. 20), and these warnings would carry over into the New Testament as well (He. 3:7-19; 4:2-3, 6-7). Hence, we should speak of audiences rather than an audience.

Text and Language

Our oldest substantial copies of the Hebrew text of Numbers are fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls (ca. 2nd century BC).⁶ Precisely because they are fragments means that translators must continue to rely primarily on the Masoretic Text (early 11th century AD), supplementing it as appropriate from these scroll fragments.⁷ In addition, the Book of Numbers appears in copies of the Samaritan Pentateuch (ca. 12th century AD) as well as copies of the Septuagint (4th century AD).⁸ Textual scholars agree that the text of the Book of Numbers is very stable and in its various sources demonstrate a transmission relatively free from corruption and largely free of variants.⁹

It must be born in mind that the Hebrew language itself was in transition in the time of Moses and later, even if one accepts a 13th century date for the exodus. (If one adopts a 15th century date, this shift is even more pronounced.) The precise nature of the language of Jacob's family in Egypt is unknown. The upheavals which rearranged the political geography of Syria-Palestine during the transition from Late Bronze Age

in the postexilic age. In addition, thirteen priestly terms and ten priestly institutions...originate in the earliest period of (or prior to) Israel's national existence. In sum, we have twenty-six strong reasons and twenty-three supportive ones for affirming the antiquity of the priestly material in the Book of Numbers, cf. J. Milgrom, *Numbers* [JPS Torah Commentary] (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. xxxii-xxxv.

⁶ Besides these fragments, there is the small foil text of the priestly blessing from 6:24-26. See the later comments on 6:22-27.

⁷ These fragments include: **2QNum^a** Num. 3:38-41, 51--4:3; **2QNum^b** Num. 3:47-53; **2QNum^c** Num. 7:88; **2QNum^d** Num. 18:8-9; **4QNum^b** Num. 11:31—36:7 (fragments, not full texts); **Nahal Hever** Num. 27:2-13; 28:11-12.

⁸ There were also Septuagint fragments of the Book of Numbers in the Dead Sea Scrolls (**4QLXXNum**).

⁹ G. Gray, *Numbers* [ICC] (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1903 p. xxxix.

II to Iron Age I (ca. 1400 to 1200 BC) produced changes in the linguistic map as well. It is likely that Hebrew emerged as a distinct language during this period, though it used the same alphabet as several other Northwest Semitic languages as well as held a rather large pool of common vocabulary. Biblical Hebrew emerged out of a mix of ancient Near Eastern Semitic Languages with close links to Ugaritic, Phoenician, Moabitish, and Edomitish. The alphabets were consonantal and essentially the same, and there were many words common to all these languages. It was naturally an oral language before it was a written language. Occasionally, “loan words” from other languages are to be found in the biblical text (e.g., Aramaic). By about the mid-11th century BC (the time of Samuel and Saul), several important developments occurred resulting in the standardization of Hebrew. The stance of alphabetic letters became stable. The direction of writing became consistent (right-to-left). The number of consonants in the Hebrew alphabet was standardized to 22 letters. Accordingly, the earliest written forms of the Torah, such as, the 10 commandments (Ex. 31:18; 32:16) and Moses’ written accounts (e.g., Ex. 24:4; Nu. 33:1; Dt. 31:24), would necessarily have been “modernized” as the Hebrew language developed with respect to vocabulary, grammar, and the forms of the letters themselves, and like all language, it would continue to change, especially after the Babylonian exile.¹⁰

Title

The English title “Numbers” derives from the Latin Vulgate, where it was titled *Numeri*, which in turn came from the Septuagint, where it was titled *Arithmoi*. All three titles depend upon the two censuses that serve, more or less, as bookends in Chapters 1 and 26. The Hebrew title, taken from the first line in the Hebrew Bible, is **בְּמִדְבָּר** (= “in the desert”), and this seems the most appropriate, since the larger portion of the book is not about the censuses, but rather, the sojourn in the desert.

Structure

Literary structure in some biblical books is quite apparent (e.g., Job), while in others it may not be discernable at all (e.g., Jeremiah). Because Numbers has a mixture of genres of both travel narratives and law, its structure is less apparent, and scholars have offered multiple ways of analyzing it, ranging from geography, theme, movement, and so forth. Most, however, divide it into three major blocks, and I will follow suite, offering a simple geographical structure.

¹⁰ C. Rollston, “What’s the Oldest Hebrew Inscription?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (May/June 2012), pp. 32-40, 66-68; A. Hurvitz, “How Biblical Hebrew Changed,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (September/October 2016), pp. 37-40, 62.

At Sinai: Organization of the Community Before Departure (1:1—10:10)
North of Sinai: Journey in the Desert from Sinai to Moab (10:11—22:1)
Plains of Moab: Preparations for Entering the Promised Land (22:2—36:12)

It should be observed that the Book of Numbers exhibits smaller internal structures using chiasm in many places. Chiasm is an ancient literary device in which pairs of items are reversed so as to yield a pattern of interrelated lines following a scheme of ABBA, ABCBA, etc. In such structures, the center is emphasized, since the parallel lines lead toward this center and then away from it. Many of the chiasms in Numbers are relatively simple, consisting of four lines, such as:

A *Would that we had died*
 B *in the land of Egypt*
 B' *or in this desert*
 A' *Would that we had died* (14:2, my translation)

In many if not most English versions, such chiasms can be difficult to see, especially if the translators have rearranged the syntax of the Hebrew lines to achieve a more typical syntax in English. For instance, in the above chiasm, where I have followed the Hebrew text closely, the NIV reads, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert!” Here, the chiasm is ignored altogether, and the line “would that we had died,” which appears twice in the Hebrew text, appears only once in the NIV.

Some chiasms can be stretched over a longer narrative unit, such as, the story of the rebellion at Kadesh. Here, the chiasm is as follows:

A *The 12 spies enter Canaan (13:1-25)*
 B *The spies bring back their mixed report (13:26-33)*
 C *The people rebel (14:1-10a)*
 B' *God sentences the people to die in the desert (14b-38)*
 A' *The 12 tribes fail in their attempt to enter Canaan (14:39-45)*¹¹

Theology and Themes

The theology of the Book of Numbers resonates with the theology of the other scrolls in the Torah and takes its place in the longer saga from the time of Abraham until Israel reached the Transjordan east of Canaan. In Genesis, God’s choice of Abraham’s family and the covenant promise that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan is followed by the Exodus story of divine deliverance from Egypt and the building of the Tabernacle, where Yahweh would dwell among the Israelites. At Mt. Sinai, God and Israel entered into a profound covenant relationship. Exodus is

¹¹ For a more thorough treatment of chiasms in Numbers and other literary devices, see J. Milgrom, *Numbers* [JPS Torah Commentary] (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. xxii-xxxi.

followed by Leviticus, where the system of worship and the call to holiness is paramount. Numbers then details the desert trek to the Promised Land and the central importance of faith and obedience as covenant requirements. Finally comes Deuteronomy with Moses' final words to the people before his death as they prepare to cross over into the land of Canaan. Numbers has its own unique contributions to this larger story. The recurring themes of the people's rebellion, the holiness of Yahweh, and his abiding presence are keys to understanding the theology of the book.

Regularly expressed in Numbers are cycles of rebellion and unfaithfulness. From their complaints about food (11), their flat refusal to go into Canaan from Kadesh (14), their challenge to Moses' authority (16), their impatience with God (21), to their apostasy at Baal of Peor (25), they demonstrated that their overriding character was unbelief. Psalm 106:24-29 vividly captures this repeated failure:

*Then they despised the pleasant land;
they did not believe his promise.
They grumbled in their tents
and did not obey the LORD.
So he swore to them with uplifted hand
that he would make them fall in the desert...
They yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor
and ate sacrifices offered to lifeless gods;
They provoked the LORD to anger by their wicked deeds,
and a plague broke out among them.*

In bold relief against this penchant for disobedience stood the faithfulness of God. He was faithful to his promise to go with them on their desert journey (9:15-23; 10:33-36; cf. Ex. 33:12-17), and even the pagans recognized that Yahweh was resident among the Israelites (14:13-14; 23:21). The moving cloud, representing a sort of moveable Mt. Sinai, led them through the desert. Whenever it moved, they moved. Here, God's presence among them would begin the process of shaping them into his holy people. Still, God's presence was not to be treated lightly, for he was a holy God, and whenever anyone impinged upon the holy space surrounding him, judgment was the result. The priests and Levites were authorized to execute any unauthorized person who would attempt to draw near the Tabernacle or who set up a family tent without maintaining an appropriate distance (1:51-53 3:10; 2:2; 3:10). Purity was paramount, and anyone ceremonially unclean was obliged to leave the camp, since Yahweh was within it (5:2-4). The Levites assigned to carry the implements of the Tabernacle when traveling were obliged to carefully avoid viewing holy objects that were accessible only to the priestly class: when the encampment was moved, all such objects had to be wrapped without touching them or even looking at them (4:15, 20). The priests themselves were required to follow God's instructions precisely, and when two of

Aaron's sons carelessly offered unauthorized fire, they were struck dead (Nu. 3:4; cf. Lv. 10:1-3).

God's presence in the camp also accentuated his grace and capacity to forgive, and this character is demonstrated in a variety of ways. The Levites, for instance, encamped as a protective body so that they were stationed between the Tabernacle, where God dwelt, and the encampments of the 12 tribes (1:53). When the Israelites failed—and they failed often—the intercession of Moses and the extension of divine grace spared them (14:10-20). If sin were not so serious, divine grace would not have been so precious. Throughout the desert sojourn, God provided sustenance (11:4-34; 20:2-13), both caring for the people but also testing them. He gave them victory over their enemies (21:21-35; cf. 24:8-9). The priestly blessing, above all other things, demonstrated Yahweh's gracious intention toward the people of Israel (6:22-27).

One of the most important theological aspects of Numbers is its attention to ritual, which occupies much space in the book. Rituals are not simply empty religious acts, and for the ancient Near Eastern person, rituals provided structure and deep-seated meaning to their lives. They expressed religious truths visually rather than verbally. They enabled people to process emotions, reinforce their belief system, build their identity within the larger social group, and cope with the challenges of life by linking them to their tradition and history. In ritual, people express what moves them most. So, whether by the regulations for the Tabernacle and priesthood, the various laws on purity and sacrifice, or the participation in annual festivals, ritual is an essential means of communication between God and humans.

Rituals come in a multitude of forms, including everything from the filthy water ordeal for a woman suspected of adultery (5:11-31) to the Nazirite vow (6:1-21) to wearing of tassels as a reminder that the Israelites were called to be a holy people set apart (15:38-41). These forms included the rituals for purification using the ashes of a red heifer (19:1-10) as well as the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual offerings (28-29). All were to be performed precisely. Modern people, who tend to dislike tradition and ritual but champion innovation, generally pass over these passages with little serious consideration. For ancient Israel, ritual was profoundly serious.

Throughout the book, the prospect of entering the promised land looms large. The failed attempt after the rebellion at Kadesh, which climaxed with the sentence of death in the desert to everyone over 20 years old, was followed by laws anticipating the arrival of the nation in Canaan (15:1ff.). So, even though postponed, the land was still to be theirs, if not directly, then to their children. God would give it to them (32:7-9), just as he had sworn to Abraham (32:11). Further, just as God is holy and the people were to be holy, the land itself was to be regarded as holy, since God would continue to dwell among them in this land (35:34). This quality of holiness is at least part of the reason the Canaanites were to be expelled (33:51-53). At the end, with Moses

anticipating his death and a successor already ordained (27:15-23), the Book of Numbers closes with the observation that these were the commands and regulations given on the Plains of Moab (36:13), an observation that would be repeated as the opening words in Deuteronomy, which immediately follow (Dt. 1:1).

One additional theological aspect of Numbers should be addressed, the links between it and the New Testament in the form of typology. This approach to interpretation was favored by the early church fathers (especially from the Alexandrian school), and centuries later, by many of the Reformers. Modern theologians tend to dismiss it, but more recent biblical theologians have revived it, though in a more circumspect way than was true earlier.

Typology is the understanding that various people and events in the Old Testament in some sense prefigure people and events in the New Testament. As such, types are inherently prophetic, and they assume the unity of the Bible and the trustworthiness of its historical underpinnings. It should be assumed at the outset, of course, that typology is also inherently intentional, at least with respect to God as the final author of the Bible. This is especially to be seen in the various New Testament texts that directly carry these same assumptions. As such, types are not merely parallels depending on the ingenuity of the interpreter, but *bona fide* relationships between the type (the Old Testament advance presentation) and the antitype (the New Testament person or event that it foreshadows).

The New Testament uses the Greek term *τύπος* (= model, pattern) at various places. In 1 Corinthians 10:6, Paul uses it concerning the relationship between the Israelite sojourn in the desert and the life of the Christian, and it is to the point that two of the incidents he cites, the miracle of water from the Rock (1 Co. 10:4; cf. Nu. 20:2-13) and the seduction of the Israelites by the Moabites (1 Co. 10:7-10; cf., Nu. 25), are both from the Book of Numbers. Indeed, Paul seems to suggest that implicitly the ancient Israelites put Christ himself to the test. The cloud of Yahweh's presence leading the Israelites through 40 years in the desert (9:15-23) anticipates Jesus being led by the Spirit into the desert for 40 days, where he was tempted, just as the Israelites were tempted (Mt. 4:1-2; cf. Dt. 8:2-3). Jesus also makes the connection between the manna in the desert that anticipated himself as the true bread from heaven (Jn. 6:32-33; cf. Nu. 11:4-6). The ancient Israelite rejection of the manna in the desert anticipates their later rejection of Christ (Jn. 6:58-60). The gift of the Spirit upon the elders of Israel, about which Moses said he wished that the Spirit could be given to the entire company of God's people (Nu. 11:29), anticipated the day when the Spirit would indeed be given to all (Ac. 2:1-4, 16-18). Jesus connected the bronze snake that Moses erected on a pole for healing (Nu. 21:8-9) with his being lifted up on the cross (Jn. 3:14-15).

A final word should be said concerning the limits of typology. At the very least, Old Testament types should be recognized when they are clearly cited in the New Testament. On the other hand, the undisciplined use of typology by some early church fathers (i.e., Origen and Ambrose), where they seemed to find types under virtually every rock and bush in the Old Testament, becomes a testimony to the imagination of the interpreter more than a witness to something God intended. Are there types beyond what the New Testament itself draws attention? Probably, but the interpreter should use restraint in order to avoid falling into the trap of the arbitrary or fanciful.

AT SINAI

Organization of the Community Before Departure (1:1—10:10)

The Book of Numbers describes the journey of Israel toward the promised land. The initial chapters concern the preparations for the people to leave Mt. Sinai, a period of some three weeks, from the 1st day of the second month of the 2nd year (1:1) to the 20th day of the second month of that same year (10:11). They had camped at the Mountain of God for nearly a year (cf. Ex. 19:1). The latter half of the Book of Exodus and the whole of the Book of Leviticus had been preoccupied with this encampment.

The Census of Warriors (1:2-46)

The first order for preparing to leave was to be a census of all the warriors 20 years old and older (1:2-4). A list of the 12 family heads is given who were to manage the count, including both of the Joseph tribes but without the Levite tribe (1:5-19; cf. 1:47). Obviously, this census was intended as a preparation for war, when the nation would reach the land of Canaan. As it would turn out, the invasion of Canaan would not happen for some time (Book of Joshua), and the reason for delay would be accounted for in the narrative of chapters 13-14.

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

While the Levite tribe is not included in this census (their count would come separately), both Joseph tribes are counted to make up the total of 12 tribes contributing to the invasion force. Also, it will be immediately noticed that the figures seem to be rounded off, mostly to the hundreds. At the end, the total figure is 603,550, the same number as given earlier for the gift of the half shekel for the Tabernacle construction (cf. Ex. 38:26; cf. 30:11-16). It is nearly the same as the approximate number of those who originally came out of Egypt, which was a round figure of 600,000 (Ex. 12:37; cf. Nu. 11:21).

These large numbers are staggering! An army of 603,550, plus all the women, children, the Levites, and those too old to fight, not to mention a mixed group of non-Israelites which accompanied them (Nu. 11:4; cf. Ex. 12:38), yields a total population of around 2 ½ million people, more or less. At the end of Numbers, a second census would yield a figure of 601,730 (26:51). These are astronomical figures in the context of the ancient world, difficult both internally and externally. It has caused no end of

distress for interpreters who affirm the reliability of the Bible but, quite frankly, do not know what to do with these numbers.

Here are the problems. Internally, the Bible says that the Israelites were the “fewest of all peoples” (Dt. 7:7, 22). They were too few to even populate the land of Canaan but would only be able to do so gradually (Ex. 23:29-30). A population of 2 ½ million would make them arguably the largest people group in the world at the time! Further, there seem to be only two mid-wives authorized by Pharaoh to handle the births within this community, an unbelievable task (Ex. 1:15-21). Of course, one can speculate that these two were only representatives of a whole battery of mid-wives, but there is nothing in the biblical text to recommend such an assumption. Quite a number of practical logistical problems loom large, such as, how could Moses or Aaron (or later, Joshua) “speak” to such a huge group? Again, one can hypothesize that the people could have been divided into smaller groups, and representatives who heard Moses could relate to them what Moses said, but nothing in the text suggests that this was done. Rather, the text simply says, “Moses said to them...” (e.g., Nu. 17:6; 20:10; 30:15; cf. Ex. 16:6, 9, 19; Dt. 1:1). When Moses inquired of Yahweh in the special tent pitched for this divine encounter, *...all the people rose and stood at the entrance of their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent* (Ex. 33:8). If one assumes such a large population, on the face of it this seems impossible. Further, could a group the size of modern metropolitan Detroit and all their animals cross a body of water in a single day? How could they provide fodder for the livestock of such a large group? One can conjecture a miracle, but no miracle is described. How could 70 people (cf. Ex. 1:5) proliferate into a group of 2 ½ million in only four generations (Ge. 15:16). If there were approximately 600,000 warriors, how could they manage the most basic necessity of sanitation, especially if they had to leave the camp to do so (Dt. 23:12)? Prior to entering Canaan, the Edomites, a relatively small people group, attacked them (20:20). How could such a small nation think they could successfully oppose more than half a million Israelite warriors? When they eventually would come to the land of Canaan, the seven Canaanite nations are described as “larger and stronger” than the Israelites (Dt. 7:1). Scholar Norman Snaith has calculated that a group this size, marching 50 abreast with one yard between each rank, would result in a column some 22 miles long, and this does not count the animals! Later war efforts suggest a much smaller army, such as, the attack upon Ai with only 30,000 (Jos. 8:3). The Danites, who would later invade Laish in northern Galilee, are listed with only 600 soldiers (Jg. 18:11, 16) as compared with 64,400 at the final census in Numbers (26:42-43). Possibly the most difficult problem is the fact that if there were 22,273 firstborn males over a month old (Nu. 3:39-43), to account for such a relatively small number for a group of 2 ½ million would mean that each household would need to produce 27 sons and additional daughters, and each Israelite mother would need to bear about 50 children.

Added to these internal issues are daunting external factors. Known armies of the period averaged only about 5,000 or 6,000, and the largest known to date was only 20,000. Would a huge body of some 600,000 warriors be intimidated by Egypt's much smaller army, chariots notwithstanding? According to population density estimates by scholars, the total population of Egypt at this time was hardly more than 3 million, and there is no evidence for a massive depopulation. The total population of Canaan itself would never have been more than a million and probably considerably less.¹²

All these factors have led to the attempt to reduce this number of 600,000 to some more manageable figure that would better suit our knowledge of the ancient world. The scholar who is unconcerned about biblical fidelity can simply dismiss these figures as hopelessly impossible, or indeed, the entire exodus itself as a pious fiction. For those who embrace the reliability of the Bible on theological grounds (and I am one of them), several approaches have been offered to reduce this number.

One frequently employed solution is linguistic, and it concerns the Hebrew word **אלף** (*'eleph*), which normally means "thousand"; however, it also seems to be a homonym for a military unit or a clan or an officer.¹³ Could "six hundred thousand" be translated differently to read "six hundred units" for instance?"¹⁴ The Hebrew text for the Reuben tribe reads 46 *'elephs* and 500. A translation option would be 46 officers and 500 infantry, which is to say, 546 total individuals. If the same approach is used for all the tribal numbers, then the result would be:

<i>Reuben</i>	<i>46 officers and 500 soldiers</i>	<i>= 546</i>
<i>Simeon</i>	<i>59 officers and 300 soldiers</i>	<i>= 359</i>
<i>Gad</i>	<i>45 officers and 650 soldiers</i>	<i>= 695</i>
<i>Judah</i>	<i>74 officers and 600 soldiers</i>	<i>= 674</i>
<i>Issachar</i>	<i>54 officers and 400 soldiers</i>	<i>= 454</i>
<i>Zebulun</i>	<i>57 officers and 400 soldiers</i>	<i>= 457</i>
<i>Ephraim</i>	<i>40 officers and 500 soldiers</i>	<i>= 540</i>
<i>Manasseh</i>	<i>32 officers and 200 soldiers</i>	<i>= 232</i>
<i>Benjamin</i>	<i>35 officers and 400 soldiers</i>	<i>= 435</i>
<i>Dan</i>	<i>62 officers and 700 soldiers</i>	<i>= 762</i>
<i>Asher</i>	<i>41 officers and 500 soldiers</i>	<i>= 541</i>
<i>Naphtali</i>	<i>53 officers and 400 soldiers</i>	<i>= 453</i>

This would make the Israelite army a bit over 6,000 strong, and the whole aggregate of Israelites a much more modest number of about 20,000-25,000. It would also resolve many of the other logistical problems described above. It would make the Israelite

¹² L. Michael Morales, *Numbers 1-19* [AOTC] (London: Apollos, 2024), pp. 101-102.

¹³ It should be noted that Arabic numbers had not yet been invented. All numbers appear as words in the Hebrew text, which is why the term *'eleph* can have homonyms.

¹⁴ Another biblical passage that uses the word **אלף**, if read as a number, results in some 27,000 soldiers being killed by a fallen wall (1 Kg. 20:30). A reduced number, such as 27 soldiers, would be much more likely.

army more compatible with the size of armies of which we know in the Late Bronze Age, where armies were relatively small. Not until the transition into Iron Age I and later, when weaponry became relatively cheap and plentiful, do we find larger armies, and even then, no armies even close to the size of 600,000.¹⁵ While at first glance this solution seems attractive, it does not entirely solve the problem of trying to coordinate the bottom-line number with the individual numbers of the various tribes. The 603,550 total appearing in Numbers 1:46 would be reduced to 600 officers and 3,505 soldiers (4,105 total), which would not match the numbers of adding up the reduced number of officers (598) and soldiers (5,550) in the listing for the individual tribes.

Other solutions suggest symbolic numbers based on astronomy or gematria or even hyperbole (where the figures are multiplied by 10) or perhaps the census figures in the time of David, which may have been retrojected back into the exodus account. None have won the day. Bible translators have chosen to retain the 600,000 number of warriors, albeit with considerable discomfort and the caveat that such a number fits awkwardly with what we know of the ancient world. Hopefully, there may be a more satisfactory answer in the future, but at present, there is no consensus, and the best option seems to rest on defining the word *'eleph* as something other than a number.¹⁶

Responsibilities of the Levites (1:47-54)

The roles of the Levites were different than that of the army, which is why they were not included in the census. They were responsible for managing the Tabernacle and its furniture, disassembling it when traveling, and setting it up when camping. Especially, they were to serve as a holy guard, positioning themselves between the larger body of Israelites and the Tabernacle as a sort of buffer zone to prevent anyone from encroaching upon holy space at the risk of their lives (1:53; 3:10, 38; 8:19).¹⁷

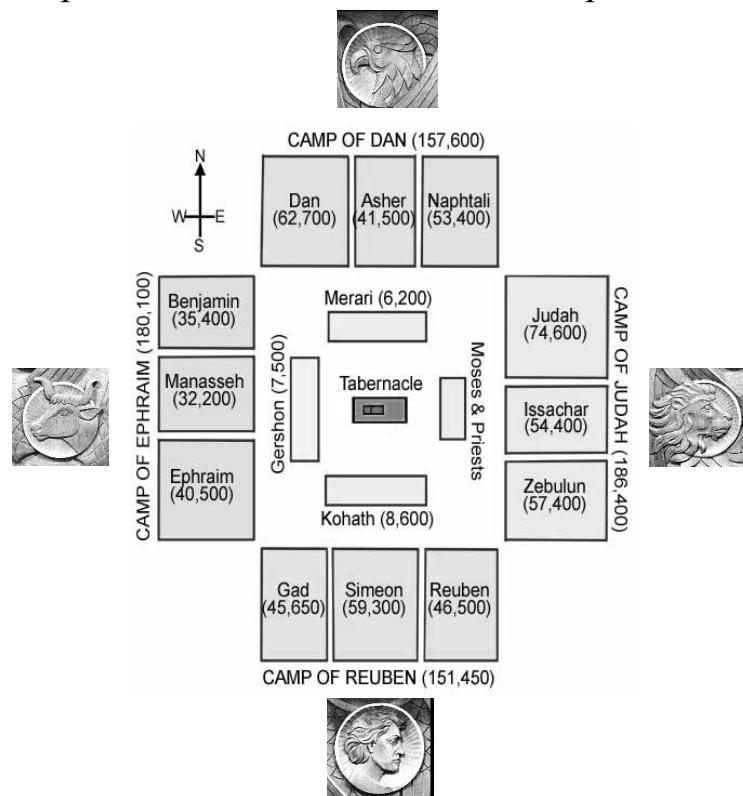
The Encampment (2:1-34)

¹⁵ In the battle described on the Kurkh Stela, which featured Ahab's Israelite army in the 9th century BC (a battle not described in the Bible), Ahab contributed a force of only 2,000 chariots and 10,000 infantry, and his force was the largest in the field! Somewhat later, in the Persian-Greek wars, and even later, in the Roman battles, the numbers are comparatively modest. In the Battle of Marathon, for instance, the Greeks fielded an army of about 11,000 and the Persians about 25,000-30,000 (and many scholars believe the numbers in these ancient sources may have been inflated). It seems clear that a force of 600,000 is very difficult to reconcile with what we know of ancient armies.

