

Notes on
Numbers
2003 Edition
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Introduction

TITLE

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

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

DATE AND WRITER

Moses wrote Numbers (cf. Num. 1:1; 33:2; Matt. 8:4; 19:7; Luke 24:44; John 1:45; et al.). He evidently did so late in his life on the plains of Moab.¹ Moses evidently died close to 1406 B.C. since the Exodus happened about 1446 B.C., and the Israelites were in the wilderness for 40 years.

SCOPE AND PURPOSE

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

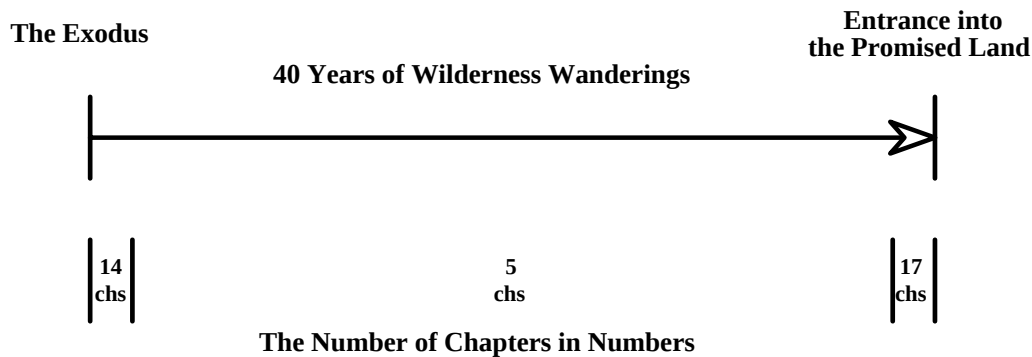
Geographically the Israelites travelled from Mt. Sinai to the plains of Moab, which lay to the east of Jericho and the Jordan River. However their journey was not at all direct. They proceeded from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea on Canaan's southern border but failed to go into the Promised Land from there because of unbelief. Their failure to trust God and obey Him resulted in a period of 38 years of wandering in the wilderness. God finally brought

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

them back to Kadesh and led them from there to the plains of Moab that lay on Canaan's eastern border.

Even though the wilderness wanderings consumed the majority of the years Numbers records, Moses passed over the events of this period of Israel's history fairly quickly. God's emphasis in this book is on His preparation of the Israelites to enter the land from Kadesh (chs. 1—14), and their preparation to enter from the plains of Moab (chs. 20—36). This indicates that the purpose of the book was primarily to show how God dealt with the Israelites as they anticipated entrance into the Promised Land. It was not to record all the events, or even most events, that took place in Israel's history. This selection of content to teach spiritual lessons is in harmony with the other books of the Pentateuch. Their concern too was more theological than historical.

Where Numbers Concentrates its Emphasis



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

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

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

²Ibid., pp. 15-16.

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

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

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

THEME

I believe the theme of the book is obedience. However others have suggested different though related themes.

"The theme of the Book of Numbers is worship."⁶

"The major theological theme of Numbers is reciprocal in nature: God has brought a people to Himself by covenant grace, but He expects of them a wholehearted devotion. Having accepted the terms of the Sinai Covenant, Israel had placed herself under obligation to obey them, a process that was to begin at once and not in some distant place and time (Exod. 19:8; 24:3)."⁷

MESSAGE⁸

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

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

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

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

⁶Allen, p. 658.

⁷Eugene H. Merrill, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 98.

⁸Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:64-80.

In the second section of the book (chs. 11—21) God's patience with His people stands out. When the Israelites failed to obey God He did not desert them, but He disciplined them in love. God's patience in dealing with the Israelites did not result from God's weakness, but it was an evidence of His strength. God did not manifest carelessness toward the Israelites by making them wander in the wilderness for 38 years. He manifested carefulness as He used those 38 years to prepare the next generation to obey Him. God disciplined the people for their disobedience, but He always directed them toward the realization of His purpose for them as He disciplined them. The years of wilderness wandering were years of education rather than abandonment. He had similarly prepared Moses for 40 years in the wilderness before the Exodus.

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

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

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

The congregation consisted of a combination of believing Israelites and others who had for various reasons joined themselves to the people of God, a mixed multitude. These foreigners joined Israel first at the Exodus (Exod. 12:38), but we find them mixed in with the Israelites throughout Israel's subsequent history (cf. Lev. 24:10-23). This "rabble" was first to complain against God, and their murmuring spread through the camp like a plague periodically (cf. 11:4).