¹⁶ See, especially, the lengthy treatment in the NET Bible, Footnote #40 concerning Numbers 1:21. See also the extended discussion in K. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 264-265. See also the detailed discussions in G. E. Mendenhall, "The Census Lists of Numbers 1 and 26," *JBL*, 77, 1958, pp. 52-66; J. W. Wenham, "Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin*, 18, 1967, pp. 19-53; C. J. Humphreys, "The Number of People in the Exodus from Egypt: Decoding Mathematically the Very Large Numbers in Numbers I and XXVI," *Vetus Testamentum*, 48, 1998, pp. 196-213.

¹⁷ Encroachment into the holy space of the Tabernacle was obviously a serious matter, since it included the lethal power of the ark and the various other sancta (4:15b, 20).

The twelve tribes of Israel were to arrange their encampment in a huge rectangle surrounding the Tabernacle, three tribes each on the east, south, west, and north. Each of the four encampments were to display a unique standard or banner for three tribes encamped together, which is to say, four banners or flags of identity. Unfortunately, while we have representations of other standards for ancient Near Eastern peoples, such as the Assyrians, we have no direct biblical description of the symbols for these Israelite banners. An intriguing suggestion, however, is that perhaps the standards employed the symbols found in the four cherubim in Ezekiel's vision of the chariot throne (Eze. 1:10).¹⁸ Since these creatures are depicted as flanking the divine chariot throne on all four sides, and since the cloud of Yahweh's presence (which later texts depict as a chariot throne, cf. Dt. 33:26; 1 Chr. 28:18; Ps. 68:32-34; 104:3b; Is. 19:1), hovered above the Tabernacle and the Israelite encampment, leading them whenever they traveled (9:15-23; 10:14-28), it is not too much of a stretch to assume that the four standards might have depicted a lion (Judah, Issachar, Zebulun), a man (Reuben, Simeon, Gad), an ox (Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin), and an eagle (Dan, Naphtali, Asher). If so, this is the placement of the tribes when encamped with their standards:



Later in the book, a full listing of the encampments will be given (33), but here only the arrangement and order of the camp is in view.

¹⁸ L. Michael Morales, *Numbers 1-19* [AOTC] (London: Apollos, 2024), p. 236.

The Census of Levites (3:1—4:49)

The Levites were not counted in the general census of the warriors, since they were not part of the army. They were counted separately, and their enumeration falls into two blocks, one more general, which included all males more than a month old, and the other for all males between the ages of 30 and 50, the latter being the age of retirement from service to the Tabernacle (cf. 8:23-24). The Levites served as representatives of all the first-born sons of the other tribes, those who had been spared death during the final plague in Egypt (3:11-13; cf. Ex. 11:4-6; 12:12-13, 23, 29-30; 13:2, 14-15). Theoretically, the first-born sons of the tribes were to serve God in the Tabernacle in behalf of their families, but since they also served in the army, the Levites substituted for them in the service of the Tabernacle.¹⁹

The census of Levites began with the family of Aaron and his sons. Two of his sons, Nadab and Abihu, had already died, because they had offered unauthorized fire before Yahweh (Lv. 10:1-2). The remaining two, Eleazar and Ithamar, would serve as priests (3:1-4), and a description of their ordination had been given earlier (Ex. 29; Lv. 8). The Levites were now consecrated as assistants to Aaron to serve in the care of the Tabernacle and to guard its furnishings (3:5-10). There were three branches of the Levitical tribe, Gershon and his clan, Kohath and his clan, and Merari and his clan (3:14-20). The Gershonites were to camp behind the Tabernacle. They were responsible to care for the Tabernacle curtains and coverings (3:21-26). The Kohathites were to camp on the south side. They were responsible to care for the pieces of furniture (3:27-32). The Merarites were to camp on the north side. They were responsible to care for the wooden poles, pegs, ropes, and bracings (3:33-37). Moses, Aaron, and Aaron's sons, who were the Kohathite priests (Ex. 6:20), were to camp on the east side (3:38). The count of the Levites, 7,500 Gershonites, 8,600 Kohathites, and 6,200 Merarites, came to a total of 22,000 (3:39). As is obvious to the careful reader, these numbers are problematic, since the figures in 3:22, 28, and 34 add up to 22,300, not 22,000. Presumably, this discrepancy is due to some scribal transcription variation.²⁰

Since the Levites were intended to represent the firstborn sons of Israel, and since the total number of firstborn Israelites a month old or older came to 22,273 (3:40-43), there were insufficient Levites by a count of 273. Hence, the additional sons had to be bought back according to the redemption laws given earlier (Lv. 27:6a), a five-shekel weight of silver for each. This total weight of 1,365 shekels was paid into the Tabernacle treasury (3:44-51).

¹⁹ Similarly, many years later, David would be restricted from constructing the 1st Temple, since he was a "man of blood" (1 Chr. 22:8; 28:2-3).

²⁰ Noting that Hebrews numbers are written as words, the most likely scribal error may have been to mistake the 8,300 for 8,600. The word שָׁלשׁ (= three) is easily mistaken for שֵׁשׁ (= six) by inadvertently dropping the ל.

The second Levite census counted all males from age 30 to 50, mature men who were fit to carry significant loads (4:1-3). The travel responsibilities of the three Levitical clans are thoroughly detailed. After the priests had packed the Ark, the Table, the Lampstand, the Incense Altar, and the Bronze Altar (the Bronze Laver is not mentioned but can be assumed),²¹ the Kohathites would carry them on poles or carrying frames, careful not to touch them or even look at them in the packing process at the risk of death (4:4-20). Almost certainly there was symbolic meaning in the colors of the packing materials. Blue apparently was reserved for the most holy objects, but the precise significance of blue, purple, and scarlet is never explained.²² The term for the outer sheathing (*tahash*) has been much debated, and the English Versions reflect this debate by translating it variously as “hides of sea cows” (NIV), “sealskin” (ERV, ASV, JPS), “goatskin” (RSV, ESV, NLT), “badgers skin” (KJV, NKJV), “yellow-orange skin” (NAB), “porpoise skin” (NASB), “fine leather” (NET, NJB, NRSV), and “durable leather” (NIB). No doubt ancient people knew exactly what was intended, but we don’t. While the Kohathites carried the sacred furniture on poles across their shoulders or carrying frames, the Gershonites and the Merarites were assigned carts, each pulled by a team of oxen, for carrying the implements assigned to them (4:21-33; cf. 7:1-9).

The actual census figures, both for those a month old and older (3:21-37) and those sufficiently mature to carry Tabernacle implements (4:34-49), may also need adjustment due to the large numbers, just as the census figures for the whole body of Israelites (1:2-46). As a final note regarding Levitical responsibilities, naturally what is given here in Numbers concerns the Tabernacle and travel protocols. Later in Israelite history, after Solomon had constructed the 1st Temple, these responsibilities necessarily became obsolete. We find David assigning the Levites such duties as craftsmanship for construction, service as magistrates and other officials, overseers of the temple precincts, and performing as vocalists and musicians for the temple services (1 Chr. 9:14-33; 23:3-32; 2 Chr. 19:8). As David stated, “Since Yahweh, the God of Israel, has granted rest to his people, and has come to dwell in Jerusalem forever, the Levites no longer need to carry the Tabernacle or any of the articles used in its service” (1 Chr. 23:25-26).

Purifying the Camp (5:1—6:21)

²¹ While the laver is not mentioned in the MT, it does appear in an extra line in the LXX and the Samaritan Pentateuch, a line apparently lost in the long textual history of the MT.

²² The colors are graded, presumably with respect to sanctity, and this grading seems consistent throughout the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Technically, the colors are: *tehelet* (blue-purple), *’argaman* (red-purple), and *tola ’at shani* (crimson). The *tahash* (yellow-orange) is not one of the sacred colors but is used to dye skins, J. Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* בְּמִדְבָּר (Philadelphia/New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 25.

At first glance, the next section covers what might seem to be random laws, but what ties them together is the elimination and prevention of impurity within the encampment. The concept of uncleanness, which is detailed in Leviticus 11-15, should be differentiated from rebellion and sin. Sin is a rebellion against God and associated with death. It can be deliberate and defiant (lit. "sinning with a high hand"), but it can also be the unconscious result of weakness. Either way, however, it results in death (cf. Ge. 2:17; Eze. 18:20; Ro. 6:23). Impurity, on the other hand, can be ethical (i.e., idolatry, bloodshed, sexual sin, etc.) or ritual (corpse contamination, scale disease, genital discharge). The primary agent for remedying sin and impurity is blood, since blood "ransoms" the sinner, which is to say, it substitutes for the life of the sinner and purges impurity (Lv. 17:11; He. 9:22). The primary agent for remedying uncleanness is water and a period of waiting.

The premise behind the impurity laws is that God is holy, and therefore, his people must be fit to be in his presence. Since Yahweh now dwelt in the midst of the camp, the camp itself must remain pure. Impurity laws primarily concern diet, childbirth, infectious disease, mildew, and bodily discharge. Persons could contract impurity in one of two ways, either firsthand (from an internal source, such as, genital discharge or scale disease) or secondhand (from an external source, such as, ritual contamination, carcass or corpse contamination). Significantly, ritual impurity did not in itself include any punishments unless a person brought his/her impurity into contact with the sanctuary. Rather, impurity temporarily restricted the person or object from coming into contact with the sacred (Lv. 22:3). Purification of persons consisted of waiting a period of either one or seven days and ablutions with water (the precedent eventually giving rise to the Jewish *mikva'ot*). Purification of objects (wood, cloth, hide) came by water ablutions and waiting until evening. Some objects (gold, silver, bronze, copper) required more vigorous ablutions. Some (earthenware, carcasses, moldy cloth) could not be purified and had to be destroyed (which gave rise to the potter's field in virtually every village). For more serious purification, burning was sometimes required. In any case, the need for purification did not presume that the person had deliberately done something wrong. It could also have come from accidental situations as well.

Four areas of impurity are now addressed: severely impure persons, fraud, suspected adultery, and the Nazirite vow.

Severely Impure Persons (5:1-4): All three disorders listed concern communicable uncleanness, each of which is covered in more detail in Leviticus: skin disease (cf. Lv. 13:45-46), bodily discharge (cf. Lv. 15:2-33), contact with a corpse (cf. Lv. 11:24-25-28; 21:1-3).

Fraud (5:5-10): Fraud is not only an offense against another person, it is equally an offense against Yahweh. Confession and restitution are required, and the restitution

must include a 20% overage paid to the victim or, if deceased, to a near relative. If no close relative remains, then the restitution was to be paid to the priest at the Tabernacle along with the *'asham* offering (cf. Lv. 6:1-7).

Suspected Adultery (5:11-31): This type of impurity gets a lengthy treatment and a full description of the ritual required (with several repetitions, possibly for emphasis). Here, if a husband suspects his wife of infidelity, described as “breaking faith,” but he has no proof, one way or another, he can take her to the priest, along with a grain offering, to undergo a ritual ordeal to determine her guilt or innocence. The priest is to mix dust from the sanctuary floor with holy water (probably taken from the laver), the woman loosens her hair, and the priest places in her hands the grain offering. He then warns her of the consequences if she is guilty, to which she responds, “Amen, Amen.” He is to write on a scroll the curses for guilt and then wash off the writing into the clay jar holding the filthy water. The woman must then drink the water. Afterward, the priest presents the grain offering before Yahweh, burning a small portion on the altar. If the woman is guilty, she will become barren or possibly suffer a miscarriage if pregnant; if innocent, nothing will happen to her. It is to the point that in the ancient world the inability to conceive a child was a horrendous social shame.

The Nazirite Vow (6:1-21): As Gordan Wenham has aptly put it, Nazirites (from the Hebrew *nazir* meaning “to be set apart”) were the monks and nuns of ancient Israel, the quintessence of holiness.²³ They were Israelites, either a man or woman, who vowed to consecrate their life to the service of God for a specified time (cf. Am. 2:11).²⁴ This period was marked off at the beginning of the vow, and during it the votary must not consume any fermented beverage, eat raisins or grapes, touch a corpse, or cut his/her hair. Even if inadvertently he/she came into proximity with a corpse, such as a family member, the one under vow was required to perform a ritual of purification before starting the vow all over again. At the end of the specified period, he/she must come to the sanctuary for the final rituals of completing the vow. Here, the votary would shave his/her head before completing the sacrificial ritual, and afterward, could return to ordinary life. On rare occasions, some individuals could become life Nazirites, such as, Samson, Samuel,²⁵ and possibly John the Baptist (Jg. 13:5; 1 Sa. 1:11; Lk. 1:15).

The Priestly Blessing (6:22-27)

²³ G. Wenham, *Numbers [TOTC]* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), p. 85.

²⁴ In the New Testament, St. Paul took a Nazirite vow for what appears to be several years (Ac. 18:18), traveling to Jerusalem to complete it (Ac. 21:22-24, 26).

²⁵ While the MT does not use the term Nazirite for Samuel, an additional line in 1 Sa. 1:22 of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QSam) reads, “he shall be a *nazir* forever,” R. Harrison, “Nazirite,” *ISBE* (1986) 3.502.

The final instruction in this current set of laws was the formulation of the priestly blessing, demonstrating Yahweh's divine benevolence toward Israel in a threefold rising crescendo of parallel lines. The repeating idioms about God's face, an anthropomorphism indicating favor when his face is turned toward someone, are echoed in Psalm 67:1. It was the duty of priests and Levites to pronounce such blessings (Dt. 10:8; 21:5; cf. Ps. 118:26), and presumably, it was this blessing which was pronounced by Aaron at the inaugural service of the Tabernacle (Lv. 9:22-23). This blessing, also, was what the people expected to hear when Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, emerged from the 2nd Temple but was unable to utter it, because he had been struck mute (Lk. 1:21-22).

In 1979 at a burial cave in Ketef Hinnom southwest of Jerusalem's Old City, a miniature scroll on silver foil was discovered with ancient Hebrew script, and when unrolled was found to contain this same ancient priestly blessing dating to the 7th century BC. Earlier than the destruction of Solomon's temple, it is now the oldest existing physical evidence of a biblical text.²⁶

Final Preparations for Departure (7:1—10:10)

Carts and Oxen for the Levites (7:1-9)

Two key phrases in 7:1 and 9:15 mark this next section as a sort of parenthesis. It backtracks to Exodus 40:17, the 1st day of the 1st month of the 2nd year, one month earlier than Numbers 1:1, and it offers supplementary material not included elsewhere. After the Tabernacle had been erected and consecrated (7:1; cf. Ex. 40:17-33), the Israelite tribal leaders, who had assisted in the census (cf. 1:4-16) and headed the encampment of the tribes (2:1-34), now brought gifts loaded on six carts pulled by 12 oxen representing the 12 tribes (7:2-3). The carts and oxen were then to be used by the Gersonites and Merarites for carrying the heavier implements of the Tabernacle when traveling (7:4-9; cf. 3:25-26, 36-37).

The Tribal Gifts (7:10-88)

The gifts from each tribe, following the order of encampment described earlier (2), consisted of silver plates, silver basins, and golden ladles. The plates and basins were filled with flour and oil for the grain offering (cf. Lv. 2:1-16; 6:14-23). The ladles were filled with incense. In addition, the leaders brought sacrificial animals for the burnt offering (cf. Lv. 1:1-17; 6:8-13), the sin offering (cf. Lv. 4:1—5:13; 6:24-30), and the fellowship offering (cf. Lv. 3:1-17; 7:11-21). Only animals for the guilt offering (cf. Lv. 5:14—6:7), which were reserved for more serious sins, were omitted.

²⁶ J. Smoak, "Words Unseen," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 44.1 (2018), pp. 52-59, 70.

All these gifts were presented at the altar for its dedication (7:11, 84), which would become the focal point for daily worship. Representatives from each of the tribes made their respective offerings, thus setting a precedent for the whole nation. Each tribe had an equal responsibility to support the sacrificial system, and no tribe, whether larger or smaller, was left out.

Moses and Yahweh (7:89—8:4)

In a brief description, Moses is depicted as entering the Tabernacle in order to listen to the divine voice from within the Most Holy Place. Presumably, he would stand outside the inner veil to hear the voice of God speaking to him from the other side of the curtain. This is a clear shift from the small tent that Moses pitched prior to the erection of the Tabernacle, where Yahweh also spoke to Moses (Ex. 33:7-11). Presumably, this small tent was temporary until the Tabernacle could be constructed. However, it was anticipated that Moses would hear the divine voice in the Tabernacle once it was erected (cf. Ex. 25:22).

It is somewhat confusing to most readers that both this earlier tent, which was pitched outside the camp, and the Tabernacle itself, which was erected in the very center of the camp, are both called the “Tent of Meeting,” even though they are two different structures. That Moses was able to enter the Tabernacle to hear the divine voice naturally leads to the lampstand, which would be the only light within the Tabernacle barring the burning of incense.

The seven lamps of the lampstand (or menorah) were to be set up by Aaron so that they shone forward (i.e., toward the center), thus illuminating the Table of the Bread and the Altar of Incense. The lamps were to be tended morning and evening so that they burned perpetually (Ex. 30:7-8). This article of furniture, described in more detail elsewhere (cf. Ex. 25:31-40), was like a flowering tree, similar to the one Moses saw when on Mt. Sinai (cf. Ex. 25:40; He. 8:5). We have no clear visual representation of this lampstand until the 2nd Temple period, when there is a bas-relief of it in the Arch of Titus constructed in AD 81.²⁷ How similar this Roman depiction might be to the 1st Temple’s menorah can only be conjectured.

Consecration of the Levites (8:5-26)

The consecration of the Levites to their role of service involved a ritual of purification including water ablution,²⁸ complete body shaving, the washing of clothes, and offering grain, sin, and burnt offerings (8:5-8). The Levites were to stand at the

²⁷ Steven Fine, Peter Schertz, and Donald Sanders, “True Colors,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 43.3 (2017), pp. 28-25, 60-61.

²⁸ The water for sprinkling probably was the special water for cleansing mixed with the ashes of a red heifer (19).

front of the Tabernacle before the whole congregation, where the Israelites would impose hands upon them and Aaron and his sons would present them to Yahweh as a wave offering (8:9-11). Typically, a wave offering involved elevating a sacrificial element and moving it horizontally, side-to-side, but here this could hardly be applicable to the Levites, so the ritual must have been symbolic in some way. Then, the physical cleansing of the Levites was followed by their moral cleansing. They would impose their hands on the sacrificial bulls for the sin offering and burnt offering (8:12-14). This sacrifice would qualify them to do the work assigned to them.

The Levites, who were counted earlier in a special census (cf. 3:40-51), served in a representational role as a protective substitution for the first-born sons of the nation (8:15-19). There seems to be a clear chiastic pattern in these commands, which emphasize the representative role of the Levites, since this is the center of the chiastic structure:

- A They served as atonement in behalf of the people (8:12)*
- B They served as assistants in the Tabernacle (8:15)*
- C They were given to Aaron (8:16)*
- D They represented the firstborn (8:16)*
- E This was in lieu of the firstborn struck down in Egypt (8:17)*
- D' They represented the firstborn (8:18)*
- C' They were given to Aaron (8:19)*
- B' They served as assistants in the Tabernacle (8:19)*
- A' They served as atonement in behalf of the people (8:19)*

The importance of this protection is immediately apparent, since the nation was about to celebrate its second Passover. The consecration of the firstborn, all of whom belonged to Yahweh, implied sacrifice (3:11-13; cf. Ex. 13:2), and indeed, firstborn animals were to be sacrificed if not redeemed (18:15-16; cf. Ex. 13:12-13; 22:29b-30; 34:19-20; Dt. 12:6; 14:23). That the firstborn of both human and animal belonged to Yahweh was a vivid reminder of his saving power and every family's responsibility to be loyal to him alone. That firstborn sons were to be redeemed, not killed, stood in sharp contrast to pagan customs, where firstborn sons were sometimes actually killed (cf. 2 Kg. 3:26-27). All these instructions were followed to the letter (8:20-22).

The final section of instructions for the Levites concerned their terms of service. They were to begin their work at age 25 and retire from their duties of transporting the heavy items of the Tabernacle at age 50 (8:23-25). This did not eliminate them from their other primary duty of serving as guards in the encampment (8:26; cf. 1:53; 3:10, 38; 8:19), but it did exempt them from the more arduous tasks requiring younger muscles and stronger backs.

There is some inconsistency in the numbers given. In the Levitical census, the starting age seems to have been 30 (4:3, 23, 30; cf. 1 Chr. 23:3).²⁹ In much later times the starting age is listed as 20 (1 Chr. 23:24, 27; 2 Chr. 31:17; Ezr. 3:8). A clear resolution for these discrepancies is not immediately apparent, but perhaps it is related to the elimination of the upper age in the time of David, since with the building of the 2nd Temple the Levites would no longer need to carry the various implements of the Tabernacle, and the lower age was changed as well (cf. 1 Chr. 23:24-27). Alternatively, a rabbinical solution was the conjecture that a Levite began training at age 25 but did not begin his actual work until age 30. This solution also seems to have been adopted by the members of the Qumran Community in the time of Jesus.³⁰

The Second Passover (9:1-14)

It had now been one year since the initial Passover in Egypt.³¹ Accordingly, Yahweh instructed Moses to celebrate the second Passover as originally instructed (9:1-3; cf. Ex. 12:1ff.; Lv. 23:5). The people did so on the evening of the 14th day of the 1st month (9:4-5).³²

A new problem arose, since no one was allowed to eat sacrificial meat if they were ceremonially unclean (cf. Lv. 7:19-21). Among other things, handling a corpse would render a person unclean, and this situation affected a number of the Israelites, possibly due to a death in the family (cf. Lv. 21:1-4, 11-12; 22:4b). To be sure, the commandment about touching a corpse was originally given with respect to the priesthood, and perhaps this generated the question regarding the community at large. In any case, they appealed to Moses (9:6-7), who in turn appealed to Yahweh (9:8).

Yahweh clarified the laws for purification by directing unclean individuals and/or families that they still should celebrate the Passover, and indeed, unless traveling, were required to do so at the risk of divine penalty (9:9-13).³³ Non-Israelites, here likely referring to the mixed group who accompanied the Israelites out of Egypt (cf. Ex. 12:38), also should participate so long as they followed the regulations, and a brief review of the Passover requirements were rehearsed (9:14; cf. Ex. 12). However,

²⁹ However, the LXX in 4:3, 23, 30 gives 25, thus harmonizing with the figure in 8:24.

³⁰ J. Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers במדבר* (Philadelphia/New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. 65-66.

³¹ It should be kept in mind that the Israelite year was lunar, not solar, and consisted of 12 months, each 30 days long.

³² Literally, the Hebrew text says the celebration took place **בֵּין הָעֶרְבַּיִם** (= between the evenings) after the Hebrew fashion of reckoning days from sunset to sunset (cf. Ex. 12:6-10; Dt. 16:6).

³³ The penalty of being “cut off” (**כָּרַת**) at least means excommunication from the people of God, which would result in almost certain death by starvation, exposure, etc., and perhaps, even judicial destruction, cf. T. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), p.151. For the rabbinical viewpoints on the meaning of this verb “to be cut off,” see J. Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers במדבר* (Philadelphia/New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. 405-408.

such participation in the Passover required a waiting period of one month, which would give ample time for purification rituals to be completed.³⁴

The Cloud (9:15-23)

The date given in 9:15 harks back to Exodus 40:1, one month earlier than the date given in Numbers 1:1. It elaborates what is briefly described in Exodus 40:34-35, when the cloud of Yahweh's glory covered the Tabernacle. At night, the fiery presence of Yahweh within the cloud blazed out like fire (9:16; cf. Ex. 13:21-22; 19:16-19; 24:17-18). This cloud was the primary theophany of Yahweh. It is not merely "a cloud," but "the cloud" and is so marked in the Hebrew text (הֶעָנָן), the same cloud that guided the Israelites from Egypt to Mt. Sinai (Ex. 13:21-22; 14:19-20) and enveloped the mountain when they arrived (Ex. 19:9, 16; 24:15-18). The cloud served as a protective sheath surrounding the fiery presence and divine glory of God, since no one could look directly upon God and survive (Ex. 33:20-23). Attending Yahweh within the cloud were the myriads of heavenly beings (Dt. 33:2; cf. Is. 6:2; Eze. 1:4-14; Rv. 4:4-8). Earlier, in the instructions for *Yom Kippur*, the high priest was warned about any inappropriate entrance into the Most Holy Place, because Yahweh was resident in "the cloud" over the ark (Lv. 16:2). This cloud is presumably the same from which the divine voice spoke to Jesus' disciples at the transfiguration, acclaiming him as God's Son (Mt. 17:5; Mk. 9:7; Lk. 9:34; 2 Pe. 1:16-18). It is the cloud into which Christ disappeared when he returned to the glory he shared with the Father before the creation of the world (Ac. 1:9; cf. Jn. 17:4-5). As such, the cloud both revealed Yahweh's presence while protecting the Israelites from any unwarranted direct visual sight, thus preserving God's ineffability.

The cloud served as a travel guide for the Israelites (9:17-23). Sometimes, the cloud led them to encamp for a day, sometimes for several days, and sometimes a month or more or even a year. So long as the cloud was over the Tabernacle, the nation stayed where it was encamped. When the cloud lifted, however, they knew it was time to travel once again.

The Silver Trumpets (10:1-10)

The final task for preparing to leave Mt. Sinai was the construction of two silver trumpets.³⁵ The trumpets were for assembling the clan leaders (10:1-3), assembling the whole congregation for worship or celebration (10:7, 10; cf. 2 Kg. 11:14; 2 Chr. 5:12-14; Ezr. 3:10-11; Ps. 98:6), and for signaling the arrangement of the Israelites as they

³⁴ Centuries later, Hezekiah would follow this policy of waiting a full month for travel and purification (2 Chr. 30:1-5).

³⁵ It should be understood that these silver trumpets were distinct from the shophars, which were made from animal horns.

marched in formation through the desert, first the clans from the eastern encampment, then the southern, and though not mentioned, presumably then the northern and finally the western (10:4-6). Obviously, such arrangements suggest the movement of an army. In battle, the trumpets were used for signaling as well (10:8-9; cf. 31:6; 2 Chr. 13:12-16).

The trumpets were to be made from hammered silver, and while we have no ancient depiction of them, they do appear as bas-reliefs in the Arch of Titus in the first century AD, and there are written descriptions of them in Josephus, who indicates they were less than a cubit in length with bell shaped ends.³⁶

³⁶ *Antiquities*, iii.12.

NORTH OF SINAI

North of Sinai: Journey in the Desert from Sinai to Moab (10:11—22:1)

The middle and largest section of the Book of Numbers details the travel and sojourn of the Israelites between Sinai and Moab. Central to this section will be the rebellion at Kadesh, which resulted in the long period of waiting for the older generation to die off. Two travelogues will appear in this section, 10:11—12:16 and 20:1—22:1. Between the travelogues will be the narratives regarding the nation's rebellion and its failed attempt to enter the land of Canaan as well as the institution of various laws given while encamped at Kadesh.

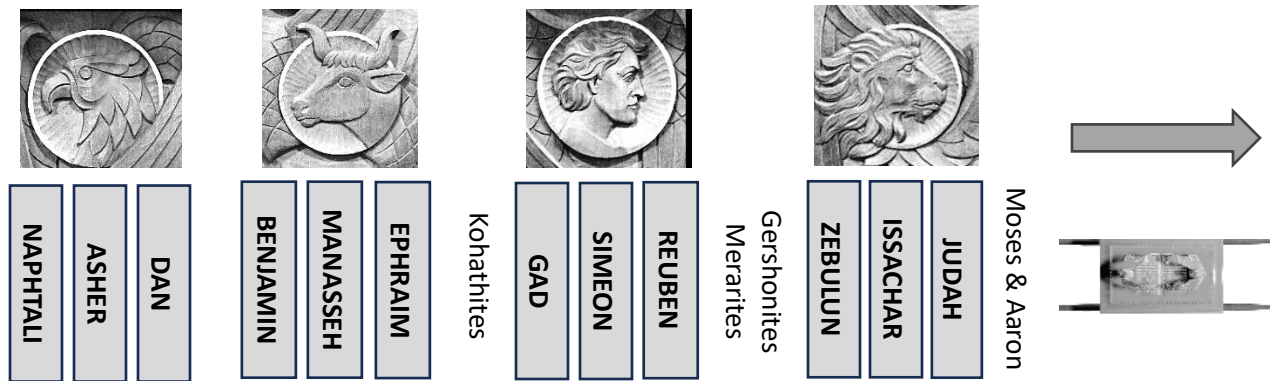
All of the elaborate preparations for departure—the census in preparation for war, the laws of purity, the consecration of the Levites, and a second Passover—would now converge to test whether or not the Israelites could actually live as a holy people dedicated to serve Yahweh as his treasured possession. As would become clear almost immediately, they turned out to be prime examples of moral failure. Only by the grace of God would they survive. Only by continual forgiveness could they claim to be God's covenant people. Along the way, they would suffer repeated disciplines to form and reform their hearts. Herein is an important feature in the nature of grace: grace is not merely permissiveness, and forgiveness does not cancel out discipline.

Leaving Mt. Sinai (10:11-36)

The departure from Mt. Sinai was initiated by the lifting of the cloud, which led them from Sinai to the Desert of Paran (10:11-13; cf. 12:16). This travel entailed some intermediate camps including Taberah (11:3), Kibroth-hattaavah (11:34), and Hazeroth (11:35; 12:16) as well as several narratives about events that happened in those encampments. None of these sites, including the desert of Paran, can be identified with certainty other than to say they were likely in the northern Sinai Peninsula.

The Israelites marched in battle formation, headed by the Ark of the Covenant (10:33b) and Moses and Aaron. Then came Judah under its standard, along with Issachar and Zebulun (10:14-16), followed by the Levitical families of the Gershonites and Merarites (10:17). Next came Reuben under its standard, along with Simeon and Gad (10:18-20), followed by the Levitical families of the Kohathites (10:21). The third group of Israelites marched under the standard of Ephraim, along with Manasseh and Benjamin (10:22-24). The rearguard marched under the standard of Dan, along with Asher and Naphtali (10:25-28).

BATTLE FORMATION FOR TRAVELING UNDER THE FOUR STANDARDS



As the Israelites departed from Mt. Sinai, Moses invited Hobab, his brother-in-law, to accompany them and to serve as their “eyes,” presumably advising them on where to find water and how best to survive in the desert (10:29-32).³⁷ This family of Kenites were desert-dwellers (cf. Jg. 4:11), and while Hobab’s final response is not recorded here, it seems that he and his family joined in the trek to Canaan (Jg. 1:16).

The cloud and the ark led them on their initial three-day journey from Sinai (10:33-34). Each morning when they began travel, Moses announced, “Rise up, O Yahweh! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you” (10:35; cf. Ps. 68:1). When they stopped in the evening, he announced, “Return, O Yahweh, to the countless thousands of Israel” (10:36).

Three Incidents of Rebellion (11:1—12:16)

Three consecutive narratives of complaint now follow, clear evidence of the Israelites’ lack of trust, often leading directly into disobedience. In these narratives (11:1-3; 11:4-34; 12:1-15), the first and last follow a similar pattern: the people complain, Yahweh hears, an appeal is made to Moses, Moses intercedes, the appeal is answered, but the march northward is delayed. The structure of the middle one is more complex, but in all three Moses is the central figure, pointing to his leadership as intercessor and the source for divine guidance.

The Grumbling at Taberah (11:1-3)

³⁷ The MT of Numbers describes Hobab as the son of Reuel, Moses’ father-in-law (Ex. 2:18, 21). There is some ambiguity in the names, since earlier Moses’ father-in-law is called Jethro (Ex. 18:1). Still later, he is called Hobab in the MT of Judges 4:11, though a number of English Versions change the title to “brother-in-law” out of deference to Numbers 10:29 (so ASV, ERV, NIV, NIB, NLT). Some scholars suggest that the Hebrew title *חָתָן* in Judges 4:11 should be simplified as “relation by marriage,” cf. L. Michael Morales, *Numbers 1-19* [AOTC], 2nd ed. (London: Apollos, 2024), 1. 229-230.

The first failure and discipline after commencing their trek toward Canaan resulted from widespread complaints about how hard the journey was (11:1a).³⁸ This would be merely the beginning of their grumbling and complaints (cf. 14:17, 27, 29, 36; 16:11, 41; 17:5, 10; cf. Ps. 106:25). Attitudes have consequences! While this incident might seem to be rather innocuous from a modern point of view, especially for a people traveling through an inhospitable desert, enduring hardness without accusation is an outgrowth of faith, while grumbling is its antithesis. In view of the Israelites' complaints, Yahweh's anger burned hot.³⁹

The initial discipline was an outbreak of fire (possibly lightning?) at the edge of the camp (11:1b). Exactly what was burned is not stated, whether this was desert brush or perhaps even some Israelite tents, but it was sufficiently severe that the people cried out to Moses for relief, who in turn interceded for them to Yahweh (11:2). They named the site Taberah, which means, "burning" (11:3).

The Grumbling at Kibroth-Hattaavah (11:4-35)

The short narrative of the Israelites' initial occasion of grumbling after leaving Mt. Sinai is now followed by a much longer narrative, this one more serious. Here would come not only a test of the people themselves, but also, a test of Moses as their pastor. The issue, as would be true on other occasions, was discontentment with the food (cf. 20:2-5; Ex. 15:22-24). The complaints started with the "rabble" but quickly spread throughout the Israelite nation (11:4-6).⁴⁰ The problem was not the amount of food, but the lack of variety. They had been eating manna for a year now, a flakey, sweet, grain-like substance called the "bread of angels" (11:6-9; cf. Ex. 16:31; Ps. 78:24-25).⁴¹ Now, they craved some alternative, especially remembering the meat, fish, and vegetables they had eaten in Egypt. Later, in reflecting on this penchant for complaining about diet, Moses would offer the famous quip echoed by Jesus, "...man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh" (Dt. 8:3; Mt. 4:4; Lk. 4:4). Paul would later cite the grumbling and deaths of the complainers, who died by "the Destroyer" (1 Co. 10:10).

³⁸ Quite literally, the phrase כְּמִתְאָנְנִים רָע means "like [those] complaining of evil." It is to the point that they were implying that their hardships came from Yahweh, so they were implicitly blaming him. Yahweh was listening!

³⁹ The typical idiom for Yahweh's anger is that "his nose burned" (אָפוּ יָהוָה).

⁴⁰ The term אֶסְפָּרָה, which is a *hapax legomenon*, has been variously rendered as "rabble" (RSV, NRSV, NIV, NIB, NJB, NLT, NASB, ESV), "mixed multitude" (KJV, ERV, ASV, NET, JPS), and "riffraff" (NAB). Presumably, it refers to the non-Israelites who traveled with the Israelite nation (cf. Ex. 12:38; Lv. 24:10; Dt. 29:11; Jos. 8:35).

⁴¹ Ex. 16:15 explains the etymology of the Hebrew word מָן (= "What is it?"). It appeared on the ground with the morning dew (Ex. 16:14). Many attempts have been made to identify this manna with some natural substance in the Sinai desert, ranging from a lichen to the secretion of the tamarisk tree or to excretions of insects. Be that as it may, whatever it was it would last the entire 40-year sojourn in the desert, six days each week (Ex. 16; Jos. 5:12), and because it did not appear on Sabbath days, it seems better to regard it as miraculous rather than simply a natural phenomenon.

Yahweh was angry and Moses was distraught at these complaints (11:10). Appealing to Yahweh, Moses vented his frustration to God in a series of pointed questions culminating with the rather edgy, “If this is how you are going to treat me [making me serve as nursemaid to these incorrigible people], put me to death right now!” (11:11-15). The reader might have expected Yahweh to take umbrage at Moses’ brash words, but instead, he directed Moses to assemble the 70 elders before the Tabernacle, where he would dispense the Holy Spirit upon them just as it rested upon Moses (11:16-17; cf. Ex. 24:1).⁴² The elders would then become Moses’ supporters in managing this mass of unhappy people. As for the people themselves, they were to prepare themselves for an inundation of meat, though the very meat they craved would be more of a judgment than a blessing (11:18-20). Such a quantity of meat seemed incredible, even to Moses, but Yahweh indicated it was coming (11:21-23).

After Moses had assembled the 70 elders, Yahweh descended in the cloud and dispensed his Holy Spirit upon them all, causing them to prophesy (11:24-25). If their prophesy was anything like what Paul described in the New Testament, it was likely an expression of edification or reprimand (cf. 1 Co. 14:3), where he describes prophecy as a message to believers for “strengthening, encouragement, and comfort” as well as “words to instruct” or even an expression of judgment to lay bare the unhealthy attitudes of the complainers (cf. 1 Co. 14:3, 19, 22b, 24-25, 31). Alternatively, if it was analogous to what happened to Zechariah, John’s father, it may have been an expression of praise (Lk. 1:67). It seems to have been a one-time experience (11:25b). An additional note indicates that two of the elders, Eldad and Medad, who for reasons unknown were not present with the others, also were blessed with the gift of the Spirit (11:26-27). Joshua was upset, since they were not present and their absence might suggest a threat to Moses’ authority, but Moses was not disturbed, expressing his desire that the Holy Spirit might someday rest on the whole congregation of Israel (11:28-30), something that would not happen until Pentecost in Acts 2.

Just as Yahweh had promised, the outside of the camp was inundated with meat in the form of quail driven in from the sea by a strong wind (11:31-32).⁴³ Every person was able to gather some 60 bushels of quail or more (10 homers), and they spread out the bird carcasses for drying. After gorging themselves on this new food, however, they were struck with a plague, perhaps some type of food-poisoning, and many died (11:33-34). They named the site Kibroth Hattaavah (= graves of craving), and from there they departed for Hazeroth (11:35).

Gordan Wenham has offered an especially insightful comment about this whole incident. The two events are interwoven in the narrative, the dispensing of the Holy

⁴² Interpreters sometimes question whether the term “spirit” refers to Moses’ human spirit or the divine Spirit, but Moses later identifies it with the divine Spirit (11:29), so “Holy Spirit” is appropriate.

⁴³ Quails annually migrate between Europe and North Africa, a fact recorded as far back as Aristotle.

Spirit on the Israelite elders and the inundation of meat for the people. The contrast is striking. The Spirit was given to the elders within the Tabernacle courtyard, a place of holiness. The quail were found outside the camp, an area associated with uncleanness and death. The gift of the Spirit drew the elders toward God, while the craving for meat drew the people away from God, again emphasizing what Moses would later say and Jesus would quote: *He [God] humbled you...feeding you with manna...to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh* (Dt. 8:3; Mt. 4:4).

The Rebellion at Hazeroth (12:1-16)

The next challenge, surprisingly enough, came from Moses' older sister and brother, Miriam and Aaron. What seemed to have been the point of contention was Moses' Cushite wife, but as would become clear, there was a deeper resentment concerning Moses' unique authority. The term "Cushite," a descendant of Cush (cf. Ge. 10:6), generally refers to someone from Ethiopia or Nubia, which in turn would mean a woman of non-Israelite ancestry. Her identity remains obscure. Was she Zipporah, the Midianite woman Moses married while a shepherd (Ex. 2:21; 18:2)? The term Cushite is used in poetic parallelism alongside Midian (Hab. 3:7), and Zipporah had rejoined the Israelites in the Sinai desert (Ex. 18:5-6). Or was she an Ethiopian, one from among the mixed multitude (Ex. 12:38), whom Moses married either after the death of Zipporah or as an additional wife? Either way, it now became clear that the objection from Miriam and Aaron was much deeper than the ethnicity of Moses' wife; they claimed equal spiritual authority with Moses (12:1-2). Perhaps there was some latent jealousy over the fact that the divine Spirit had moved from Moses to the 70 elders but not to them. It is probably significant that Miriam is listed before Aaron in 12:1, since such would not usually be the case in a patriarchal society. It suggests that she was the primary instigator, and Aaron simply supported her point of view. In turn, this may be why Miriam would be the one judged so severely. The compiler of the material now adds a parenthetical note about Moses' deep humility (12:3). (It seems unlikely that such a statement would have come from the hand of Moses himself.)

At Yahweh's command, Moses brought his sister and brother to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Here, Yahweh descended in the pillar of cloud and addressed them directly in a poetic structure emphasizing the differences between Moses and a more conventional prophet (12:4-5). These divine words explained the uniqueness of Moses, who stood alone as the elevated servant of Yahweh. Miriam may have been a prophetess (cf. Ex. 15:20) and Aaron the titular high priest (Ex. 29:1-9), the two archetypes of Israelite religion. Nonetheless, however great their roles, they remained below Moses. God communicated to prophets through visions, dreams, and riddles, but to Moses, who was in charge of the whole Israelite community, God spoke face-

to-face. Moses, alone, had been privileged to see the very form of God (albeit veiled, cf. Ex. 33:18-23).

The chiasmic structure of the divine poem, which by definition puts emphasis on the middle lines, is instructive (12:6-8):

Hear now my words:

A – If there is a prophet among you

B – [I], Yahweh, will make myself known to him in a vision

C – I will speak to him in a dream

D – Not so with my servant Moses

D' – He is entrusted with all my household

C' – I speak to him mouth-to-mouth

B' – In visible appearance and not in riddles

A' – He beholds the form of Yahweh

Why did you not fear to speak against my servant, against Moses?

(my translation)

When Yahweh withdrew, Miriam was struck with scale disease “like snow” (12:9-10), a judgment that would be long remembered (cf. Dt. 24:9). This immediately identified her as ritually unclean (cf. Lv. 13:45-46). Further, if Moses’ wife, about whom Miriam had objected, was dark-skinned, which presumably she was, Miriam’s whiteness would have stood out in stark contrast. Her only hope would be through the intercession of Moses, whom Miriam and Aaron had challenged. Just as he did for the people, Moses now interceded for them as well (12:11-13). It is a mark of true humility for a leader to intercede for the well-being of someone who has just opposed him, and Moses rose to the occasion!

Miriam would eventually be healed and restored, but not until she had been ostracized from the encampment for a full week. By analogy, if for some reason her father had shown contempt for her at birth by spitting in her face (cf. Dt. 25:9), she would have been publicly humiliated and perhaps rejected altogether (12:14).⁴⁴ Further, the laws for scale disease and uncleanness called for seven days of isolation (cf. Lv. 13:4-6; 14:8-9). This period of Miriam’s quarantine now stalled the northward march for another week (12:15-16).

⁴⁴ How often newborn girls were rejected is unknown, but Ezekiel’s allegory of the foundling suggests it was a known practice (Eze. 16:4-5). The act of spitting seems to have been a gesture of humiliation and rejection (cf. Dt. 25:9; Is. 50:6). While we know that the act of spitting in one’s face was perceived to have magical power in the ancient Near East, the banishment of seven days is not known from ancient Near Eastern literature, though it may have been a known practice, cf. J. Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers במדבר* (Philadelphia/New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 98.

The primary point in this incident focused on the uniqueness of Moses' office. Moses stood far superior to Miriam, a prophetess, and Aaron, a high priest. Moses was the trustworthy servant over Yahweh's whole estate. Many centuries later, Moses himself would be eclipsed, for while he was the trustworthy servant over all God's household, yet one greater was still to come, not a servant, but a son, Christ Jesus, who as God's very Son held greater honor than even Moses himself (cf. He. 3:1-6).

The Rebellion at Kadesh (13:1—14:45)

Now would follow the greatest failure of all. Upon reaching the Desert of Paran, the Israelites had reached their geographical objective, the southern border of the promised land.⁴⁵ Yahweh had promised to "give" them the land, though at the same time, they were to "take" it (cf. 33:53). Here they would face the ultimate test: would they believe in the promises of God?

Reconnoitering the Land of Canaan (13:1-33)

At Yahweh's direction, Moses sent a team of 12, one from each tribe (including the two Joseph tribes minus the Levite tribe), to reconnoiter the land of Canaan (13:1-16). One of these 12 leaders, Hoshea, Moses had renamed as Joshua, the name by which we usually know him (13:16). Caleb represented the clan of Judah (13:6), which is curious, since he was not originally from this tribe.⁴⁶ The point of this exploration was not to determine whether or not they could accomplish the task Yahweh had given them; rather, it was more along the lines of verifying the abundant richness of the land that God had promised and assessing the morale of the Canaanites themselves (13:17-20). They were to start in the south and work their way northward following the chain of central mountains.

The team did as they were directed, spending some 40 days in the reconnaissance (13:21-25).⁴⁷ Since it was the season for new grapes (mid- to late-

⁴⁵ The Desert of Paran seems to have been in the northeastern Sinai desert. While there are various references to it in the Hebrew Bible, none are precisely definitive. Kadesh (13:26), or Kadesh Barnea (32:8), the location of the Israelite encampment, is usually identified with an oasis in this area presumably to the south of the Negev.

⁴⁶ Caleb was a Kenizzite (Nu. 32:12), and Genesis 15:19 mentions the Kenizzites as one of the people groups in the land of Canaan. Originally an Edomite clan (Ge. 36:15), Kenaz had settled in southern Canaan, and his family, along with a number of other clans, was to be dispossessed by Abraham's descendants (Ge. 15:19). Some scholars suggest that the Calebites may have been absorbed into the tribe of Judah as late as the reign of David, but this is a guess. Be that as it may, Caleb was apparently closely associated with the tribe of Judah much earlier, which is why he was selected to represent Judah in the selection of the 12 spies (Nu. 13:3, 6). Even at this early period, he must have been recognized as a leader in the Judah tribe. When Moses later chose representatives to parcel out the land of Canaan, Caleb, once again, would be selected to represent Judah (Nu. 34:16-19). As to when or how Caleb's family was absorbed into the tribe of Judah, we have no direct information, but apparently it was quite early.

⁴⁷ Often enough the ubiquitous number 40 is programmatic, not strictly mathematical. As such, it is frequently an approximation, and it probably serves as the same here.

summer), they were able to secure a huge cluster to bring back, sufficiently large that two men had to carry it suspended on a pole, along with some examples of pomegranates and figs.

After their return, the 12 leaders reported their findings, showing everyone the huge cluster of grapes they had brought back (13:26). Indeed, just as Yahweh had said, it was “a land flowing with milk and honey” (13:27; cf. Ex. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lv. 20:24)! However, when they reported on the Canaanites themselves, they described them as powerful warriors with well-fortified cities (13:28-29).⁴⁸ Especially, they felt intimidated by the descendants of Anak, the huge warriors living in Hebron (13:22, 28b; cf. Dt. 2:10-11; Jos. 11:21-22).⁴⁹ It is instructive to observe that instead of referring to Canaan as “the land Yahweh had promised” (Ex. 12:25; 32:13; 11:12), they now called it “the land to which you sent us” (13:27). They listed several people groups, the Amalekites in the Negev, the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites in the central mountains, and the Canaanites along the coastal plain.⁵⁰

Though Caleb attempted to offset this discouraging report by urging the people to go forward (13:30), the other spies, presumably all except Joshua (cf. 14:6), lamented that an invasion was impossible. The Anakim, especially, were intimidating,

⁴⁸ Fortifications in pre-Israelite Canaan during the Late Bronze Age generally consisted of massive mud-brick walls on stone foundations, sometimes featuring a glacis (angled packed-dirt or stone approach ramparts sloping upward at about 40 degrees making it difficult to come near the wall from the outside). Some excavated walls were upwards of 20' thick. Sometimes a fosse (dry moat) was dug, basically a deep ditch at the base of the glacis which in turn increased the vertical height for attackers to climb. Walled cities were usually constructed on elevations, so the defenders could shoot downward while their attackers must shoot upward. Massive gates, usually of wood but sometimes protected by bronze sheathing, were protected by four-cornered towers on each side. Towers jutting out from the walls enabled the defenders to shoot projectiles down the face of the wall without exposing themselves.