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

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

When we face a challenge to our faith we must see the difficulty overshadowed by God's presence, power, and promises.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We can fail to realize all that God wants for us if we fail to trust Him.

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

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

OUTLINE

- I. Experiences of the older generation in the wilderness chs. 1—25
 - A. Preparations for entering the Promised Land from the south chs. 1—10
 - 1. The first census and the organization of the people chs. 1—4
 - 2. Commands and rituals to observe in preparation for entering the land chs. 5—9
 - 3. The departure from Sinai ch. 10
 - B. The rebellion and judgment of the unbelieving generation chs. 11—25
 - 1. The cycle of rebellion, atonement, and death chs. 11—20
 - 2. The climax of rebellion, hope, and the end of dying chs. 21—25
- II. Prospects of the younger generation in the land chs. 26—36
 - A. Preparations for entering the Promised Land from the east chs. 26—32
 - 1. The second census ch. 26
 - 2. Provisions and commands to observe in preparation for entering the land chs. 27—30
 - 3. Reprisal against Midian and the settlement of the Transjordanian tribes chs. 31—32
 - B. Warning and encouragement of the younger generation chs. 33—36
 - 1. Review of the journey from Egypt 33:1-49
 - 2. Anticipation of the Promised Land 33:50—36:13

Exposition

I. EXPERIENCES OF THE OLDER GENERATION IN THE WILDERNESS

CHS. 1—25

A. PREPARATIONS FOR ENTERING THE PROMISED LAND FROM THE SOUTH CHS.

1—10

The first 10 chapters in Numbers describe Israel's preparation for entering the land.

"... just as the way from Goshen to Sinai was a preparation of the chosen people for their reception into the covenant with God, so the way from Sinai to Canaan was also a preparation for the possession of the promised land."⁹

"The two censuses (chs. 1—4, 26) are key to understanding the structure of the book. The first census (chs. 1—4) concerns the first generation of the Exodus community; the second census (ch. 26) focuses on the experiences of the second generation, the people for whom this book is primarily directed. The first generation of the redeemed were prepared for triumph but ended in disaster. The second generation has an opportunity for greatness—if only they will learn from the failures of their fathers and mothers the absolute necessity for robust faithfulness to the Lord despite all obstacles."¹⁰

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

The muster of the tribes except Levi ch. 1

The purpose of this tally of the adult males 20 years of age and older was to identify those who would serve in battle when Israel entered the land (v. 3).¹¹ Entrance into the land should have been only a few weeks from the taking of this census. Moses had taken another census nine months before this one (Exod. 30:11-16; 38:25-26), but the purpose of that count was to determine how many adult males owed atonement money. The census described in Numbers 1 excluded the Levites whom God exempted from military service in Israel (vv. 49-50).

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

Reuben	46,500	Ephraim	40,500
Simeon	59,300	Manasseh	32,200

⁹C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 3:1.

¹⁰Allen, p. 701.

¹¹See Gershon Brin, "The Formulae 'From ... and Onward/Upward' (*m ... whl'h/wmslh*)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99:2 (1980):161-71.

Gad	45,650	Benjamin	35,400
Judah	74,600	Dan	62,700
Issachar	54,400	Asher	41,500
Zebulun	57,400	Naphtali	53,400

The total was 603,550 men (v. 46).¹² Since each figure ends in zero it appears that Moses rounded off these numbers. God was already well on the way to making the patriarchs' descendants innumerable.

"It is in the context of developing a military organization for war that the Levites are assigned their tasks in relation to the tabernacle. In a sense, their military assignment is the care and transportation of the religious shrine. Num. 1:49-53 clearly outlines the requirements for the militaristic protection of the tabernacle by the Levites."¹³

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

The phrase "the Lord spoke to Moses" (v. 1) occurs over 80 times in the Book of Numbers.¹⁴

The placement of the tribes ch. 2

The twelve tribes excluding the Levites camped in four groups of three tribes each on the tabernacle's four sides. The Levites camped on all four sides of the tabernacle but closer to the sanctuary than the other tribes (v. 17).

This arrangement placed Yahweh at the center of the nation geographically and reminded the Israelites that His rightful place was at the center of their life nationally and personally.