⁴⁹ The term “sons of Anak” (13:28) or *Nephilim* (13:33) harks back to the ancient story in Genesis 6, where the term also is used to describe the offspring of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” (Ge. 6:4). These fearsome “fallen ones” (= *nephilim*), which the LXX rendered as “giants,” have stimulated considerable discussion. In Genesis, the interpretations fall into two broad categories. One takes the terms “sons of God” and “daughters of men” to refer to angels cohabiting with humans, producing a race of superhumans. The other takes the term “sons of God” and “daughters of men” to refer to the descendants of Seth and the descendants of Cain, producing exploitative tyrants. Regardless, it seems clear that the *Nephilim* or sons of Anak described here in Numbers refer to people of imposing physical stature when compared with the smaller Israelites (cf. Dt. 2:21; 9:2).

⁵⁰ The Amalekites seem to have been a nomadic group living in the Negev, later described as “first of the nations” (24:20). The Hittites, if they were descendants of the Hittites in the Anatolian Plateau, were not native Canaanites. Their empire imploded in about 1200 BC. Possibly, Hittite refugees entered Canaan from the north. The Jebusites describe those who lived in Jebus (an alternative name for Jerusalem). The name Amorites was used generally of Canaanites, but especially those who lived in the central mountains. The name Canaanites usually refers to peoples inhabiting the coastal plain. These various people groups should not be thought of as distinctive races as we think of them in modern terms. Rather, the names are more geographically oriented and linked to a local city, tribe, clan, or political entity. The people groups living in Canaan were never united into a state, but rather, were divided into small city-states, existing side-by-side along with aliens or fringe groups called the *‘apiru* as described in the Amarna Letters of the 14th century. Nothing in the Book of Numbers suggests a political relationship between these dwellers in Canaan and the Egyptian Pharaoh, which in turn favors a 13th century date for the exodus and sojourn, since this would have been after the Amarna Period, and the suzerainty treaties between various Canaanite city-states and Pharaoh Akhenaten, as documented in the huge cache of letters between the two, was now over.

and they reported that alongside them they felt as small as grasshoppers. So, this “bad report” won the day (13:31-33).

The Ultimate Rebellion (14:1-45)

The report of the 12 spies was devastating to the larger body of Israelites, and as was typical of their general response to any hardship, they complained against Moses and Aaron, urging that it would have been better to die in Egypt (14:1-2). Some even suggested replacing Moses with another leader who would take them back to Egypt (14:3-4). The year since they left Egypt had dulled their memories sufficiently that they could hardly remember how distressed they were when they originally cried out under Egyptian oppression (cf. Ex. 1:13; 3:7). Now, they accused God of hating them (cf. Dt. 1:27-28).

Moses and Aaron, deeply alarmed at this rebellion, fell with their faces to the earth, since they immediately realized the implications. This was an outright rejection of Yahweh and the salvation he offered (14:5). This is why in the New Testament the rebellion at Kadesh is described as a rejection of the gospel (He. 4:2, 6). Joshua and Caleb arose to plead for the people to reconsider (14:6-9), but the congregation as a whole was so adamantly opposed that they threatened to stone them (14:10a).

In the face of this rebellion, the glory of Yahweh descended, and he began to speak to Moses about this consummate unbelief, even offering to strike down the whole Israelite nation (14:19b-12). As he had done in the debacle of the golden calf at Mt. Sinai (cf. Ex. 32:10-14; 34:6-9), Moses interceded for their national sin on the basis of Yahweh’s own character as one slow to anger and abounding in love, pleading forgiveness for this faithless offense (14:13-19). In his intercession, Moses recalled Yahweh’s own self-declaration, which he had been privileged to hear at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 33:19-20; 34:5-7). It is repeated in various later passages, again showing that Yahweh’s primary character of goodness is exemplified in his compassion, grace, love, and faithfulness (cf. Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8-9; Joel 2:13; Neh. 9:17; Jonah 4:2; 2 Chr. 30:9). He is quick to forgive, but he is slow to anger. The language “maintaining love to thousands [of generations]” and “punishing the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation” is idiomatic, not mathematical. The point is to emphasize that God’s capacity for mercy vastly outweighs his capacity for judgment. These clauses should not be used to calculate some sort of fixed generational curse.⁵¹

⁵¹ A popular but mistaken interpretation of this passage is that negative patterns of misfortune are passed down through multiple generations of a family as a divine curse, and this pattern must be broken by prayer for deliverance and even exorcism. This theology seems to have been developed by Derek Prince, a popular charismatic leader (now deceased). There is no doubt that abusive lifestyles in families leave emotional damage in children, but to say that this is a divine curse that would last for four generations is not the point of Yahweh’s self-declaration. Indeed, the

Yahweh's response was immediate: "I have forgiven them, as you requested" (14:20). However, while forgiveness restores covenant relationship with God, it does not necessarily imply a lack of consequences. This was generally true of the sacrificial system, where the one who offers sacrifice is forgiven, but he still must offer the sacrifice of a valuable animal (Lv. 4:20, 26, 31; 5:10, 13, 16, 18).⁵² Israel is now restored as God's covenant people, but they still will be prohibited from entering the promised land (14:21-23). Caleb, on the other hand, stands as an example of those who had "a different spirit," and he would be allowed to enter Canaan (14:24; cf. 26:65).

Instead of entering the land, Yahweh now commanded them to turn back toward the Sinai desert (14:25).⁵³ There they would sojourn until everyone over the age of 20 had died with the exception of Joshua and Caleb (14:26-30; 32:10-12). (Only the Levites, who were not counted in the general military census, would be exempt, 14:29). Their children would now become the remnant who would enter the promised land (14:31), but the first generation would spend the next 40 years (technically 39 more years) waiting until all of them were dead (14:32-35). They would receive exactly what they asked for. They had said, "Would that we had died in the desert," and now they would do just that! It is just as C. S. Lewis would describe it: *There are only two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'Alright, then, have it your way' (The Great Divorce).*

An immediate judgement fell on the 10 spies who had given a discouraging report, and they all died under a plague (14:36-38). At the death of the spies, the congregation of Israel now disobeyed Yahweh once more and marshalled their forces to enter Canaan without Moses or the ark, which is to say, they went without Yahweh. Though Moses warned them this would be disastrous, they went anyway, where they suffered defeat in which, as Moses would say later, "...they [the Canaanites and Amalekite] chased you like a swarm of bees" (14:39-45; cf. Dt. 1:41-44).

Camping at Kadesh (15:1—19:22)

Apparently, the encampment at Kadesh continued for some time after the rebellion (cf. Dt. 1:46). Their departure is not described until 20:22. In between are a miscellany of laws as well as some critical events.

Torah will later indicate that a son will not be punished for the sin of his father (Dt. 24:16), and much later, Ezekiel will emphatically negate such an idea (Eze. 18).

⁵² Herein, of course, is the radical difference from what Jeremiah would call a "new covenant," one "not like the covenant I [Yahweh] made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt." Rather, in this new covenant, Yahweh declared, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Je. 31:32-34).

⁵³ Lit., "by way of the Sea of Reeds"

Supplementary Offerings (15:1-21)

Supplementary laws concerning offerings made with grain, oil, and wine now follow with the stipulation that these statutes would take effect after the second generation entered the land of Canaan (15:1-2). A repeating phrase, “Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Say to the people...’” demarcates these laws (15:1, 17, 37). While the laws might seem oddly placed, they help to reaffirm Yahweh’s purpose, which was to bring the people of Israel into the promised land. The rebellion and death sentence of the first generation at Kadesh, and the anticipation of the second generation actually entering the land, assured the congregation that Yahweh had not surrendered his initial purpose.

Along with their offerings by fire, the Israelites were to include significant amounts of grain, oil, and wine, elements that represented the primary agricultural products of the land of Canaan (15:3-12):⁵⁴

ANIMAL	FLOUR	OIL	LIBATION
Lamb	1/10 th <i>ephah</i>	1/4 <i>hin</i>	1/4 <i>hin</i>
Ram	2/10 th <i>ephah</i>	1/3 <i>hin</i>	1/3 <i>hin</i>
Bull	3/10 th <i>ephah</i>	1/2 <i>hin</i>	1/2 <i>hin</i>

While these sacrifices are detailed in Leviticus (Lv. 1, 3, 6, 7), it is new information that every burnt offering and every fellowship offering must have these precise accompanying elements apparently based on the size of the animal.⁵⁵ This law was to be applied equally to both native-born Israelites as well as any non-Israelites living among them (15:13-16).

That such offerings were to be a pleasing aroma to Yahweh is not explained (15:3, 7, 10, 13, 14), though the same language is used repeatedly in Leviticus (Lv. 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9, 12; 3:5, 16; 4:31; 6:15, 21; 8:21, 28; 17:6; 23:13, 18; 26:31). Obviously, this language is metaphorical, since God does not have a physical body. His sense of smell, along with other anthropomorphisms, such as, his eyes, mouth, arm, and so forth, speak of the character and attributes of God. The earliest use of this language of a pleasing aroma regarding sacrifice comes in the Torah at the conclusion of Noah’s sacrifice at the end of the great flood (Ge. 8:21). There it seems to be linked to his mercy in promising never again to destroy the earth. Perhaps the same essential meaning is intended both here and in Leviticus—that in the ritual of sacrifice with its accompanying offerings of flour, oil, and wine, Yahweh will extend his mercy as a sign of his pleasure in the sincerity of the worshipper. This, at least, seems close to St. Paul’s understanding. When referencing this ancient language of a pleasing aroma, he

⁵⁴ Dry measures include an *ephah* (about half a bushel); liquid measures include a *hin* (about a gallon).

⁵⁵ In Ezekiel’s vision of a new temple, the precise amounts are changed for reasons that are unclear (cf. Eze. 46:5-7, 11, 14).

speaks of the character of Christians as being “the aroma of Christ” and the “fragrance of life” and “a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice” (2 Co. 2:15-16; Phil. 4:18).

Yet another ritual is envisioned after the second generation would enter the promised land. When the Israelites finally were eating the produce of Canaan, they were to offer a dough offering in the form of a cake to the priest (15:17-21).⁵⁶ This ritual follows the general principle of first-fruits, which is to say, a portion is first offered to God in gratefulness. It implies that the whole quantity is holy (cf. Ro. 11:16).

Atonement for Failure (15:22-31)

But what if someone should inadvertently fail to keep some detail of these requirements, and what if no one knew of this failure (15:22-24a)? Then, a burnt offering as well as a sin offering in behalf of the whole community was in order, along with the required grain and libation (15:24b-26; cf. Lv. 4). So, whether this failure was on the part of the whole community or even a single person within the community, the failure had to be addressed by sacrifice, and this would be true for Israelite or non-Israelite alike (15:27-29).

Deliberant disobedience (lit., “with a high hand”), on the other hand, could not be atoned for. It was brazen defiance against Yahweh, and the penalty was to be “cut off” (15:30-31).⁵⁷

The Sabbath Breaker (15:32-36)

The wood-gatherer on the Sabbath presumably was intending to kindle a fire for cooking, a clear violation of Sabbath law and likely an example of the brazen defiance just mentioned (cf. Ex. 35:3). However, the earlier statutes about Sabbath-breaking do not specify the mode of execution, only that the Sabbath-breaker should die (cf. Ex. 31:14-15; 35:2). Moses, therefore, resorted to Yahweh for clarification, and the answer was death by stoning outside the encampment (to avoid corpse contamination). Had the man inadvertently picked up sticks, his failure could have been atoned for, but his brazen violation removed that possibility.

***Tsitsit* (15:37-41)**

The commandment to wear *tsitsit* (tassels) interwoven with a blue cord served as a reminder that the Israelites were to recall and observe all the commandments Yahweh had given. Probably, there was symbolic significance to the color blue, but it is not explained (signs of royalty or divinity are common guesses). All we can say is that the same color was used in the Tabernacle (Ex. 26:4, 31, 36; 36:11), in the regalia

⁵⁶ While the priest is not here mentioned, the term תְּרוּמָה, often translated simply as “offering,” is a technical term for what is given to a priest (cf. Lv. 7:32; Nu. 18:8).

⁵⁷ For the meaning of being “cut off,” see Footnote #33.

of the high priest (Ex. 28:28, 31, 37; 39:21-22, 31), and in the wrappings for the ark (Nu. 4:6).

Jesus, of course, was Torah observant (Mt. 9:20; 14:36), so he wore the *tsitsit*.

The Insolence of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (16:1-50)

This opening narrative concerning the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram heads an even longer section that extends through chapter 19. The focus of these narratives and laws concerns the priests and Levites, their legitimacy and importance. Centuries later, the writer of Hebrews would say, *No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was* (He. 5:4).

The first narrative, a somewhat lengthy one, arose when several men, a Levite named Korah and some Reubenites with the support of some 250 other leaders confronted Moses and Aaron (16:1-3).⁵⁸ Their challenge was that the preeminence of Moses and Aaron, both from the same family, was too limiting in a nation where the entire body of people were regarded as holy.

Moses was shocked at their arrogance.⁵⁹ He proposed a test of offering incense, one of the most basic priestly duties (16:4-7). Yahweh would make the choice as to who could function as a priest! Korah had said Moses and Aaron had “gone too far.” Now, Moses says that Korah and his companions had “gone too far.” It should be remembered, of course, that offering incense carried its own risk, since two of Aaron’s sons already had died by offering unauthorized fire (cf. 3:2-4; Lv. 10:1-3). Coming near to Yahweh was no light thing!

Clearly, the tension in this story is primarily between Korah, a Levite, and Aaron, the high priest (16:8-11). The Levites already had been assigned to special privileges, and the Kohathites, of which Korah was one, had the sacred duty of carrying the ark (chap. 4). But they wanted more—they wanted the priesthood itself. Moses instinctively understood that their essential complaint was against Yahweh, who had chosen Aaron as the high priest (Ex. 28-29; Lv. 8). The others even refused to face Moses when he summoned them, saying that he was trying to kill them in the desert and blaming him that they had not been given a land flowing with milk and honey, ignoring completely the fact that it was their rebellion against Yahweh that prevented them from entering the promised land (16:12-14).⁶⁰

These unjust aspersions nettled Moses, and he asked God not to honor the offering of Korah and his crowd (16:15). His instructions for the next day were terse.

⁵⁸ The Reubenite named On is mentioned only here.

⁵⁹ Most English translations assume that Moses fell facedown or prostrated himself in intercession. However, on the basis of Ge. 4:5, the BHS suggests that his face fell, which is to say, his countenance was downcast.

⁶⁰ The accusation that Moses might gouge out their eyes is probably an idiom intending to say that Moses had blinded them as to the real situation in the desert. It is comparable to the modern idiom to “pull the wool over one’s eyes.”

Korah and his supporters were to take censers to burn incense before Yahweh. Moses and Aaron were to do the same. All of them would then stand at the entrance to the Tabernacle, where the glory of Yahweh appeared at various times (cf. 12:5). Here, Yahweh himself would choose who was holy or not (16:16-17; cf. 16:7). When all had gathered with their censers filled with incense and fire, Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron to withdraw from the others before his judgment would be meted out (16:18). Moses and Aaron immediately began to intercede for the rest of the congregation, who were watching, and Yahweh commanded them to move away also, not even so much as to touch anything that belonged to the challengers (16:19-27). Moses then announced to the congregation that what was about to happen would confirm his divine choice beyond all doubt. Korah and his crowd would not die the ordinary death of old age, but the very earth would open up and swallow the conspirators alive (16:28-31). They would drop straight into *sheol*.⁶¹ Immediately, Korah and his supporters dropped into the crevice that had opened before the shocked congregation of Israel, and they perished by fire from Yahweh (16:32-35). It might be assumed that all their families perished, since they had assembled as well (16:27b), but a later text clarifies that this was not the case (26:8-11). Several of the Psalms later would be linked to the “sons of Korah” (see the superscriptions in Psalms 42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88).

What remained of the rebels’ censers, which now had become holy because they had been offered to Yahweh, were retrieved and hammered into bronze plating for the great altar (16:36-40).⁶² In the most vivid way, the priesthood of Aaron and his sons was vindicated.

Within a day, the people were grumbling again, this time accusing Moses of killing Korah and his company (16:41). As had happened before (14:11-12; 16:21; cf. Ex. 32:9-10), Yahweh threatened to exterminate them all (16:42-45), and indeed, a plague of judgment already had broken out. Moses instructed Aaron to quickly make atonement for the congregation with incense, which is unusual in that atonement usually is achieved with a blood sacrifice. However, perhaps the point is that atonement is here effected with a censer precisely because it was through the censers of Korah and his company that Yahweh’s choice of Aaron had been challenged. Though some already had died from the plague, Aaron stood between the living and the dead, and

⁶¹ The Hebrew term *sheol*, deriving from a verb meaning “to be extinguished,” refers to the abode of the dead (1 Kg. 2:6, 9). The English translation “hell” can be misleading, especially since people often connect it with the imagery of fire and punishment that arises in the intertestamental literature. Rather, in the Old Testament, *sheol* is depicted as being in the depths of the earth (Job 11:8; Prov. 15:24; Eze. 31:15-18), a place of gloom (Job 10:19-22) and decay (Is. 14:9-11). Hence, it frequently is translated as “grave.”

⁶² Since Bezalel already had created bronze plating for the great altar (cf. Ex. 27:2; 38:2), the function of this passage seems ambiguous. The LXX has an additional line indicating that Bezalel use the bronze from the censers for the original plating, but if so, then the incident with Korah and his company must have come much earlier. Better, perhaps, is the suggestion that this was an additional plating or possibly a replacement plating.

his intervention with legitimate incense stopped the plague (16:46-50).⁶³ Once again, Yahweh's choice of Aaron and his sons as the legitimate priesthood was underscored.

The Budding Rod of Aaron (17:1-13)

The next narrative concerned the divine choice of Aaron and his sons as the legitimate high priests. It reaffirmed what was implicit in the story of Korah's rebellion. Apparently, there still was ongoing grumbling among the people, and Yahweh determined to settle the issue, once and for all (17:5). He instructed Moses to take twelve staffs representing the twelve tribes, writing the names of the tribal leaders, one on each staff.⁶⁴ Presumably, these leaders would be the same as those named in 1:5-16 in the military census with the exception that Aaron represented Levi, and it is unclear how the two Joseph tribes were represented. Perhaps, altogether, there were thirteen staffs, the twelve staffs representing the twelve tribes (Ephraim and Manasseh included), and then one representing Aaron. The staffs were then placed in the Tabernacle "before Yahweh," which is to say, in front of the ark. The staff representing the divine choice of the priestly tribe would sprout (17:1-7).

The next day, Aaron's staff had not only sprouted, but it had produced blossoms and almonds! The staffs were brought out, each leader retrieving his own staff, but the staff of Aaron was then placed back in the Tabernacle in front of the ark (17:8-11).⁶⁵ The effect upon the congregation was immediate, and they realized in their grumbling over Aaron's priesthood, they had put themselves at dire risk (17:12-13). The outcome was now crystal clear: the people could only come near to Yahweh by means of a priestly mediator. Atonement was not to be taken lightly. Aaron, the high priest, must be that mediator, him only and his sons who would succeed him. Indeed, this was one of the primary roles of the Levites as a tribe—that they were to serve as a buffer standing between the people and God to prevent them from death (cf. 1:53; 3:10, 38; 8:19).

Duties of the Priests and Levites (18:1-32)

With the settling of the question about Yahweh's choice of Aaron and his sons as the appointed high priests, the next section of legislation follows naturally with

⁶³ The number 14,700 seems unusually large. If, for instance, it be granted that the original census numbers of chapter 1 are reduced to about 20,000-25,000 for the whole of the congregation of Israel, based on an alternative translation of the Hebrew word *'eleph*, then 14,700 deaths plus the 250 supporters of Korah, if taken at face value, would be more than half the entire congregation. One way of reducing this number includes the suggestion that 14 clans were involved with the deaths of 700 individuals, cf. C. Humphreys, "The Number of People in the Exodus from Egypt: Decoding Mathematically the Very Large Numbers in Numbers I and XXVI," *VT XLVIII/2* (1998), pp. 196-213.

⁶⁴ A play on words figures in this narrative in that the Hebrew word for tribe (לְבִיָּהּ) is a homonym for the word "staff."

⁶⁵ An anomaly occurs in the New Testament, where the author of Hebrews indicates that Aaron's rod was inside the ark, whereas in Numbers it says it was placed in front of the ark (cf. He. 9:4). Later in the Hebrew Bible, it will be stated that nothing was in the ark but the tables of stone holding the ten commandments (1 Kg. 8:9; 2 Chr. 5:10).

detailed instructions about the roles of the priests as well as the Levites. Much of this instruction had been previously given (cf. 1:50-53; 3:10-13, 38), but this repetition solidifies what was previously stated and adds to it.

To Aaron and his sons, Yahweh specifically assigned responsibility for handling any offenses of encroachment into the holy space surrounding the Tabernacle (18:1). This would probably include offenses by priests, for instance, who were disqualified by improper clothing (Ex. 28:42-43), lack of hygiene (Ex. 30:19-21), inebriation (Lv. 10:9), physical defects (Lv. 21:23), or inappropriate timing (Lv. 16:2). Ordinary Israelites, of course, could enter the sanctuary courtyard with their sacrifices and offerings, but they could only go as far as the altar. The Levites, for their part, served as assistants to the priests (18:2), as guards to prevent unauthorized persons from approaching the sanctuary (18:3-6). Priests, only, were permitted to officiate for sacrificial offerings or actually enter the first room of the sanctuary (18:7).

Because of their service in the Tabernacle, the priests were privileged to eat some of the portions of sacrificial animals, grain offerings, wave offerings, and the first-fruits libations of oil and wine (18:8-13; cf. Lv. 7:19-21; 22:2-9). A distinction is made between what is “most holy,” which could be eaten only by the priests (18:8-10), and what is “holy,” which could be eaten by the priests’ family members (18:11-13). The priests, also, had access to everything devoted to Yahweh, including first-born animals (18:14-15a). However, for things that were not suitable for sacrifice, such as, first-born sons or unclean animals, the owner was obliged to make a cash payment to the priests (18:15b-16).⁶⁶ Sacrificial animals, however, could not be redeemed with a cash payment (18:17-19). Portions of such sacrifices were to be set aside for the priests to eat (18:17-19), a statute described as a “covenant of salt.” The covenant of salt, mentioned elsewhere only once (2 Chr. 13:5), is obscure, but probably is concerns a covenant that is inviolable.⁶⁷ The privileges described were in lieu of the fact that the priests would have no land inheritance in the land of Canaan (18:20).

Now would come a new statute not given previously, the allotment of Israelite tithes to the Levites, who also would receive no land inheritance (18:21-24).⁶⁸ The Israelites were to tithe to the Levites from the best of their crops, and the Levites, in turn, were to tithe to the priests the best of the tithes they had received (18:25-32). Earlier, the products that were subject to tithing were specified as “everything from the

⁶⁶ Coinage, of course, would not be invented for several centuries, so the terms *shekels* and *gerahs* are weights, not coins. A *shekel* weighs about 0.4 ounce. A *gerah* weighs about 0.6 gram. Approximations of modern equivalents are based on the many examples of weights unearthed by archaeologists from the ancient world.

⁶⁷ The Arabic expression, “there is salt between us,” is an idiom of hospitality and firm friendship. Similarly, salt as a preservative was likely symbolic of something enduring, cf. E. Pollard, *ISBE* (1979), Vol. I, p. 794.

⁶⁸ The word “tithe” is based on the Hebrew word for “ten,” hence, a tithe was 1/10 of something. The practice of giving a tithe was known to be practiced in the ancient Near East by Egyptians, Lydians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. It should be remembered that Abraham paid tithes on spoils of war, and Jacob also promised to pay a tithe (Ge. 14:20; cf. 28:22).

land,” whether grain, fruit, or animals (Lv. 27:30-33). Also, later expansions of the tithing law would link the tithe for ancient Israel to love for one’s neighbors, and the tithe was specified not only as the means of support for the Levites, but also as a kind of social program for the support of those who were at an economic disadvantage (Dt. 14:28-29).

Purification for Corpse Contamination (19:1-22)

As discussed earlier (cf. 5:1-4), there is a difference between sin and impurity. Sin is rebellion against God, and it can be deliberate and defiant, but it can also be inadvertent or the unconscious result of weakness. Impurity, on the other hand, is ritual contamination, and it especially concerns the forces of life and death, such as, corpse contamination, scale disease, and genital discharge. The basic premise behind ritual impurity is that God is holy, and therefore, his people must prepare themselves to come near him. The various laws in Leviticus concerning diet (11), childbirth (12), infectious diseases (13-14), and bodily discharge (15) all fall into this category, either from an internal or external source. Earlier, those who were ritually impure were expelled from the encampment (5:2-4; 12:14; cf. Lv. 13:45-46). Further, ritual impurity could be passed to others through secondary contact (19:22; cf. Lv. 15).

The legislation in this section primarily concerns the ritual impurity of corpse contamination, since dead bodies caused one of the most serious types of impurity. Further, since death is very much a part of life, it was virtually impossible for persons to avoid contacting a corpse at some point, especially when a family member died. To prevent divine judgment due to corpse contamination, a special concoction made from water and the ashes of a red cow along with burned cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool was to be stored for community ablutions (19:1-10).⁶⁹ Since a female animal was consistently used for purification offerings (6:14; 15:27; cf. Lv. 4:28, 32; 5:6; 14:10), this red cow ordinance follows in kind. Under the supervision of Aaron’s son, Eleazar,⁷⁰ a layperson was to slaughter the red cow outside the camp and burn it, and both Eleazar and the one who slaughtered the animal, along with the individual who collected and stored the special concoction, would be ritually impure until evening. As a fascinating irony, this process polluted the pure but made pure the polluted person.

Anyone impure due to corpse contamination was ritually impure for an entire week (19:11). The procedure for using the special water of cleansing consisted of sprinkling it on the ritually impure person on the third (the halfway mark) and seventh day (19:12-13). Such impurity not only affected the person him/herself, who had been in a family dwelling with a corpse, it affected anyone who entered the tent as well as

⁶⁹ These are the same materials included for the purification of infectious skin disease (cf. Lv. 14:4, 6, 49, 51-52).

⁷⁰ No clear reason is given as to why Eleazar instead of Aaron officiates, but perhaps by this time Aaron was close to death (cf. 20:22-29), or else, it was important that as the High Priest he not become ritually impure.

any open vessel in the tent (19:14-15). If corpse contamination occurred in the field, such as, in the case of a death during a war action or the death of someone who died naturally in the open or if there was even incidental contact with a grave or a bone (19:16), the ritual for cleansing was necessary. A person who was ritually pure must mix some of the stored ashes with water and use hyssop⁷¹ to sprinkle the tent, its furnishings, and any persons who were impure (19:17-19a). The ritually impure person must bathe and wash his clothing (19:19b). Failure to do this this would result in being “cut off” from the congregation (19:20; see Footnote #33 for the idea of being “cut off”). The ritually pure person who mixed and sprinkled the water of cleansing for the benefit of the ritually impure person would become ritually impure himself, though only until evening (19:21-22).

From Kadesh to the Plains of Moab (20:1—22:1)

The Israelites had camped for an unspecified period in the Desert of Paran at Kadesh (cf. 12:16; 13:22).⁷² There are several notations indicating that once again they were traveling (20:1, 17, 22; 21:1, 4, 10-13, 16, 18b-20, 22; 22:1). What seems apparent is that they were nearing the end of the 40-year sojourn in the desert, since Aaron would soon die, and his death would be in their 40th year (cf. 33:38). At some point, as they neared this climax, some particular Israelite was bound to be the last man standing, and it must have been especially daunting to have the whole congregation looking at him, knowing that everyone was waiting on his death. This travel section began with the very brief notation of the death of Miriam, Moses’ sister (20:1). It will also describe the climax of rebellion in the desert, first by the people (14), then by the tribal leaders (16), and finally by Moses and Aaron (20). All receive the same punishment—death in the desert and the prohibition from entering the land of promise.

Water from the Rock—Again! (20:2-13)

Similar to what had happened many years earlier, the people confronted Moses due to lack of water (20:2-5; cf. Ex. 17:1-7). The irony is that they also griped that they had no grapes or pomegranates, precisely the examples of bounty the spies brought back from the land of Canaan when they had rebelled (cf. 13:23). As before, they grumbled that it would have been better to have died or stayed in Egypt. The similarities to the earlier event are especially striking, including Moses using his rod to bring water from the rock at a place called Meribah.

Moses and Aaron prostrated themselves before Yahweh at this confrontation. From the glory cloud at the entrance to the Tabernacle, he instructed them to take the

⁷¹ Hyssop is a plant or group of plants widespread through ancient Israel.

⁷² Deuteronomy says they stayed there “many days” (Dt. 1:46).

staff, presumably Aaron's staff that had budded and was lying in front of the ark,⁷³ and speak to the rock, which would then deliver water for the people and their livestock, just as had happened many years before (20:6-8). The most significant difference between this incident and the earlier one is that previously Moses was to strike the rock, while here he was only to speak to it. Accordingly, they gathered the people before the rock.

This time, however, Moses vented his frustration. Instead of speaking to the rock, he spoke to the people, expressing his anger at their constant complaining (cf. Ps. 106:33b). The fact that he said, "...must we bring you water out of this rock" suggests that here Moses and Aaron are crediting to themselves the power to perform the miracle, thus thrusting Yahweh into the background and implicitly usurping his authority. Herein lies the primary difference between the religion of Yahweh and the religion of the pagans. In pagan religion, the gods are not sovereign. They can be manipulated by magic. In the faith of Yahweh, he alone is in control, and he is absolutely sovereign. This, then, was the sin of Moses and Aaron—claiming for themselves a power that belonged only to God. Then, Moses struck the rock sharply two times, and indeed, the water flowed. However, his disobedience in claiming the power to perform the miracle and in striking the rock instead of simply speaking to it resulted in a severe rebuke from Yahweh, who now announced that neither Moses nor Aaron, who was complicit in this disobedience (cf. Dt. 32:50-51), would lead the new generation into the land of promise (20:9-12). Though as Moses would later indicate, he pleaded for a reversal of this judgment, Yahweh flatly refused (Dt. 3:23-26). As before, the place-name Meribah (= contention, quarreling) accented the tragedy (20:13a; cf. Ps. 81:7). In this incident, Yahweh demonstrated once again that his holiness must not be encroached upon (20:13b). Every leader or pastor (and Moses was surely the consummate pastor) experiences frustration from time to time with the people assigned to him, but every leader should take heed about the danger of not honoring God in the sight of the congregation!

As an aside, it is fascinating to see what St. Paul makes of this incident in the New Testament. He says, "They...drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Co. 10:3-4). Quite literally, the Greek text reads, "...they were drinking from a spiritual following rock," and the imperfect verb *ἐπίνον* (= were drinking) carries the nuance of continuing action. As such, the Israelites were sustained for their whole sojourn in the desert by this spiritual Messianic Rock, and it is to the point that the miracle of bringing water from a rock happened not only once, but twice, once at the beginning of their trek and once at the end. Paul may have been drawing from rabbinical tradition, which also

⁷³ The phrase, "Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence" (20:9a), seems to refer to Aaron's rod rather than Moses' rod.

suggested that the *Mal'ak Yahweh* accompanied Israel in the form of a moving rock.⁷⁴ Regardless, the idea that God was a Rock was a common metaphor in the Old Testament (Dt. 32:4, 15, 18, 30-31; Ps. 18:2, 31, 46; 62:2, 6; 89:26; 92:15, etc.).⁷⁵ As such, Moses' petulance in striking the Rock was an affront to Yahweh himself.

The Edomites Deny Israelite Passage (20:14-21)

The original attempt to enter Canaan had been from the south, but now the Israelites would take an alternative approach and travel eastward and northward to the Transjordan in order to enter Canaan from east of the Jordan River. The geographical area of the Edomites,⁷⁶ which was squarely in their path, was located primarily east of the Arabah, north of the Gulf of Aqabah, south of Moab, and west of the Arabian Desert. A major trade route, called "the kings highway" (Dt. 2:8, 27),⁷⁷ traversed this land north to south, and the Edomite profit from control of travel and trade on this route must have been considerable. Until about 80 or so years ago, our sole information about the Edomites came from the Bible. Since then, however, archaeological excavations have revealed some Edomite texts, images of their patron deity Qos, various pottery, evidence of copper mining, and fortresses guarding the trade routes connecting Canaan, the Sinai Peninsula, and Arabia.

It was through this area that the Israelites intended to go, and Moses requested permission for peaceful travel, promising not to use any Edomite resources or at least to pay for anything they did use (20:14-21). The ancient reconciliation between Esau and Jacob, the two mutually hostile twin grandsons of Abraham (Ge. 33), seems not to have passed down to Esau's descendants, the Edomites. Not only did the Edomite king refuse their request, he marshalled his army to threaten them, but rather than fight against their "brother," the people of Israel skirted Edomite territory. However, later Moses indicates that they were able to buy some food and water from them (cf. Dt. 2:28-29).

Aaron's Death (20:22-29)

Of the three family members who were the primary leaders in Israel, Miriam died first (20:1b). Now Yahweh said that Aaron, who had been complicit in Moses' disobedience at Meribah, was to die near the border of Edom, which they were skirting

⁷⁴ This midrash of a moving rock in Jewish tradition imagines a single rock (sometimes linked with the well that is mentioned in 21:17-18) that followed the Israelites through the desert. The tradition appears in various forms in Philo, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and other rabbinic literature.

⁷⁵ Christians have long observed that if Christ is the Rock in typology, and if striking the Rock was a foreshadowing of Jesus' death on the cross, then striking the Rock twice would break the typology intended, since Christ died once for all.

⁷⁶ Our earliest extra-biblical references to Edom come from Egyptian texts from the late 13th and early 12th centuries.

⁷⁷ The so-called "King's Highway" was a north-south route connecting Damascus with the Red Sea.

(20:22-24).⁷⁸ He was 123 years old (cf. 33:39). Here, we have the first transfer of power from Aaron to his son, Eleazar, at Mount Hor (20:25-26).⁷⁹ The priestly regalia of Aaron as the high priest (described in detail earlier, cf. Ex. 28, 39) was now given to Eleazar at the top of the mountain (20:29). Israel mourned for him 30 days, the same length of time that Moses eventually would be mourned when he passed (Dt. 34:8).

The War with Canaanite Arad (21:1-3)

Arad's attack upon the Israelites would become their first confrontation with the Canaanites, one of the people groups whom they were to displace in the land of promise (cf. 33:40; Ex. 3:8, 17; 13:5, 11; 23:23, 28; 33:2; 34:11). Forty years earlier they had been given victory over a desert group called Amalek (Ex. 17:8-13). More recently, they had been threatened by the Edomites, but there had been no actual military action (20:20). Of course, the military census prior to leaving Mt. Sinai presupposes that they were to invade the land of Canaan, and the abortive attempt to invade from the south after their rebellion at Kadesh had ended in disaster (14:14:45). Now, however, the second generation would finally meet with success.

In passing, it should be noted that additional laws would eventually be given concerning military action (Dt. 20). Further, the invasion of Canaan was more than just the acquisition of land. It was also a divine judgment upon the Canaanites for their grossly immoral lifestyles (Lv. 18:24-27; Dt. 18:9-11), and the Israelites were to be God's "tool" for executing this judgment (Ge. 15:16; Dt. 9:4-5; 18:12; Nu. 33:4b), much the same as many years later God would use the Assyrian war machine to discipline Israel (Is. 5:25; 10:5ff.). Especially, the Israelites were to avoid assimilating to the immoral Canaanite culture (cf. Dt. 7:1-6).

Archaeological work has shown that Arad was an important fortified city in the eastern Negev as far back as Early Bronze Age II. It dominated the frontier region and the road between Edom and harbor at Elath.⁸⁰ The "road to Atharim," where the initial conflict took place, is unknown, but apparently it was near the same place that the Israelites had suffered defeat some 38 years earlier, since the name Hormah is used in both cases (cf. 14:45; 21:3).⁸¹ As such, the earlier defeat at Hormah would now be

⁷⁸ The phrase "gathered to his people" is a common idiom for death (cf. Ge. 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:33; Nu. 32:1). At the very least, it envisions death, not as isolation, but as a reunion with deceased family members in *sheol* (see Footnote #61).

⁷⁹ Mt. Hor has long been identified with Jebel Nebi Harun (= the Mount of the Prophet Aaron), cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, iv.4.7, which is near Petra. Later, this area is called Moserah (Dt. 10:6). Neither of these sites can be identified with certainty, however, and the mountain specified by Josephus does not seem to be at the border of Edom, but in its heartland.

⁸⁰ There is an archaeological anomaly in that the site apparently lay deserted for some 1500 years and was only rebuilt well after the Israelites arrived. However, the mention of multiple towns might mean that the term Arad was simply applied generally to the area, Y. Aharoni, *ISBE* (1979) I.227.

⁸¹ The KJV translated this as the "way of the spies," presumably referring to the spies who spied out the land (14), but most all other English Versions read this as a place-name.

replaced by a decided victory after the Israelites vowed to consign these southern Canaanite towns to *herem*.⁸²

Fiery Serpents and the Copper Snake (21:4-9)

The victory at Hormah did not appreciably change the Israelites' impatience, and while skirting the border of Edom, they once again complained about the food and lack of water (21:4-5). The daily ration of manna had become repulsive to them, which they described as "contemptible" (קִלְקֵל). This time Yahweh sent fiery snakes among them with a lethal bite, and many died (21:6).⁸³ Just how the term "fiery" is to be understood is not immediately clear. It could refer to severe inflammation from snake-bite. It could be a homonym meaning poisonous (cf. Is. 14:29, NIV, NIB), though some English Versions render it elsewhere as "darting adder" (cf. 30:6, NET). It is the same word translated as "seraphim" in Isaiah (Is. 6:2, 6), and both in Numbers and Isaiah, the root שרף means "burn."

The people confessed their impatience toward Yahweh, and Moses, once more, interceded for them (21:7-8). God instructed him to make a copper⁸⁴ image of a snake, erecting it on a high pole, and anyone bitten could look at the copper image and live (21:8-9). This copper image was apparently carried with the Israelites in their further travels, and it endured for a long time, when eventually it was destroyed by Hezekiah, because the Israelites had been offering incense to it as an idol (2 Kg. 18:4). On a more positive note, Christ recognized a typology in this narrative anticipating his being lifted up in crucifixion (Jn. 3:14). The symbolism of snake-bite, harking back to the serpent in Eden who was destined to strike the heel of Eve's offspring (cf. Ge. 3:15), would be raised on the cross so that all who looked to him might be saved.

On to the Plains of Moab (21:10-20)

⁸² The Hebrew term חֵרֵם (*herem*), which appears in this passage, appears frequently in the Book of Joshua and various other texts in the Hebrew Bible in a variety of contexts. Its basic reference is to something "devoted," which is to say, separated from common use because it is consecrated to Yahweh. In such a ban, whatever is designated *herem* cannot be redeemed (cf. Lv. 27:28). In various laws, this term is applied to animals, land, cities, and humans. Since whatever is *herem* is dedicated to God, it is a sin against God to employ it for personal use or to spare its destruction. With respect to the Canaanites, the term has generally been thought to refer to the slaughter of people, though more recently, in view of a growing sensitivity to ethnic cleansing and genocide, some scholars have suggested lesser meanings, such as, expulsion or the destruction of Canaanite religious paraphernalia or something non-lethal rather than outright slaughter, cf. C. Trimm, *The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022). At the very least, here it means that no war spoils would be taken.

⁸³ Lawrence of Arabia recounts the infestation of snakes in this same area, naming horned vipers, puff-adders, cobras, and black snakes, so much so, that they beat the shrubbery with sticks to drive them away.

⁸⁴ Or, bronze. A copper snake with a gilded head was discovered in an ancient temple at Timnah, near Eilat, and it dates to about the 13th or 12th century BC, very near the time of the exodus (late dating). Whether or not the one Moses created was similar can only be conjectured, cf. B. Rothenberg, *BAS Library*. Of interest is that this artifact was discovered near Midianite lands, where Moses' father-in-law Jethro was a Midianite priest.

Once again, the travelogue picks up (21:10-13; cf. 33:44ff.). The clearest identity of the place-names are the references to the Zered Valley (the southern border of Moab, cf. Dt. 2:13), and the Arnon Gorge (the northern border of Moab). Later recapitulation of their travel indicates they avoided any provocation to the Moabites (Dt. 2:9), crossing the Zered Valley, and finally encamping along the Arnon Gorge.



The reference to the *Book of the Wars of Yahweh* is one of two ancient texts that apparently seem to have been anthologies of early war songs (cf. Jos. 10:13b; 2 Sa. 1:18). Neither text has survived, so our only knowledge is from these poetic snippets (21:14-15). The first one is obviously a fragment, since it begins with the Hebrew direct object marker and is missing the opening. One can only speculate on what preceded it.⁸⁵ The next snippet arises with Yahweh's instruction that Moses should gather the people in order to provide water for them (21:16-18a). This water came from a well that was dug under the direction of the princes and nobles.

The remainder of the itinerary brought the Israelites to the area around Mt. Pisgah, where at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy Moses would view the promised land before dying (21:18b-20; cf. Dt. 34:1ff.).

⁸⁵ Robert Alter suggests that a verb of violent action is reasonable to infer, so he adds the word "Against..." and translates *supah* as "whirlwind" rather than as a place-name, cf. R. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible* (New York/London: W. W. Norton, 2019) 1.552. If so, then this poetic fragment envisions a conflict. The Samaritan Pentateuch, with a slightly different reading, says "he [Yahweh] marched." See also, D. Christensen, "Num. 21:14-15 and the Book of the Wars of Yahweh," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*: 36 (1974), pp. 359-360.

The Conquest of Sihon and Og (21:21-35; 22:1)

As had been the case with the Edomites (20:16b-17), when the Israelites reached the Transjordan, they requested permission to pass peacefully through the area of King Sihon. Sihon's territory lay between the Arnon Gorge to the south and the Jabbok creek to the north with Heshbon as its capital.⁸⁶ Like the Edomite king, Sihon of the Amorites flatly refused.⁸⁷ In this case, however, their entreaty is not described as coming from a "brother" (20:14), since Israel had no ancient familial connections with them. Israel had avoided conflict with the Edomites, the descendants of Abraham's grandson Esau (Ge. 36:9; cf. Dt. 2:8), the Moabites, the descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot (Ge. 20:36-37; cf. Dt. 2:9), and now the Ammonites, also descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot (Ge. 20:38; Dt. 2:19, 37). Mustering his army, Sihon immediately confronted the Israelites in battle formation, blocking the only available route to the Jordan River, and this time the Israelites had no choice but to fight (21:21-26).⁸⁸ They conquered Sihon's army (21:28a). All the other towns of the Transjordan Amorites now fell to the Israelites (cf. Dt. 2:24-36).

It is of interest that the text says they began to occupy this land (21:25a), though as would be clarified later (chapter 32), they did not do so immediately. This is different than would be the case later when Joshua eventually would invade the Cisjordan Canaanites, when after each foray, the Israelite warriors returned to their base camp without occupying the Canaanite cities.⁸⁹

The poetic fragment (21:27-30) has prompted a good deal of discussion,⁹⁰ since it is unclear if it is a taunt song of the Israelites over the fall of Heshbon or the memory of an earlier conflict between Sihon and the Moabites. This latter view seems to fit the text as it stands, which is to say that Sihon, who once had conquered the people of Chemosh (i.e., the Moabites),⁹¹ was now himself conquered by the Israelites. It does beg the question as to why a victory of Sihon over the Moabites is even cited in the first place. Perhaps its inclusion here is a sort of justification for Israel's conquest of Sihon, who had destroyed many villages of the Moabites, the descendants of Abraham

⁸⁶ Like the place-name Arad, Heshbon might be a territorial name, not just a city-name. Archaeological excavations at Tell Hesban have revealed no occupancy earlier than Iron Age I. Various other nearby sites have been explored, some with much older occupants, such as, Jalul or Umeiri, but at present biblical Heshbon has not been located with any certainty, cf. L. Herr, "The Search for Biblical Heshbon," *BAR* 19.6 (1993): 36-37, 68.

⁸⁷ For the Amorites, see Footnote #50.

⁸⁸ Jahaz, the site of the battle, has not been identified, but it was mentioned in the famous Moabite Stone as being near Dibon (Lines 18-21).

⁸⁹ K. Kitchen, *On the Historical Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2003), pp.160-163.

⁹⁰ The scholarly discussion not only includes the content of the poem, which is fragmentary and obscure, but also the language itself. Verse 30 is particularly difficult and has resulted in multiple readings.

⁹¹ Chemosh is the patron deity of the Moabites, and he, also, is mentioned in the famous Moabite Stone.

through Lot (cf. Jg. 11:19-27).⁹² In any case, the primary point is that the Israelites now occupied the Amorite territory (21:31-32).

Following their victory over the Amorites, the Israelites ventured farther north toward Bashan, the highlands east of Galilee. Here, no plea was extended to pass through their territory peacefully, and Yahweh directly commanded the Israelites toward the battle, since this area was specifically envisioned as a part of the promised land (34:10-11). They defeated Og of Bashan, and once again, they settled in this area as well (21:33-35; cf. Dt. 3:1-11).⁹³ After these two impressive victories over Sihon and Og, the Israelites returned to the plains of Moab across from Jericho on the western side of the Jordan River (22:1).

⁹² G. Wenham, *Numbers [TOTC]* (Leicester, England and Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1981), pp. 161-162.

⁹³ The fuller account in Deuteronomy mentions Og's huge iron bed, about 13' long and 6' wide (Dt. 3:11).

THE PLAINS OF MOAB

Preparations for Entering the Promised Land (22:2—36:12)

The final section of the Book of Numbers, along with the entire Book of Deuteronomy, marks the final events before the death of Moses and the entry of Israel into the promised land under the leadership of Joshua. Here in the Plains of Moab on the eastern side of the Jordan River, the Israelites would encamp a considerable length of time, similar to their lengthy encampments at Mt. Sinai and Kadesh,

The Balaam Narratives (22:2—24:25)

Three chapters are given to the stories concerning Balaam's efforts to curse the people of Israel.⁹⁴ Ancient Near Eastern curse rituals provide a context for these narratives. In a world filled with magic incantations, curses were widely used as ways of controlling one's enemies. Far more than just wishes, curses were believed to carry an inherent power in and of themselves. Indeed, Balak, the Moabite king, puts it succinctly, "...those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed" (22:6b). Egyptian execration texts, for instance, recorded the names of Egypt's enemies upon pottery bowls. These bowls were smashed in the belief that such curses would magically lead to the destruction of Egypt's enemies. Archaeological discoveries from the Hittite Empire at Boğazköy show that curses were a part of suzerainty treaties so that if a treaty was violated, the disasters listed in the curses would fall upon the perpetrator (and this, in turn, lies behind the litany of curses listed in Dt. 28:15ff.). The Assyrian curses for covenant violation in Esarhaddon's vassal treaties before his death demonstrate the same thing. Ancient Near Eastern prophets, who were believed to have concourse with the gods, were considered to be specialists in this regard, which is why Balak, the Moabite king, hired the famous Mesopotamian prophet Balaam ben Beor, to curse the Israelites.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Called the "Book of Balaam" in Rabbinic tradition, this designation suggests that the rabbis considered it to be a complete unit, and likely, that it was added independently, cf. J. Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers במדבר* (Philadelphia/New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 185 and notes p. 319. Another reason why the Balaam stories might seem to be from an independent source is the rather wide use of divine names (Yahweh/29 times; Elohim/11 times; El/8 times; Shadday/2 times; and Elyon/1 time).

⁹⁵ That Balaam was a well-known figure is demonstrated by the discovery of a plaster inscription at Deir 'Alla in the east Jordan Valley, the site of a Late Bronze Age sanctuary, though the inscription itself was radio-carbon-dated to ca. 800 BC. In this inscription, Balaam is described as having a visionary communication with the gods. His name, Balaam ben Beor, appears in the text in more than one place, and there is little doubt that this is the Balaam ben Beor described in the Book of Numbers, cf. A. Lemaire, "Fragments from the Book of Balaam Found at Deir 'Alla," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 11.5 (1985): 26-35, 37-39.

Balak Hires Balaam (22:2-20)

The encampment of the Israelites on the northern border of Moab created great uneasiness among the Moabites. Though the Israelite trek had skirted their borders (21:13), this large number of visitors convinced the Moabites that the available resources could not support them (22:2-4a). Hence, the Moabites consulted with the Midianites (tribesmen who lived in the Sinai Peninsula and desert areas near Moab), and together they agreed to summon Balaam ben Beor, the famous Mesopotamian prophet who lived near the upper Euphrates River (cf. 23:7),⁹⁶ to deliver a powerful curse against Israel (22:4b-6). Representatives from both Moab and Midian traveled northward to buy his services (22:7).⁹⁷

After the dignitaries arrived, Balaam had an encounter with God in the night, who told him that he was to decline the offer, and more to the point, he was forbidden to curse the Israelites. Rather, they were to be regarded as a blessed people (22:8-12). Balaam now stood between the intent of the Moabites and Midianites and the commands of God, a theme that will be prominent in the remainder of the narratives. It may seem strange that the true God would communicate his purposes to a pagan prophet, but it should be remembered that this sort of thing also happened on other occasions (cf. Dt. 13:1-5; Mt. 12:27; Jn. 11:49-52). So, in the morning, Balaam sent them home and did not go with them (22:13).

Balak, however, did not give up so easily. He sent another coterie of more impressive dignitaries, assuming that Balaam's refusal to come would be ameliorated by a more substantial fee (22:14-17). Once more, Balaam invited them to stay the night but warning them that he would not be able to do anything unless permitted by Yahweh (22:18-19). In his response, Balaam even refers to "Yahweh, my God," which at the very least means that he was cursorily familiar with the religion of Yahweh and might even mean that he was himself a worshipper of Yahweh. (However, the Balaam inscription found at Deir 'Alla, see Footnote #95, has no reference to Yahweh, but instead, refers to the "gods" [*shaddayin*] as well as *Shamash*, the sun god, so the reader should probably not make too much of his reference to "Yahweh, my God.") Perhaps he was simply using words that would hold weight with the dignitaries, or perhaps he was merely adding Yahweh to the other deities in the pantheon. As had happened before, God spoke to Balaam, but this time he did not restrict him from accompanying the representatives, only that he was forbidden to say anything but what God would tell him to say (22:20).

Balaam and the Ass (22:21-40)

⁹⁶ Lit., "the river," which usually means the Euphrates in the Hebrew Bible.

⁹⁷ The Hebrew text reads that they went with **וּמְדִיָּאֵי וּמִמּוֹאָב** (= and divinations in their hands), which most English versions take to be an idiom referring to the fee for divination.

Balaam's journey to Moab with the dignitaries from Moab discloses his spiritual obtuseness. It might seem curious that Yahweh was angry at Balaam, even though he allowed him to go (22:21-22). The qualifier "as he was going" may suggest that the divine anger was not so much his decision to go but what happened on the way, the details of which are yet to be described.⁹⁸ Certainly Balaam was hypocritical in that though he readily indicated he could not speak other than what God told him, he still was willing to go to Moab in service of a king who wanted him to curse the Israelites. The money, no doubt, was attractive, which seems to be the way New Testament writers reflected on the story, speaking of the "wages of wickedness" (2 Pe. 2:15; Jude 11b).

There seems an intentional comparison between Balaam and the homely domestic animal, and Balaam comes out on the short side. He urged on his donkey, three times beating her mercilessly for turning off the way, bruising his foot in a narrow passage, and collapsing before the *Mal'ak Yahweh* (22:23-28).⁹⁹ To the ass, Balaam retorted, "You've made a fool of me," but as fools go, Balaam didn't need much help (22:29-30). Only when God opened his eyes to see the heavenly figure did Balaam realize his foolhardiness (22:31-35). In the same way, Balak would press Balaam three times to curse the Israelites until the pagan prophet was bluntly stopped by Yahweh. Just as God put words in the mouth of the ass, he would put words in the mouth of Balaam. Three times the ass was trapped between the sword of the LORD and Balaam's staff, and three times Balaam would be trapped between Yahweh's prohibitions and Balak's demands. Such parallelism insinuates that God can use whom he wills, prophet or ass, and indeed, the ass turns out to be most discerning of the two. As a side note, the description of the talking ass is so ridiculous in the ordinary sense of the word that it underscores authenticity. No serious writer who was attempting to concoct such tale out of thin air, hoping to convince an audience that it really happened, would interject an element like a talking ass!

When Balaam arrived in Moab, Balak immediately confronted him at the Arnon Gorge, probably at the eastern edge, with a rebuke for not coming earlier, but Balaam again emphasized that he could not speak anything other than what God put in his

⁹⁸ To be sure, most versions read the phrase *כִּי יֵצֵא* as "because he went" (so KJV, ASV, ESV, JPS, etc.), which is quite understandable, but the phrase can also be understood as a temporal sense, i.e., "when he went" or "as he was going" (so NIV NIB), which in this case seems preferable, cf. T. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* [NICOT], 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), pp. 404-405.

⁹⁹ While the figure of the Angel of the LORD appears several times in Genesis and Exodus, this is the first appearance in the Book of Numbers (the figure does not appear in either Leviticus or Deuteronomy). The *Mal'ak Yahweh* (Angel of the LORD) is a somewhat paradoxical figure inasmuch as on some occasions he seems to represent Yahweh (i.e., Ge. 16:11) and on other occasions he seems to be Yahweh (i.e., Ge. 48: 15-16; Ex. 3:2-6). Sometimes, there is fluidity between the two sides of this paradox in the same passage (i.e., Ge. 16:11, 13).

mouth (22:36-38). Balak now staged a sacrificial feast in honor the famous Mesopotamian prophet (22:39-40).

Balaam's First Oracle (22:41—23:12)

After looking over the Israelite encampment from a high vantage point (22:41), Balaam directed that seven altars be built for sacrificial offerings (23:1-2; cf. 23:14, 29). Since seven such altars are not part of biblical religion, they must derive from pagan tradition, and indeed there is a pagan precedent. A Babylonian tablet specifies, "At dawn, in the presence of Ea, Shamash, and Marduk [Babylonians deities], you shall erect seven altars..."¹⁰⁰ The number seven was sacred in the ancient Near East, and the use of multiple altars for a single divination ritual was a known practice.¹⁰¹ God then gave Balaam a message which he delivered to Balak and his dignitaries as an oracle (23:3-6). This would be the first of a series of oracles that Balaam would deliver, and all of them are in the form of Hebrew poetry.¹⁰² The synonymous parallelism of the couplets is easily followed, even in translation.

It may seem strange that Yahweh would deliver his word to a pagan prophet in the midst of a pagan divination ritual, what later will be labeled "sorcery" (cf. 23:23a; 24:1), but this, of course, is the irony of the circumstance, mirrored by the words God put into the mouth of the ass. As the sovereign Lord, God can deliver his word in whatever way he chooses.¹⁰³ The oracle recounts Balak's invitation to curse the Israelites, followed by Balaam's response that he could not curse what God did not permit (23:7-8). It observes that the Israelites, who are a large people group (note the hyperbole "like the dust," cf. Ge. 13:16),¹⁰⁴ are not the same as other nations,¹⁰⁵ and it closes with the desire that Balaam's own death might be like theirs, favored by God (23:9-10). Clearly, this oracle directly affirms that Israel is favored by God, and it is precisely this declaration of favor that angered Balak. Far from cursing the Israelites, Balaam had exalted them (23:11-12)!

¹⁰⁰ René Largement, "Les oracles de Bile'am et la mantique Sumero-Akkadienne," in *Memorial due Cinquante-naire* (Paris: Bloud, 1964), pp. 46.

¹⁰¹ L. Morales, *Numbers 20-36* [AOTC] (London: Apollos, 2024), p. 150. The number seven was significant: the Enuma Elish creation story is divided into seven tablets. In Babylonian mythology, seven evil spirits, the *Sebettu*, were feared as messengers of plague, drought, and death. The seven altars possibly had an astrological significance related to the seven planets, given that astrology was central to Babylonians religion.

¹⁰² For a brief introduction to the forms of Hebrew poetry, see my study "Interpreting the Bible" on my website www.dkonos.org (Literature: Theology & Ethics Section 1 of 2), pp. 54-56.

¹⁰³ As another example, it may be remembered that a similar divine word was given during a séance between Saul and the witch of Endor (1 Sa. 28).

¹⁰⁴ The phrase concerning the fourth part of Israel might be a reference to one of the four encampments (cf. Chapter 2), perhaps the only one Balak could clearly see from the high place (cf. 23:13).

¹⁰⁵ This distinction here between "people" and "nation" (23:9) is amplified in the Hebrew Bible's general designation of Israel as a "people" (*'am*), while other groups are called "nations" (*goyim*).

Balaam's Second Oracle (23:13-26)

Balak now suggests that they change locations. Perhaps a different venue would be more successful. As before, he would only be able to see part of the Israelite encampment, but hopefully enough. He took Balaam to the top of Mt. Pisgah (cf. 20:21), and once again, seven altars were constructed after which Balaam retired to hear from God (23:13-15). Once again, God responded with a message for Balak, and Balaam now returned to Balak with his second oracle (23:16-17).

This one begins with the blunt statement that God cannot be manipulated (23:18-20). Pagan rituals assumed precisely the opposite, that the deities could be manipulated, placated, and, like fickle humans, their minds could be changed.¹⁰⁶ Not so with Yahweh! His divine intent was to bless the Israelites, and consequently, he would spare them misfortune and trouble, for he, their divine King, was in their midst (23:21). Yahweh was no distant emperor; he was enthroned in the Tabernacle in the very center of the encampment. He had delivered them from Egypt for a divine purpose, and no sorcery by Balaam could alter that (23:22-24). In metaphorical language, Israel's state of blessing and enduring power is described by two of the most powerful animals in the ancient world, the wild ox (the auroch) and the Asian lion (both species are now extinct). The Israelites would overpower all their enemies and nothing could stop them.

As might be expected, Balak again was furious. It would be better to say nothing at all than to have Balaam repeat these affirmations of favor toward Israel (23:25-26). Balaam, for his part, resorted to what he had said before: he could only say what Yahweh had told him.

Balaam's Third Oracle (23:27—24:13)

If anything, Balak refused to give up. Now he changed the venue once more, this time to an elevation and an angle from which he could see the entire Israelite encampment. As before, Balaam called for the construction of seven altars with sacrifices, but this time he did not look to omens as he had done previously. On the first two occasions, he had left Balak and the dignitaries at the seven altars while he went to another place, presumably to enact some sort of ritual from which he expected omens (cf. 23:3, 15). Now, he simply faced the desert and waited, and when he did, the divine Spirit came upon him, giving him yet a third oracle (23:27—24:2). Once more, the precedent of God speaking through an ass prefigures him speaking through the pagan prophet, this time by an effusion of the Holy Spirit.

Balaam now prostrated himself before this overwhelming vision of Yahweh, his perception now clear, since he had heard the very words of God (24:3-4). His oracle concerning Israel, once more, was a divine affirmation, not a curse. Earlier, he had

¹⁰⁶ Of course, the astute reader may remember that on other occasions it might seem that God changes his mind (cf. Ge. 6:6; Ex. 32:14, etc.), but these are anthropomorphisms used as analogies; and here, God's constancy is affirmed.

compared Israel's strength to that of the wild ox and lion. Now, he compares Israel's abundance to flourishing gardens and fertile valleys with copious water sources (24:5-7). These are images of bounty and blessing. Looking into the future, he announced a coming king of Israel who would be greater than Agag, the future king of the Amalekites.¹⁰⁷ Of course, at the present time, Israel had no king. However, the idea of a future kingship had certainly been voiced to the patriarchs (Ge. 17:6, 16; 35:11), and shortly Yahweh would give instructions for how this king was to be chosen and how he was to behave himself (cf. Dt. 17:14-20). The theme of a victorious king will emerge again in the Fourth Oracle (24:17-19). Amalek certainly was viewed as a dreadful enemy, a godless people who cut down the weak and vulnerable from behind (cf. Dt. 25:17-19). The ultimate battle between Israel and Amalek, Israel's oldest enemy (cf. Ex. 17:8-14), would not happen until the days of Saul, Israel's first king (1 Sa. 15), and it would be Samuel who would execute Agag in view of Saul's failure to do so (1 Sa. 15:32-33). Employing poetic lines nearly identical to 23:22, 24, the third oracle ends with another reference to the Israelites' rescue from Egypt and their invincibility, once again using the analogies of the wild ox and lion (24:8-9a; cf. 23:22, 24). Just as was said to the patriarchs (Ge. 12:3; 27:29b), those who blessed Israel would be blessed, and those who cursed Israel would be cursed (24:9b). Balak's unrelenting intent to curse Israel would now recoil upon him and his nation, a backlash that would be cited again in the fourth oracle (24:17b).

Balak was now even more furious at this unwelcome outcome. In angry frustration, he clapped his hands, an ancient indication of derision (cf. Job 27:23; La. 2:15), dismissing Balaam to his northern home without his fee (24:10-11). Balaam, for his part, continued to excuse himself by his former disclaimer that he could only say what Yahweh had said (24:12-13).

Balaam's Fourth Oracle (24:14-19)

Though Balak had sent him home, Balaam had one parting shot, a fourth oracle foretelling something even more momentous. He introduced it with nearly the same words as he did in the third oracle, here adding only a single line about his being "the one knowing the knowledge of Elyon" (24:15-16). This oracle extends the theme of kingship found in the third oracle, especially the appearance of a future king who would crush Israel's enemies.

Balaam marks this vision of the coming king as concerning the distant future, or as he says, "not now" and "not near" (לֹא עֵתָּה and לֹא קֶרֶב, 24:17a). He describes him as a "star out of Jacob" and a "scepter out of Israel" (24:17b). The

¹⁰⁷ Both the LXX and the Samaritan Pentateuch, obviously following a different recension of the text, read "Gog" instead of "Agag," but all the English Versions follow the Masoretic Text. Either way, he is a symbol of power. However, the later mention of the Amalekites in 24:20 tilts in favor of Agag, the Amalekite king, rather than Gog.

parallelism of “star” and “scepter” is striking, since stars were sometimes used as metaphors for royal persons, and of course, scepters were royal implements.

Who is this coming figure? These descriptions have long been understood as very early messianic passages, and indeed, this same passage in Numbers was listed in a collection of messianic texts by the Qumran community near the time of Christ.¹⁰⁸ There was a preliminary fulfillment in the time of David, when the powers of Moab and Edom, along with other hostile entities, were broken (2 Sa. 8:2, 11-14; 1 Kg. 11:15-16), but its final and complete fulfillment is in Christ, the coming messianic King, who will reign until all enemies are put under his feet. That the passage was messianic seemed so apparent that it was generally held by the Jews from ancient times. Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BC) of the Maccabees minted coins with an imprinted star, suggesting that he was the conquering ruler rising from Jacob. In Targum Onkelos, the words “star” and “scepter” were rendered in Aramaic as “king” and “anointed one.” In the Second Jewish Revolt (AD 132-136), the title “star” was applied by rabbinic scholars to Simon bar Koseba. His nickname, bar-Kokhba (= son of the star), given to him by Rabbi Akiba, indicated that the revolt leader was perceived to be the promised messiah (in this case a failed claim). His moniker “son of the star” was directly linked to this text in Numbers in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Taannit* 4:5). From Jewish interpretation, it passed down to the Christian church and has been the prevalent view ever since until the advent of modern interpreters, who generally disclaim any messianic link.¹⁰⁹

The predicted victories over Moab and Edom, the nations that refused the Israelites passage through their homelands, would be crushing defeats (24:17c-19).¹¹⁰ Instead of Moab being cursed, Balaam, in effect, curses Moab.

Balaam’s Final Oracles (24:20-25)

Balaam’s predictions did not yet end, and he pointed to three more people groups who would meet disastrous ends, the Amalekites, the Kenites, and the navy from Kittim. It should be noted that all these incidents are projected for the indeterminate future: none of them, on the face of things, seem to concern the soon-coming Israelite invasion of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua.

¹⁰⁸ The so-called Testimonia is made up of four messianic quotations (Ex. 20:21; Nu. 24:15-17; Dt. 33:8-11 and Jos. 6:26). Together, they refer to a prophet like Moses, a star identified as a priest, the scepter of David as a royal messiah, and a blessing of Levi (4Q175).

¹⁰⁹ Two New Testament passages that may well be allusions to this passage in Numbers are Mt. 2:2 and Rv. 22:16.

¹¹⁰ The Moabites apparently were descended from Lot through Sheth, which is suggested by the parallelism, though no Old Testament genealogies offer this information. Because of this absence, some interpreters view them as a separate people group. Seir, on the other hand, is generally identified with a range of mountains where Esau located (Ge. 32:3; 33:14, 16).

The Amalekites, called the “chief of nations,” are listed first (24:20). The destruction of Amalek is to be linked with the previous mention of Agag (24:7b). Twice the Israelites had encountered them already (14:43-45; Ex. 17:8-14). The title “chief of nations” or the “first of nations” may refer back to the genealogical reference that Amalek was one of the chieftains in Esau’s clan (Ge. 36:16). The Amalekites would fall to the Israelites in the time of David.

The Kenites, relatives of Moses, were a Canaanite clan of whom some members had been traveling with the Israelites in the trek through the desert and would continue to be friendly after they arrived in Canaan (10:29-32; Jg. 1:16; 5:24; 1 Sa. 30:29).¹¹¹ Despite this, in the end they would fall to the Assyrians (24:21-22).¹¹²

The final group, a navy from Kittim, seems to refer to the people of Cyprus, the island and people group generally referred to as Kittim in ancient literature, both inside and outside the Bible. The problem with this passage is that the language and grammar are far from clear. Literally, it says “they shall humble Asshur and humble Eber, and also he [no verb; no antecedent] until destruction.” Such ambiguity has left interpreters with the challenge of making sense of things, and while there are multiple suggestions, ranging from the invasion of the sea peoples to the Philistine threat to Alexander the Great or to the Romans, there is no consensus.

So, Balaam went home, and Balak left disappointed (24:25). In the end, the question remains: was Balaam a good guy or a bad guy? There certainly are some points in his favor. Repeatedly, he stressed that he could not say anything except what God permitted him to say (22:18, 38; 23:12, 26; 24:12-13). He even spoke of Yahweh as “my God” (22:18). Consistently he refused to curse the Israelites, and in each of his oracles, he affirmed them as God’s favored people. Repeatedly, God spoke to him directly (22:9-12, 20) and revealed to him the content for his oracles (23:4-5, 16). He, in turn, faithfully relayed them to Balak and the Moabite dignitaries (23:7ff.; 23:17ff.; 24:1-3, 15, 20, 21, 23). In the third oracle, he was suffused with the Holy Spirit and empowered to announce his blessing of Israel (24:1-2), and this included an important messianic prediction about the coming King (24:17a). If the text said only this and no more, Balaam might easily have been regarded as a true prophet and worthy of honor.

On the other hand, despite these more positive aspects, Balaam also is depicted as a man who loved money, even though in the end he was deprived of his fee (24:11). The offer of a handsome reward attracted him (22:7, 17, 37b), and though God told him any attempt to curse the Israelites was doomed to failure, since they rested under

¹¹¹ See additional comments on 10:29-32.

¹¹² If this prediction concerns the time of the neo-Assyrian empire, then the destruction of the Kenites would happen in about the 8th century during the Assyrian expansions into the Levant. However, some scholars suggest the term “Asshur” might refer to a local people group briefly mentioned elsewhere (cf. Ge. 25:3, 18; 2 Sa. 2:9; Ps. 83:8), cf. G. Wenham, *Numbers [TOTC]* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1981), p. 181.

his favor (22:12), he went anyway, allowing Balak to assume he would do the deed. On his way, the incident with the talking ass became a prelude to Balaam, the talking prophet, and the Angel of the LORD plainly told him that this was a reckless venture from the start (22:32b). Once in Moab, he resorted to pagan divination rituals, something absolutely forbidden in Israel (23:1-3, 14-15, 29-30). Later references to Balaam, both outside the Bible, where he is depicted as a pagan polytheist (Deir 'Alla inscription), and inside the Bible, where he serves as an example of corrupt leaders who are doomed (2 Pe. 2:13-22; Jude 11; Rv. 2:14), leaves him seriously compromised. Indeed, his repeated claim that money was of no consequence might merely have been an exercise of posturing for even more money (22:18; 24:12-13). His vicious beating of his ass three times revealed his true character (22:23, 25, 27). In the end, Balaam is an ambiguous figure, a pagan whom God sovereignly used, just as he used the ass, despite his questionable moral character.

The Moabite Seduction of Israel (25:1-18)

After Balaam's departure, the Israelites would now encounter first-hand the Canaanite fertility cult. By engaging in it, they would reach the climax of the cycles of rebellion that had occurred throughout their desert sojourn of four decades. To appreciate what happens here, one must have some knowledge of Canaanite religion. Like all other religions of the ancient Near East, Canaanite religion was polytheistic. The names of the gods and goddesses of the various people groups might differ, but the essential character of the religions were much the same. Principle deities included El (father of the gods); Ba'al (or Hadad), god of storm; Anat (Anath), mother god; and, Astarte (Ashtoreth), the consort of Ba'al. The personification of the forces of nature included Yam (god of the sea) and Mot (god of death and the underworld). Various people groups had patron deities, such as, Chemosh (god of the Moabites) and Milkom/Molech (god of the Ammonites). This pantheon of 70 deities made up the divine assembly that was believed to live on Mt. Zaphon in the Lebanon range.

In many ways, the activity of the gods was the activity of humans writ large with romances, conflicts, and wayward children. The controlling mythology paralleled the agricultural seasons of the year when Ba'al, the god of rain, was imprisoned by Mot in the underworld, causing the dry season. His sister/consort engaged in a terrific struggle to set him free, and his emergence from the underworld brought about the wet season with its consequent fertility. Ritual reenactment and imitative magic in the form of sacred prostitution mimicked the sexual union of Ba'al and Astarte, and the open-air shrines, the *bamot* (high places), were sites where sacred prostitution was conducted. These sites were supplied with *massebot* (stone pillars as phallic symbols) and *asherot* (wooden poles or trees symbolizing the female counterpart). Such cultic sexual encounters were believed to stock-pile fertility energy. Many thousands of iconographic artifacts of female figurines with exaggerated sexual features have been

unearthed by archeologists. Sacrifices, also, were offered at the *bamot*, and these included human as well as animal sacrifices. The primary concern of all these religious expressions was fertility—crops, animals, and people.¹¹³

The Israelite failure began with Moabite women inviting Israelite men to engage in sacred sex, the ritual reenactment of the mating of the deities, which was an act of sexual infidelity to their wives and a direct violation of the commandment prohibiting adultery (cf. Ex. 20:14; Lv. 18:3, 24-30). It also included participation in pagan sacrifices to the god Ba'al-Peor, yet another grievous violation (25:1-3; cf. Ex. 20:3) and the very thing the Israelites had been warned about (cf. Ex. 34:15-16). Yahweh's wrath against the leaders who allowed this to happen as well as the Israelites who participated resulted in their execution (25:4-5). Yahweh sent a plague upon the people, and some 24,000 died (25:9).¹¹⁴ While the larger body of Israelites were grieving over this scandalous affront and the deserved judgment that followed, one Israelite man, Zimri ben Salu of the Simeon tribe (25:14), took a Midianite woman, Cozbi, the daughter of a Midianite tribal chief (25:15), into his family tent to have intercourse with her in the very sight of Moses and everyone else.¹¹⁵ Phineas, the grandson of Aaron (cf. Ex. 6:25), followed them into the tent, and with his spear, he impaled them both, driving the spearhead through both their bodies (25:6-9). This zealous act of execution stopped the plague, an act that was reckoned as righteousness by later generations (cf. Ps. 106:28-31). Because of his zeal, Yahweh awarded him and his family an enduring covenantal promise of priestly service, for in this execution, he made atonement for the nation (25:10-13).

The outcome was that the Midianites, who were relatives of Moses by marriage (Ex. 2:15-21) and once were in a quasi-friendly relationship with the Israelites (Ex. 18), would now be their mortal enemies (Nu. 25:16-18). The animosity between the Israelites and Midianites would be carried out in future conflict (Nu. 31; Jg. 6-8).

The Second Census (26)

¹¹³ Until about a century or so ago, our knowledge of Canaanite religion was confined largely to the texts of the Bible. Since then, large libraries of cuneiform texts have been discovered in places like Ugarit to broaden our understanding. For further details of Canaanite religion, see H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. J. Sturdy (London: S.P.C.K.: 1973). See, especially, the chapter on "West Semitic Religion."

¹¹⁴ In 1 Co. 10:8, Paul gives the figure of 23,000. This discrepancy between the 24,000 in Numbers (both in the MT and LXX as well as Philo and Josephus) and the 23,000 in Paul has no completely satisfactory explanation. Some suggest that Paul intentionally omitted those leaders of the rebellion who were executed at a different time (cf. Nu. 25:4), while others suggest that both in Numbers and in Paul the numbers are rounded (i.e., more than 23,000 but something less than 24,000). Historical-critical scholars, of course, simply attribute the discrepancy to a Pauline memory lapse, a solution that evangelicals find incompatible with the integrity of Scripture. Once again, as with the census numbers, the figures seem abnormally large.

¹¹⁵ The Midianites, like the Moabites, lived in the Transjordan regions, and in the Balaam stories, the two peoples were closely associated (22:4, 7). Later, the Book of Numbers suggests that this seduction of Israelites came at the advice of Balaam (Nu. 31:15-16).

The encampment of the Israelites in the Plains of Moab would be their last stop before crossing the Jordan River to invade the land of Canaan. Once again, as had happened nearly 40 years earlier (1:1-2), Yahweh commanded a census, since the first generation of warriors had now died. As before, this was to assess the number of men fit to serve in the army for the invasion of Canaan, anyone older than 20 years (26:1-4). In addition, this count would figure in the allotments of land once the invasion was complete, reckoning the size of allotments based on tribal numbers (26:52-56). Clans within each tribe are listed, since lots would be cast between them for family parcels. These allotments would eventually be carried out by Joshua (Jos. 13-19). If one includes the daughters of Zelophehad, the people of Israel now comprised some 70 clans, a number matching the 70 individuals who entered Egypt in the time of Joseph (cf. Ge. 46:27; Ex. 1:5).

Near the beginning of the tribal numberings was a dire reminder of the mishaps of the past (26:8-11), particularly the rebellion of the Levite Korah, and Dathan and Abiram, his Reubenite supporters (chapter 16). Though their families were judged when the earth swallowed them up, a notation here indicates that some of Korah's family members survived, and we find remnants of this family in the choristers of the Psalms where they are listed as the "descendants of Korah" (26:11; cf. Psalms 42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88). Near the end of the numberings, the rebellion of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, is recalled (26:61) as well as the general rebellion of the whole nation that had resulted in their sentence of death in the desert, all except Joshua and Caleb (26:63-65).

When compared with each other, the counts for the 1st and 2nd censuses are fairly similar. The various clans, when compared with the genealogical records in Gen. 46:8-24, show minor differences, but these are mostly spelling variations. The notation that Zelophehad had no sons, only daughters, sets up the anomaly to be resolved in 27:1-11 and 36:1-13.

1 ST CENSUS		2 ND CENSUS	
<i>Reuben</i>	46,500	<i>Reuben</i>	43,730 (26:5-7)
<i>Simeon</i>	59,300	<i>Simeon</i>	22,200 (26:12-14)
<i>Gad</i>	45,650	<i>Gad</i>	40,500 (26:15-18)
<i>Judah</i>	74,600	<i>Judah</i>	76,500 (26:19-22)
<i>Issachar</i>	54,400	<i>Issachar</i>	64,300 (26:23-25)
<i>Zebulun</i>	57,400	<i>Zebulun</i>	60,500 (26:26-27)
<i>Ephraim</i>	40,500	<i>Ephraim</i>	32,500 (26:35-37)
<i>Manasseh</i>	32,200	<i>Manasseh</i>	52,700 (26:28-34)
<i>Benjamin</i>	35,400	<i>Benjamin</i>	45,600 (26:38-41)
<i>Dan</i>	62,700	<i>Dan</i>	64,400 (26:42-43)
<i>Asher</i>	41,500	<i>Asher</i>	53,400 (26:44-47)
<i>Naphtali</i>	53,400	<i>Naphtali</i>	45,400 (26:48-51)

Most tribes increased marginally, though five of them decreased slightly. Simeon had the greatest decline, possibly due to deaths of judgment in the debacle with the Moabites. In any case, the Israelite man who had blatantly flaunted his sexual union with the Midianite woman had been a Simeonite (cf. 25:14). Manasseh, on the other hand, had the largest increase, which accounts for the fact that their tribal holdings included land on both sides of the Jordan (Jos 17:11, 16-17).¹¹⁶ Altogether, the total for the first census was 603,550, while the total for the second was 601,730.

The Levite census, as in the earlier one, was conducted separately, since the Levites would not be members of the invading force and would not receive any land inheritance (26:62). The same issue with astronomically large numbers that attended the 1st Census also attends the 2nd Census (see the discussion on pages 16-19).

Zelophehad's Daughters (27:1-11)

The second census not only was an accounting of available warriors, but also the basis for land allotment in Canaan, and only male family heads were registered (cf. 26:52-56). Technically, the land belonged to God and the Israelite families were his tenants (cf. Lv. 25:23), but each family would receive an allotment based on the registered names in the second census. In a patriarchal culture, inheritance protocols passed through the male descendants, father to son. Ordinarily, when a father died his inheritance was split between his sons, the eldest receiving a double share (cf. Dt. 21:15-17). Any daughters would receive a dowry upon marriage, but they then became members of their husbands' families. On occasion, a family might not have any sons, only daughters, and this raised the question of how to avoid a family name disappearing from the register of Israelites, and equally important, how to avoid a family being passed over in the property allotments to be assigned within the land in Canaan. This situation actually happened in the family of Zelophehad, a descendant of Manasseh with five daughters but no sons (27:1-4). The daughters consulted with Moses, who in turn, consulted with Yahweh. The young women made clear in their presentation that their family had not been involved in the Korah rebellion (cf. 16), where presumably any property had been confiscated. To be sure, their father had died in the desert, along with all the others in the whole nation over 20 years old, but at least this was for his own sin for refusing to enter the land of Canaan at Kadesh and not to be considered in the same category. Doubtless, this situation was not unique, and the decision to be delivered here would set a precedent for any family facing the same circumstance.

¹¹⁶ In 1910, a set of 102 inscriptions on pottery shards, called the Samaritan Ostraca, were discovered at the royal acropolis of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom. They describe shipments of wine and oil from nearby districts, and a number of the names on the ostraca match the names of Manassite clans listed in this 2nd Census, cf. J. Milgrom, *Numbers* [JTC] (Philadelphia/New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p.224.

Yahweh immediately indicated that the five women had a just cause. The daughters would be permitted to inherit property, or in the case of a family that had no children whatsoever, the father's property would be given to his brothers. If there were no brothers, then it passed to uncles, and if there were no uncles, then it passed to the nearest male relative in his clan (27:5-11). This handling of a real situation is likely how many of the case laws in the Torah came about, especially those enumerated in Deuteronomy. Indeed, there is a fascinating example of this law being carried out, when a certain Shehan had no sons but gave his daughter to Jarha, his Egyptian slave (1 Chr. 2:34-35). Attai, the grandson, inherited the ancestral property.

This question and its resolution were probably handled here inasmuch as 2 ½ tribes would receive land inheritance in the Transjordan (chapter 32), and the tribe of Manasseh was one of them. The decision about property inheritance by daughters, however, created a new question, one not to be addressed until the final chapter of the Book of Numbers (chapter 36).

Joshua to Succeed Moses (27:12-23)

Leadership succession in the ancient world, similar to property inheritance, was typically father to the eldest son. The people of Israel were no exception. Family leadership among the patriarchs passed from Abraham to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob, and Jacob to the twelve sons as heads of clans, usually to the oldest son (though both Isaac and Jacob were exceptions, since they were second sons). Of course, there were no clear references for Israelite tribal leaders during the many years of Egyptian bondage, and it would not be until the rise of Moses that a new national leader emerged as singled out by Yahweh. Aaron's successors already had been established following the patrilinear model (3:2-4, 10; cf. Ex. 28:1, 4, 41-43; 39:41), but as yet, no successor had been indicated for Moses, who was now near the end of his career and life.

Joshua, the one to become Moses' successor, was an Ephraimite, one of the Joseph tribes (cf. 1 Chr. 7:27). His name Hoshea (= salvation) was amended by Moses to Joshua (= Yahweh saves, cf. Nu. 13:8, 16). He first appears as the field commander of the Israelite army in its conflict with Amalek (Ex. 17). Later, he appears as the aide of Moses when Moses was ascending Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:13; 32:17), and he had served Moses from his youth (cf. Ex. 33:11; Nu. 11:28). When the Israelites reached Kadesh Barnea, Joshua was one of the 12 spies sent to reconnoiter the land Canaan (Nu. 13:8). Upon their return, he, along with Caleb, urged the people to obey Yahweh by invading the land (Nu. 13:30; 14:6-9), which in turn gained him the privilege of finally entering the land many years later (Nu. 14:30, 38; 26:65; 32:12). Hence, it is not surprising that just before his death, Moses sought Yahweh's permission to appoint a successor, and that successor would be the Spirit-filled Joshua, who was installed by the imposition of Moses' hands (Nu. 27:15-23).

As Moses' successor, Joshua would fulfill two primary functions. First, he would serve as the military commander of the Israelite forces for the invasion of Canaan (Dt. 1:38; 3:21, 28; 31:3, 23). Second, he would administrate land allotments in Canaan to the various tribes (Dt. 31:7; Jos. 13:1-7; 19:51). Moses' final speech to the Israelites before his death would be made with Joshua standing at his side (Dt. 32:44).

The relevance of Joshua's appointment derives from the fact that not only was Moses now very old (cf. Dt. 34:7), but he had been restricted from entering the land of Canaan because of his petulance in striking the rock a second time (27:12-14; cf. 20:6-12). The reference to the Abarim range in 27:12, where Moses was to view the land of Canaan before he died, clearly seems to be a reference to mountains in western Moab (cf. Nu. 33:47-48). Later, Mt. Nebo/Pisgah would be designated as the particular peak Moses would ascend (cf. Dt. 32:49; 34:1). Both Miriam, his sister, and Aaron, his brother, were now dead (cf. 20:1, 23-29). It was Moses' turn. He would be allowed to see the land, but he would not be allowed to enter it. The description of his vision of the land would be postponed until Deuteronomy 34 (cf. Dt. 32:48-52).

In his usual role as the consummate intercessor, Moses knew well that whoever succeeded him must serve as a pastor-shepherd (27:15-17). Moses' address to Yahweh as the "God of the spirits of all flesh" (cf. 16:22) underscores Yahweh's divine sovereignty over the peoples of the world. He was not a mere provincial deity, as was the common viewpoint among the surrounding nations, but he was Lord over all.

Yahweh now indicated that the successor was to be Joshua, a man who was endowed with the Holy Spirit (27:18)¹¹⁷ and who would now be privileged to share Moses' position of authority, permitted to seek answers from Yahweh through the priestly use of Urim and Thummim (27:19-21; cf. Ex. 28:30).¹¹⁸ There would be some difference between them, of course. Moses, alone, had been privileged to speak to Yahweh "face to face" (cf. 12:6-8). Joshua, though sharing Moses' authority, would hear from Yahweh by secondary means.

Joshua's confirmation as Moses' successor was now revealed to the entire body of Israelites by the public ceremony of imposing hands, a ritual of blessing (cf. Ge.

¹¹⁷ That Joshua was endowed with special powers seems obvious, but the Hebrew text does not have the word "holy" modifying "spirit" as one will find in passages like Ps. 51:11 and Is. 63:10-11. Most modern English Versions do not capitalize it (exceptions are the ESV, NASB, and NLT), while older translations do capitalize it (KJV, ASV). Nonetheless, while there is some ambiguity, I think the reference is likely to the Holy Spirit, similar to the endowment of the Holy Spirit to the prophets.

¹¹⁸ The breast-piece of the High Priest was folded (28:16), and into this fold were deposited the mysterious implements called Urim and Thummim, apparently small objects for casting lots with respect to public matters. Possibly they were small pebbles or a form of dice or even small sticks used to secure a "yes" or "no" answer from Yahweh (cf. Nu. Lv. 16:7-10; 1 Sa. 23:9-12; Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65). The words אורִיִּם and תִּמְמִיִּם begin with the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet (similar to the *alpha* and the *omega* in the New Testament), and they probably symbolize the totality of God's judgments

48:14) and appointment (cf. 8:10) that would continue into the New Testament for ordaining leaders (Ac. 6:6; 13:3; 1 Ti. 4:14; He. 6:2).

Appointed Public Sacrifices and Festivals (28:1—29:40)

The Israelite Calendar

While the Israelite calendar had 12 months, it followed the phases of the moon rather than the sun, and each year was 360 days long with 30 days in each month. The two words for month in Hebrew, חֹדֶשׁ and יָרֵחַ, are both lunar-oriented, the first referring to the day of the new moon and the second the word for the moon itself. Only four of the Hebrew names of the months have survived, *Abib* (“fresh head” [of grain]), *Ziv* (“beauty” [time of flowers?]), *Ethanim* (“permanent streams?”), and *Bul* (rains). As is obvious, these four are agricultural in character. It is the later Babylonian names of the months that cover the full range. Of course, using such a lunar calendar meant that periodically adjustments had to be made to in order to remain in sync with the sun (similar to our leap-year, but in this case a type of leap-month).¹¹⁹

MONTHS	HEBREW NAMES	BABYLONIANS NAMES	SEASON
1 st	Abib	Nisan	March/April
2 nd	Ziv	Iyyar	April/May
3 rd	--	Sivan	May/June
4 th	--	Tammuz	June/July
5 th	--	Ab	July/August
6 th	--	Elul	August/September
7 th	Ethanim	Tishri	September/October
8 th	Bul	Marheshvan	October/November
9 th	--	Kislev	November/December
10 th	--	Tebeth	December/January
11 th	--	Shebat	January/February
12 th	--	Adar	February/March

Schedule of Sacrifices

A distinction should be drawn between public and private sacrifices. Any Israelite could approach the Tabernacle to offer sacrifices, and these are described in detail in Leviticus 1-7, many of the descriptions beginning with “any of you” or

¹¹⁹ An early agriculture calendar, now dubbed the Gezer Calendar, was discovered in 1908 from about the 10th century BC. It designates the agricultural seasons and 12 months of the year (but not by name) beginning in the fall: two months (olive harvest), two months (planting), two months (late planting), one month (hoeing flax), one month (barley harvest), one month (harvesting and feasting), two months (vine tending), one month (summer fruit), cf. Dospěl, Marek, “Text Treasures: Gezer Calendar,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 52.2 (2026): 64; W. Albright, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [ANET], p. 320.

“someone” or “a member of the community” or some comparable phrase. However, the sacrifices in Numbers 28-29 are scheduled public sacrifices, and they were appointed for particular times.

TIMES	BULLS	RAMS	LAMBS	MALE GOATS	
	(whole burnt offering)			(sin offering)	
Daily		2			The parenthetical numbers indicate an aggregate, since the daily offering and/or the new moon offerings were not displaced by the various offerings for other times (cf. 29:6). Dry measures for flour and grain were based on the <i>ephah</i> (22 liters or ½ bushel). Liquid measures for oil and wine were based on the <i>hin</i> (4 quarts or liters).
Sabbath		2(4)			
New Moon	2	1	7(9)	1	
Unleavened Bread	2	1	7(9)	1	
Weeks/Pentecost	2*	1*	7(9)	1	
Trumpets**	1(3)	1(3)	7(16)	1	
Atonement	1	1	7(9)	1	
Tabernacles					
1 st Day	13	2	14(16)	1	
2 nd Day	12	2	14(16)	1	
3 rd Day	11	2	14(16)	1	
4 th Day	10	2	14(16)	1	
5 th Day	9	2	14(16)	1	
6 th Day	8	2	14(16)	1	
7 th Day	7	2	14(16)	1	
8 th Day	1	1	7(9)	1	
*There is a discrepancy between Lv. 23:18 (one bull, two rams) and Nu. 28:27 (two bulls, one ram). This might be a scribal error.					
**After the Babylonian exile, the New Year (Rosh ha-Shanah) would be celebrated in the 7 th month instead of the 1 st month.					

The liturgical pattern for public sacrifices and annual festivals was built on the calendar, and they are enumerated on the basis of frequency and divided into daily, sabbatical, and monthly offerings, plus the seven annual feasts throughout the year.¹²⁰ Daily offerings, which occurred morning and evening, had been covered earlier (cf. Ex. 29:38-41) as were the seven annual feasts (Lv. 23). Hence, there is some overlapping of this earlier material here in chapter 28-29 plus additional details. Both the sacrifices and feasts seem to be largely arranged around the number seven, the symbolic number of completion and well-being. Altogether, there were seven feasts:

¹²⁰ Many years later, the neglect of these offerings was taken to heart by Hezekiah, who recognized that the ancestors had been unfaithful in this regard (2 Chr. 29:5-11).

Sabbath, New Moon, Unleavened Bread (which included the Passover and First-fruits),¹²¹ Weeks (seven weeks after Passover), Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles. The two most important of them, Unleavened Bread and Tabernacles, were each seven days long, and Tabernacles, the last feast of the year, was held in the seventh month.¹²²

The tally of public sacrifices was enormous! Every year, this would have included at least 113 bulls, 32 rams, 1086 lambs, and more than a ton of flour, not to mention huge quantities of oil and wine.¹²³

Meaning of the Various Public Sacrifices

The focus of Numbers 28-29 is on the scheduling of public sacrifices and festivals and the ritual offerings for each. One must look further afield to find their inherent meanings. Explanations for their meanings are not always as clear as one might hope, but the gist can be determined reasonably enough. The *Tami'd* (**morning and evening sacrifice** daily, 28:1-8), originally was instituted at Mt. Sinai (28:6; cf. Ex. 29:38-42). There, it is linked to the idea that God would meet the Israelites and speak to them from the Tabernacle, the place consecrated by the presence of his glory (Ex. 29:43). This consecration of the day in the morning and the gratitude offered in the evening surrounded the Israelites, symbolizing their full commitment to Yahweh and the life he provided. It also served as a reflection upon the creation of the universe, when the various stages of creation were demarcated by the repeating phrase, "...it was evening, it was morning" (Ge. 1). The word *Tami'd* means "continuous," and the morning and evening sequence suggests that all life is a life of worship honoring Yahweh. It is he who provides daily sustenance, regulating and sustaining the order of the world.

The weekly **sabbatical offerings** also recalled the creation account, when God had completed the work of creation and took rest on the seventh day (Ge. 2:2). The seventh day, therefore, was set apart as holy, and beginning with the gift of manna in the desert, the Israelites were not to work on that day (cf. Ex. 16:4-5, 22-26). Of course, this stipulation would become the longest of the Ten Commandments given at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 20:8-11). It symbolized divine grace through rest.

The monthly **new moon offerings**, which are mentioned at various times in the Old Testament, seem to have been a time for family worship (cf. 1 Sa. 20:5-6; 2 Kg. 4:23). Further, the annual festivals were reckoned using the new moon dates (28:16; 29:1, 7, 12).

¹²¹ In Leviticus 23, the offering of First-fruits occurred on the day following the Sabbath, whenever that fell during Unleavened Bread and Passover week (Lv. 23:9-11). This should be distinguished from the new grain offering offered at the end of the barley harvest and presented seven weeks later on the Feast of Weeks (Nu. 28:26; cf. Lv. 23:15-16).

¹²² In addition to the cycles of sevens here in Numbers, elsewhere there is also the sabbatical year (every 7th year) and the Jubilee (every 50th year after seven "weeks" of years, cf. Ex. 23:10-11; Lv. 25; Dt. 15:1-18).

¹²³ G. Wenham, *Numbers [TOTC]* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1981), p. 197.

The first annual festivals of **Passover** (the initial day) and **Unleavened Bread** (the entire week) are clearly linked to liberation from the bondage in Egypt (cf. Ex. 12:3-30; Lv. 23:4-8; Dt. 16:1-8). This was to be a time of reflection upon the ancient central event of salvation, one of the three *haggim* to which every male Israelite was obliged to appear before Yahweh at the Tabernacle, and later, the Temple (Ex. 23:14-17; Dt. 16:16-17). Bread without yeast recalled the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt (cf. Ex. 12:34, 39), hence, the “bread of affliction” (Dt. 16:3). Leviticus also stipulates a first-fruits ceremony during the Passover week (Lv. 23:9-14), one not mentioned here.

The **Feast of Weeks** celebrated the conclusion of the wheat harvest; hence, it is here called the Feast of First-fruits (28:26) but elsewhere the Feast of Harvest (cf. Ex. 23:16) or Feast of Weeks (Ex. 34:22; Lv. 23:15-21; Dt. 16:9-12). It was calculated as seven full weeks (i.e., a “week” of weeks) from the day of the first-fruits wave offering during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Lv. 23:15-16), which is to say, seven weeks plus one day.¹²⁴

The **Day of Blowing Trumpets** (29:1-6; cf. Lv. 23:23-25) was also a day of rest. If this day is what is envisioned in Psalms 47, it venerates Yahweh as the “great King over all the earth” (Ps. 47:2, 7, 9). In later Israel, this became the “head of the year,” which is to say, New Years Day or *Rosh ha-Shanah*, the beginning of the most holy month featuring the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles.

The **Day of Atonement** or *Yom Kippur* (29:7-11; Lv. 16:1-34; 23:26-32) was the holiest day of the year marked as a time of national repentance, fasting, prayer and purgation for the Tabernacle/Temple, which had been defiled by sinful humans over the past year. On this day alone the high priest was permitted to enter the Most Holy Place to offer blood, first for himself, and then for the people. Every 50 years it was celebrated by trumpet-blowing through the land (Lv. 25:8-9), a day of restoration for family property and the release of slaves.

The **Feast of Booths** or Tabernacles or Ingathering (29:12-40; cf. Ex. 23:16b; 34:22b; Lv. 23:33-36; Dt. 16:13-15; Ne. 8:13-18), the last festival of each year, occupied a full week and is elaborately treated here. It was time of joy and celebrated by families living in small booths or huts to remind them of their sojourn in the desert before entering the land of promise. More sacrifices were offered during this festival than any other, and since it occurred at the end of the harvest season, it was a time for expressing thankfulness to Yahweh for the bounty of his provision. The number of bulls sacrificed began with 13 and descended each day of the festival until seven were offered on the seventh day.¹²⁵ It was during this festival that Solomon moved the Ark

¹²⁴ In Greek, it was designated as Pentecost (πεντηκοστή = fiftieth), cf. Ac. 2:1.

¹²⁵ The total of 70 bulls sacrificed was understood by the rabbis as representing the 70 nations of the world, cf. J. Milgrom, *Numbers [JTC]* (Philadelphia/New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p.247.

of the Covenant into the 1st Temple (1 Kg. 8:1-2). Much later, the prophet Zechariah predicted that the feast would become universally observed (Zec. 14:16). The first day of the festival and the day following the festival (the 8th day) served as “book-ends” to the feast, both Sabbaths for sacred assembly (cf. 2 Chr. 7:8-10).

The Deeper Meaning of Sacrifice

The Torah has a rich vocabulary of several verbs and nouns used for sacrifice, and as can be seen below, several of them appear in Numbers 28-29.

זָבַח (verb *zabach*) meaning to slaughter for a communion sacrifice

זֶבַח (noun *zebach*) a sacrifice

כָּפַר (verb *kaphar*) to make atonement, appease, make amends (28:22, 30; 29:5)

קָרָבָן (noun *qar'ban*) something brought near, offering or gift in the most general sense (28:2)

קָרַב (verb *qarav*) to come near to offer (28:2, 3, 11, 19, 26, 27; 29:8, 13, 36)

שָׁחַט (verb *shahat*) to kill, to slaughter

עֹלָה (noun *olah*) what ascends, burnt offering (28:3, 6, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 23, 27; 29:2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 36, 38, 39)

שָׁלוֹם (noun *shalom*) peace offering, repayment sacrifice (29:39; cf. Lv. 23:19)

חַטָּאת (noun *hatta't*) sin offering (28:15, 22; 29:5, 11, 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 38)

מִנְחָה (noun *minhah*) grain offering (28:5, 8, 9, 12, 13, 20, 26, 28, 31; 29:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 30, 31, 33, 34, 37, 38, 39)

אַשָׁם (noun *'asham*) guilt offering

Since ritual is one of the signs of a community's deepest values, the scheduled offering of public sacrifices, such as, the burnt offering, sin offering, and grain offering, expressed the Israelite covenant relationship with Yahweh. Sacrifice was ubiquitous in the ancient world for all cultures, and the three primary functions were: 1) to placate the wrath of the god(s), 2) to gain favor from them, usually for agricultural or other personal purposes, and 3) to seal this relationship with a sacred meal. The sacrifices in the Hebrew tradition, though similar, are unique. They were not aimed at placating divine wrath *per se*; they were aimed at atonement, relationship, devotion, forgiveness, and the ritual expression of faith and/or thanksgiving. The communal meal is one area where ancient Near Eastern practice and Hebrew practice have some common ground, largely on the basis of the widespread practice of covenant ritual. Both those outside the Hebrew community and those within it recognized the protocols of covenant ceremony in which the sacred meal was a constituent part of the sacrificial process. For the Israelites, the sacrifice of animals and grain does not end in waste; rather, the offerings will either be burnt on the altar or eaten by the priests and/or the people as directed in detail in Leviticus (chapters 1-7).

The primary agent for remedying sin and impurity is blood, since blood "ransoms" the sinner, which is to say, it substitutes for the life of the sinner and purges impurity (cf. Lv. 17:11; He. 9:22). The act of atonement (bringing into unity) involves cleansing from sin and impurity so that humans are reconciled to God from whom they have been estranged. All sin has its origin in the life of the sinner. The life of the sinner is forfeit, since he/she is now estranged from the sole source of life, who is God. The removal of sin is possible only by the same means, the payment of this life-debt through the substitution of one life for another. The symbolic agent of this substitution is blood, which is the essence of life and the reason the Israelites were not to eat blood (Lv. 17:11, 14). Sacrifices were for forgiveness and the restoration of relationship with God. It is quite correct to say that this was a balancing of the scales of justice: justice is restored when the sinner repents, turns back to God, and follows through with sacrifice. The whole burnt offering, which was to be totally consumed, symbolizes the total annihilation due the sinner and the total consecration of the forgiven sinner to God.

The idea of substitution is also important. The oldest precedent, of course, is in Abraham's offering of Isaac and the substitution of a ram in place of his son (Ge. 22:13). However, the imposition of hands on a sacrificial animal suggests the same thing (Lv. 1:4; 3:2; 4:24, 29, 33). At the very least, it means that the person offering the animal identifies the animal as his own and he is vitally linked to it. The fact that it is the person bringing the offering who slaughters the animal also points to the same thing.

The repeating phrase in all these descriptions, "a pleasing aroma" (28:2, 6, 8, 13, 24, 27; 29:2, 6, 8, 13, 36), seems to have been an ancient liturgical expression for the pleasant smell of the ascending sacrificial smoke (see the discussion on pages 41-42). This idiom is almost certainly an anthropomorphism, first appearing in Genesis 8:21. Since there are similar expressions in Mesopotamian literature regarding sacrifices as a "pleasing smell," the expression was probably a stock phrase indicating acceptance and reconciliation (cf. Eze. 20:41).

In the New Testament, the sacrificial system comes to a climax in the sacrificial death of Jesus.

Laws Concerning Vows (30:1-16)

Vows are solemn promises made by a man or woman to Yahweh, usually in the form of a promise that some gift (votive offering) will be given to God if he would fulfill a request by the worshipper. They often have an "if...then" structure. Such vows were widely recognized in ancient Near Eastern culture, and we possess vow-texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia, the Hittites, the Phoenicians, and Ugarit. Earlier in the Book of Numbers, a specific kind of vow was described in some detail, the Nazirite

vow (6). References to vows are to be found in many Old Testament books, and in biblical usage, while a person might swear an oath to another person, a vow was made exclusively to God. Hence, vows were offered in the context of prayer, often in times of distress. The completion of a vow was often a sacrifice. Vows were voluntary, not mandatory, but once made they were binding (Dt. 23:23; Eccl. 5:4-6).

Because the basic nature of vows was that they were unretractable, the question arises, especially in the context of a patriarchal culture, as to whether or not they could ever be retracted, and in the case of women's vows, whether or not their vows were final without the consent of a father or husband. Numbers 30 addresses this issue, and the laws concerning vows are casuistic.

Men's vows are unretractable altogether (30:1-2; cf. Dt. 23:21). An unmarried daughter still living at home, on the other hand, needed the consent of her father for a vow to be binding. If she made such a vow, and he did not immediately object, the vow must stand (30:3-4). If her father forbade the vow at the time it was offered, however, the vow would not stand (30:5). If she made a vow but then married afterward before the vow was fulfilled, her vow needed the consent of her new husband following the same principles as had been true for her father before her marriage (30:6-8). If she made a vow after she married, the same principles follow as had been true when she was under the authority of her father (30:10-15). If divorced, where no father or husband had jurisdiction over her, the vow must stand (30:9).

Wars in the Transjordan (31-32)

The War with Midian (31:1-54)

Midian was an area to the east of the Gulf of Aqaba in northwest Arabia (cf. Josephus, Ptolemy, Eusebius), and the name Madyan (a form of Midian) survived well up into the Islamic Period. The Midianites seem to have ranged over a rather large area, including the southern Transjordan, the Arabah trench, portions of the Negev, and possibly northern Sinai. They likely were involved in the spice trade between Arabia and western Asia (cf. Ge. 37:28). Excavations at Qurayyah beginning in 2014 on a rock plateau have yielded considerable pottery remains of painted ware vessels as well as religious imagery, such as, a stone relief of the god Salm.¹²⁶

The Midianites were descended from Abraham and Keturah (Ge. 25:1), and it was to their lands that Moses fled after the killing of an Egyptian. Moses subsequently married into a Midianite family (Ex. 2:15-22). In the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites at first had cordial ties with the Midianites through Jethro, Moses' father-in-law (Ex. 18). The real crux of their later animosity, however, occurred in the Balaam stories,

¹²⁶ Marta Luciani, "Archaeology in the Land of Midian: Excavating the Qurayyah Oasis," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Winter 2023), pp. 32-39.

when the Midianites joined the Moabites in securing the services of Balaam to curse the Israelites (Nu. 22:4, 7), and later, in the seduction of the Israelite men in the Midianite fertility cult (25:6-9). The upshot of this debacle ended with Yahweh pronouncing a death sentence upon the Midianites (25:16-18) to be accomplished prior to Moses' death (31:1-2).

Accordingly, warriors were mustered from each tribe,¹²⁷ along with Phineas, the high priest's son, and various other implements.¹²⁸ They invaded the Midianites, killing all the men, including five "kings" (probably clan leaders, cf. Jos. 13:21) along with Balaam himself (31:3-8; cf. Jo. 13:22).¹²⁹ They burned the Midianite towns and encampments, bringing the women and war spoils to Moses and the high priest (31:9-12). Since it was the Midianite women who had seduced the Israelites, Moses was piqued that they had been allowed to live (31:13-14). He ordered the executions of all the boys and every woman who was not a virgin, the latter being spared since they could not have been involved in the seduction of the Israelites (31:15-18). This slaughter, especially with regard to the boys and women, seems barbarous to modern people who are especially sensitive to ethnic cleansing; the moral question raised by such actions is troubling. Without delving in this issue, it can at least be said that the Israelites were serving as instruments of divine judgment (cf. Ge. 15:16; Dt. 9:5; 18:9, 12), and hence, this war action was called "the vengeance of Yahweh" (31:3). The deeper question was not whether Israel had the right to attack the Midianites, but whether Yahweh had the right to execute judgment.¹³⁰

The warriors, the living captives, the war spoils, and even items of clothing were now declared to be ritually impure, since they had come into contact with corpses, and this required a seven-day process for purification (31:19-24; cf. 5:1-4; 19:11-22). Once the purification process was complete, the war spoils were divided between the warriors, the community, and the Levites (31:25-54).¹³¹

¹²⁷ As with the numbers in the two censuses, the word מִלְחָמָה surfaces once again. It is a moot question as to whether it should be treated the same way, but if so, see the extended comments on the 1st census (pp. 17-20). The same would be true in the enumeration of the animals taken as war spoils (31:36-40), which seems unusually high.

¹²⁸ The mention of trumpets is clear enough (cf. 10:1-10), but the articles from the sanctuary are not described. Perhaps they included the Urim and Thummim, which sometimes were used in times of war (cf. 1 Sa. 14:41; 28:6), or perhaps even the ark of the covenant, which also was used in war (10:35; Jos. 6:3-7; 1 Sa. 4:4-5).

¹²⁹ The statement that they "killed every male" (31:7) seems in discord with the later conflict between Gideon and the Midianites (Jg. 6-8). Perhaps this could be due to hyperbole, similar to the deaths of "all the livestock" in the 5th plague (Ex. 9:6), with some livestock surviving (Ex. 9:19-10; 11:5; 12:29), or else, since the Midianites were semi-nomadic and scattered over a wide territory, it may refer to all the men who were in league with the Moabites but not others.

¹³⁰ For a work that explores this moral issue more thoroughly, see Charlie Trimm, *The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

¹³¹ The reference to atonement or ransom in 31:50 is unclear. It may have concerned the possibility of a plague, always a danger when taking a census (cf. Ex. 30:12).

The Settlement of the Transjordan Tribes (32:1-42)

Initially, the land of promise (Canaan) was bounded on the eastern side by the Jordan River (cf. 34:10-12a). This must be understood to appreciate the significance of the request made of Moses by the Reubenites and Gadites, since what they asked for was an exception. Approaching Moses, they requested that they be allotted the rich grazing land in the Transjordan in the area of Jazer and Gilead (32:1-5).¹³² Already, several major towns and areas in the Transjordan had been subdued by the Israelites, and archaeologists have located some of them with a reasonable degree of certainty.

Ataroth is located on a high ridge overlooking the Dead Sea.¹³³

Dibon is an ancient tell adjacent to the modern Jordanian village of Dhiban, where the famous Moabite Stone (Stele of Mesha) was discovered.¹³⁴

Jazer is likely to be Khirbet Jazzir.*

Nimrah is likely to be Tell el-Bleibil, about 11 miles east of the Jordan River.*

Heshbon has been elusive, though it is likely to be in the vicinity of Tell Hesban, which is a bit north of the north end of the Dead Sea.¹³⁵

Elealeh is likely el-‘Al just northeast of Heshbon.*

Sebam (called Sibmah in 32:38) is possibly Qurn el-Kibs, about five miles south/southwest of Heshbon.*

Nebo is near Sebam. In Dt. 34, it will be the mountain where Moses will die.*

Beon is probably the same as Baal-Meon northeast of Ataroth.*

*See Timothy Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), p. 542.

The conquest of the areas requested by the Reubenites and Gadites is described earlier (21:21-35; cf. Dt. 3:1-11). Israel had waged a defensive war against Sihon of Gilead and Og of Bashan, and upon their victory, the earlier text indicates that they “settled in all the cities” (21:25, 35). However, this earlier statement must be understood as anticipating what will be described here, which is to say, they apparently had not occupied these towns immediately, since this area was not a part of the promised land. Understandably, then, Moses was upset when the request was made, especially since it smacked of the sort of rebellion that had happened four decades earlier at Kadesh, when the 1st generation refused to go into Canaan from the south (32:6-15).

¹³² Gilead is a large area in the central Transjordan without precise boundaries but divided by the Jabbok River which flows east to west, hence a northern Gilead (north of the Jabbok) and a southern Gilead (south of the Jabbok).

¹³³ Chang-Ho Ji and Aaron Schade, “Sacred Center: The Iron Age Temple at Biblical Ataroth,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 52.2 (Summer 2026), pp. 36-45.

¹³⁴ Andre Lemaire and Jeane-Philippe Delome, “Mesha’s Stele and the House of David,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 48.4 (Winter 2022), pp. 34-41.

¹³⁵ Larry G. Herr, “The Search for Biblical Heshbon,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 19.6 (Nov/Dec 1993), pp. 36-37, 68.

In response, the Reubenites and Gadites adjusted their request with the promise that they would fully support the invasion of Canaan by sending their warriors across the Jordan (32:16-19). This promise was adequate, and Moses accepted the conditions, but he warned them that if they failed to make good on their promise, "...be sure your sin will find you out" (32:20-24). The expression "before the LORD" occurs some seven times in this passage (32:20, 21, 22a, 22b, 27, 29, 32). It likely is a reference to the Ark of the Covenant, which accompanied the Israelites in battle. So, the two tribes promised to leave their women and children on the east of the Jordan, while they joined with their fellows in the invasion on the west side of the river (32:25-32).¹³⁶

Moses consequently assigned the Transjordan area to these two tribes,¹³⁷ and surprisingly, he assigned territory to half the tribe of Manasseh as well (32:33). While the boundaries are somewhat flexible, Reuben was given the territory immediately north of the Arnon Gorge bordering Moab. Gad was given the territory of Gilead in the central Transjordan north of Reuben.¹³⁸ The half-tribe of Manasseh was given the territory of Bashan north of the Yarmuk River to the east and north of the Sea of Galilee.

The Itinerary in the Desert Sojourn (33:1-49)

As the Israelites drew near to the time of Moses' death and the crossing of the Jordan River, a review of their camping sites is provided, a sort of diary that Moses had kept for the long 40-year span since leaving Egypt (33:1-2). This itinerary must be at least partly why the language of "wandering in the wilderness" became a popular phrase, though more precisely, it was not so much wandering as it was moving from campsite to campsite. Besides the listing of place-names, among them are scattered brief annotations regarding special features or events that happened at certain sites (33:6, 7, 9, 14, 36, 37, 38-39, 40, 48-49). The length of time at any given site can only be conjectured, since earlier it was noted that the cloud might lead them to camp for a day, several days, a month, or a year (9:20-22).

Tracing this route has been a difficult matter, since the location of Mt. Sinai is debatable and many if not most of the place-names are unidentifiable.¹³⁹ Without

¹³⁶ The census number of warriors from Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh is given as 110,580 (26:7, 18, 34). The number of warriors from these tribes who crossed the Jordan with their fellows is given as "about 40,000" (Jos. 4:12-13). This suggests that many of the available men from 2 1/2 these tribes would stay in the Transjordan to protect the women and children, while a smaller number of elite troops would actually cross the river for the invasion of Canaan.

¹³⁷ The verb נתן (= to give, assign) is different than for the other tribes, whose territories would be decided by lot (33:54; Jo. 13:8; 14:2).

¹³⁸ As an outside corroboration, the Moabite Stone inscription says, "Now the men of Gad had dwelt in the land of Ataroth from of old..." cf. Siegfried Horn, "Why the Moabite Stone was Blown to Pieces," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12.3 (May/June 1986), pp. 50-59, 61.

¹³⁹ I would discourage putting much weight on pop level treatments, such as, Howard Blum's, *The Gold of Exodus* (1998). In this thriller, two amateurs, Larry Williams and Bob Cornuke, claim to have found positive evidence of Mt.

attempting some final answer to this problem, we can at least say that the oldest tradition for the location of Mt. Sinai is Jebel Musa near the tip of the Sinai Peninsula. Further, there is near certainty regarding the location of Kadesh-Barnea. Otherwise, there is considerable doubt about the route and the stopping places.¹⁴⁰

Altogether, 42 sites are named, but the question arises as to what might be the theological purpose for recording this itinerary. Apart from the obvious reminder of some key junctures, like the absence of water (33:14), the death of Aaron (33:38-39), the conflict with Arad (33:40), and the arrival in the Plains of Moab (33:48-49), a number of scholars have found significance in the motif of a life journey, which in itself is a testimony to the grace of God and which has ramifications stretching all the way to the New Testament (1 Co. 10:1-13). Also, some have pointed out a numerical pattern in which significant events seem to happen in cycles of seven. Whether or not these cycles have symbolic meaning is debatable, but at least it is probably fair to say that they are not obvious.¹⁴¹

Dividing Up the Land of Canaan (33:50—35:34)

The Expulsion of the Canaanites (33:50-56)

With the assignment of the Transjordan territories to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh, it naturally follows that instructions should be given for the allotment of the Cisjordan territories to the other 9 ½ tribes. It is immediately apparent to the observant reader that language of two types is employed regarding the treatment of the resident Canaanites. The Land of Canaan, of course, was not empty territory. The residents of the Cisjordan are variously listed as multiple people groups, though their names likely concern geography more than ethnicity: the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, and sometimes, Girgashites (Ex. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 23:23; 33:2; 34:11; Dt. 7:1; 20:17; Jos. 11:3). They are described in Deuteronomy as “seven nations” (Dt. 7:1), though more often than not only six are named (see Footnote #50). In any case, the language of expulsion is used most of the time, as it is here in Numbers (22:6; 33:52, 55; cf. Lv. 18:24; 20:23; Dt. 4:38; 7:17, 22; 9:3-5; 11:23; 18:12). The Hebrew verbs **שָׁלַח** (= to send away, be dismissed), **גָּרַשׁ** (= to drive out, to banish), and **יָרַשׁ** (= to dispossess), and **נָשַׁל** (= to clear away, to expel) are repeatedly employed. However, especially in Deuteronomy, there is also the language of destruction, using the Hebrew term **חָרַם** (= dedicated to destruction, banned), where

Sinai in Midian along with evidence of the Israelite encampment, but archaeologists and scholars have been decidedly underwhelmed, cf. Ronald Hendel, “Did Amateur Archaeologists Find the Real Mt. Sinai?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 25:4 (July/August 1999).

¹⁴⁰ T. V. Brisco, “Exodus, Route of the” *ISBE* (1982) 2.238-241.

¹⁴¹ To explore these numerical cycles, see Gordon Wenham, *Numbers [TOTC]* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1981), pp. 217-219.

Yahweh commanded the Israelites to consign the Canaanites to *herem* (Dt. 2:34; 3:6; 7:2; 13:15; 20:17).¹⁴² To be sure, this term is not generally used in the Book of Numbers, where it only appears in the defensive war between Israel and Arad (21:1-3), but it appears several times in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua, and in one place, it is augmented by the blunt description, “We left no survivors” (Dt. 2:34). Other passages describe the slaughter of men, women, and children (Dt. 3:6; 13:15; 20:16-17). The tension between expulsion and annihilation, at least on the face of things, seems mutually exclusive.

So, just what does *herem* mean? At the very least, we can say the answer is not as straightforward as one might hope. For instance, in Deuteronomy, when the Israelites were commanded to consign the Canaanites to *herem*, they also were forbidden to intermarry with them or make treaties with them (Dt. 7:2-4), which sounds as though there would be some survivors. Could the term *herem* be understood as something less than a total slaughter? A number of scholars have suggested this possibility, especially given the repeating language of expulsion and in light of a growing modern sensitivity to the evils of ethnic cleansing. To put it more theologically, could the God who promised Abraham that his descendants would be an avenue of blessing to the nations also command genocide? This uncomfortable question is still on the table. At the same time, a fundamental issue in these war texts is not merely whether God’s people had the right to dispossess others of their land, but whether God had the right to execute judgment using the Israelites as the tool of his judgment. In this sense, the wars of Israel against the Canaanites were analogous to the judgments of Yahweh against the Egyptians in the plagues, where “the LORD had brought judgment on their gods” (Nu. 33:4b). Whatever the meaning of *herem*, it seems clear enough that the Israelite invasion of Canaan was some expression of divine judgment, not solely the acquisition of land (Dt. 9:4-6; 18:12; cf. Ge. 15:16; Lv. 18:24-28). Since the Book of Numbers uses the terms for expulsion, not annihilation, the precise meaning of *herem* can be set aside for this present commentary, but in the larger framework of the Torah, especially Deuteronomy and Joshua, it must be addressed.¹⁴³

As the Israelites looked forward to entering Canaan the laws forbidding Canaanite religion were paramount (33:50-52), and they included a command to destroy the implements of idolatry commensurate with the expulsion of the Canaanites (cf. Dt. 7:5). Failure to do so would result in continual temptation and difficulty, a truth

¹⁴² Wherever this term appears, the NIV footnotes the usage by saying, “The Hebrew term refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the LORD, often by totally destroying them.”

¹⁴³ To explore further this theological issue, the following treatments may be helpful: Paul Cogan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); Paul Cogan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1914); Charlie Trimm, *The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022). For my own perspective, see my commentaries on Deuteronomy and Joshua (www.dkonos.org).

spelled out in subsequent history (Jos. 23:12-13; Jg. 2:1-5). The land itself was to be divided by lot (33:53-54; cf. 26:52-56), a task occupying much of the last half of the Book of Joshua (chapters 13-19).

The Boundaries for Allotment (34:1-29)

The land of Canaan to be allotted to the nine-and-a-half remaining clans lay essentially between the Jordan Trench to the East (comprising the Sea of Galilee, the River Jordan, and the Dead Sea) and the Mediterranean Sea to the West. The desert bordering Edom marked the southern extent, and mountains in Galilee marked the northern one (34:1-12). The other tribes, of course, had already been assigned land in the Transjordan (34:13-15). Some of the place-names mentioned are known, specifically the Sea of Kinnereth (i.e., the Sea of Galilee), the Salt Sea (i.e., the Dead Sea), the Great Sea (i.e., the Mediterranean), and the mountain Lebo-Hamath in the north. Many of the place-names are obscure and their identity can only be guessed. Later, a more colloquial description of the land, north to south, would be “Dan to Beersheba” (Jg. 20:1; 1 Sa. 3:20; 2 Sa. 3:10, etc.).

A leader from each tribe was now selected to manage the allotments, ten in all (Reuben and Gad, of course, were not included). The names are listed in roughly the order of settlement, moving south to north (34:16-29).

Levitical Cities (35:1-8)

The Levitical tribe is treated separately from the others, since they would not receive any territorial allotment, though, of course, their financial support from the other tribes had already been established (cf. 18:21). Certain cities scattered among the tribe allotments would be assigned for them to live in, along with a small portion of land near the cities to be used for pasture (but not farming), since they would own some animals. This pastureland could not be sold (cf. Lv. 25:34). The Levitical cities would eventually be decided by lot as well, some 48 in all (35:7-8; Jos. 21).

Asylum Cities (35:9-34)

Six of the cities to which the Levites were assigned would also serve as asylum cities (35:6). These so-called “cities of refuge” were designated for the protection of someone who had committed manslaughter.¹⁴⁴ It must be remembered that blood had a powerful spiritual effect. On the one hand, it was the ultimate purifier, and the entire sacrificial system rested on this premise (cf. He. 9:22). On the other, blood was also the ultimate polluter (35:33), and the shedding of human blood in particular was a

¹⁴⁴ Hebrew law differentiated between murder and manslaughter, just as is true in modern law codes. The first is intentional, the second unintentional (Ex. 21:12-14).

direct attack upon the image of God (Ge. 9:5-6). Hence, since the land was “holy,” its holiness must be preserved.

Today, we assume that modern law courts will handle occasions of manslaughter, but in the ancient world, the responsibility for accounting for human bloodshed was handled by a **לִנְיָ** (= redeemer, kinsman), a near relative of the victim (35:12, 19, 21, 24, 25, 27). This term “avenger” or “redeemer” (*go’el*) refers to a male member of the victim’s family, and it was his responsibility to find and execute the one who had committed murder or manslaughter and so restore justice. This practice of blood vengeance was known throughout the cultures of the ancient Near East, and it was assumed that the injury of one person affected the whole family, and this case, the land itself. For unintentional manslaughter, however, there was a solution in the asylum cities. The one who committed manslaughter was permitted to flee the sentence of death from the *go’el* by going to one of the six designated towns, and three such towns would be in the Transjordan and three in the Cisjordan (35:9-15; cf. Dt. 4:41-43; Jos. 20:1-9; 21:13, 21, 27, 32, 36, 38).

Of course, intentionality was paramount. Someone who deliberately killed another was not eligible for sanctuary in an asylum city (35:16-21). However, death by accident was not the same as murder, so the one who committed manslaughter could find sanctuary, presumably in the closest of these six asylum cities. However, he must remain within the city until the death of the high priest (35:22-25). If he left the asylum city, the *go’el* was free to execute him (35:26-29). Indeed, a dark example of someone who was so executed because he left an asylum city is documented in the time of David (cf. 2 Sa. 2:18-23; 3:22-27). Alternatively, also from the time of David, a plea from a Gibeonite family for justice, where the perpetrator of murder, in this case King Saul, had not been executed, was corrected by the execution of some of Saul’s sons (2 Sa. 21:1-9).

It is important to observe that a trial before city elders would determine whether or not a killing was murder or manslaughter (35:12, 24-25; Dt. 19:11-13; Jos. 20:4-6). A verdict of murder required a minimum of two witnesses (35:30; cf. Dt. 17:6), and the criminal would not be allowed to buy his life back (35:31). Capital punishment was required. By the same token, someone guilty of manslaughter could not buy his freedom from his required tenure in the asylum city, but he must remain there until the death of the high priest (35:32). Either way, a life for a life was required, and if the one guilty of manslaughter was spared, the death of the high priest ultimately satisfied the life for a life requirement (Ex. 21:23; Lv. 24:17-18; Dt. 19:21).

In the end, the sanctity of life was underscored and the potential pollution of the land was prevented (35:33-34). Later, the problem of unsolved murder would be addressed by yet another ritual involving a life for a life (cf. Dt. 21:1-9).

The Inheritance of Zelophehad's Daughters (36:1-13)

Earlier, the problem of a family with no sons had been resolved by allowing Zelophehad's daughters the privilege of land inheritance (27:1-11). This, however, raised another question: when such a daughter married and later died, her land inheritance would pass to her husband's family, and if a daughter married a man from another tribe, it would then disrupt the tribal allotments themselves (36:1-4).

The solution Moses reached, presumably after consulting with Yahweh, was that such daughters must marry within their own tribe, thus preventing little "islands" of property in the middle of Manasseh's tribal territory that would belong to other tribes (35:5-9). Zelophehad's daughters followed this restriction, marrying only within their own clan of Manasseh (36:10-12).

The Book of Numbers closes with a concluding formula (36:13), leaving only one major event to occur before entry into the land of Canaan: Moses must die and leave the national leadership to Joshua, who already had been designated as his successor (cf. 27:12-23). This event and the speeches of Moses that preceded it will occupy the Book of Deuteronomy, the final book in the Torah.