"The Egyptians characteristically placed the tent of the king, his generals, and officers at the center of a large army camp, but for the Israelites another tent was central: the sanctuary in which it placed God to dwell

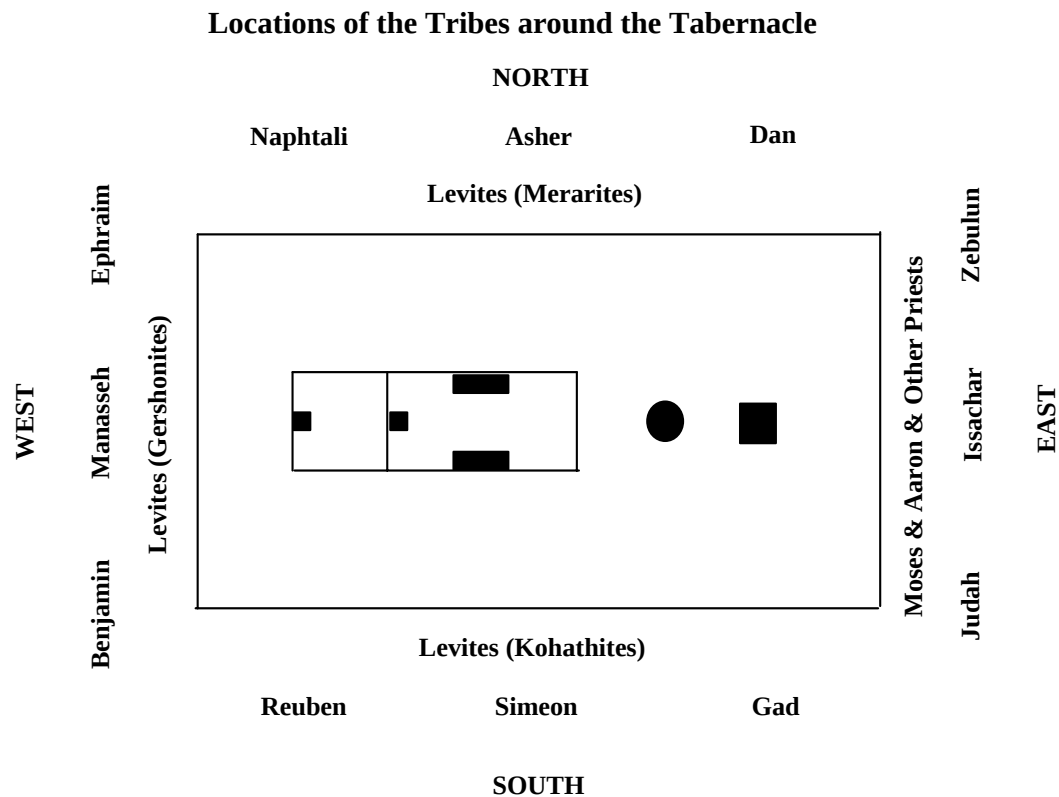
¹²For a summary of the ways commentators have sought to explain the very large census numbers as much smaller, see R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 631-64; Allen, pp. 680-91; Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, pp. 6-9; Wenham, pp. 60-66; Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, pp. 60-66; Merrill, "Numbers," p. 217; or David M. Fouts, "A Defense of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:3 (September 1997):377-87. Wenham, p. 66, concluded, "In short, there is no obvious solution to the problems posed by these census figures." See also John W. Wenham, "The Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967):19-53. I believe we should take them literally (cf. 22:3-6).

¹³John R. Spencer, "The Tasks of the Levites: *smr* and *sb*,'" *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 96:2 (1984):270.

¹⁴Walter Riggans, *Numbers*, p. 6.

among his people. From him proceeds the power to save and to defend, and from this tent in the middle he made known his ever-saving will."¹⁵

"This picture of the organization of Israel in camp is an expression of the author's understanding of the theology of the divine presence. There are barriers which divide a holy God from a fallible Israel. The structure of the tent itself and the construction of the sophisticated priestly hierarchy has the effect, at least potentially, of emphasizing the difference and distance between man and God. This is valuable to theology as a perspective, but requires the compensating search for nearness and presence. The . . . author sought to affirm this in and through his insistence that God is to be found, tabernacled among his people, at the center of their life as a community."¹⁶



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

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

¹⁶Budd, p. 25.

"According to rabbinical tradition, the standard of Judah bore the figure of a lion, that of Reuben the likeness of a man or of a man's head, that of Ephraim the figure of an ox, and that of Dan the figure of an eagle . . ." ¹⁷

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

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

"It will be seen from this arrangement that the vanguard and rearguard of the host had the strongest forces—186,400 and 157,600 respectively—with the smaller tribal groupings within them and the tabernacle in the center." ¹⁸

Moses did not explain the relationship of the tribes that camped on each side of the tabernacle to one another. Some scholars believe they were as the diagram above indicates while others feel that Judah, Reuben, Ephraim, and Dan were in the center of their groups. ¹⁹

"Further, the placement on the east is very significant in Israel's thought. East is the place of the rising of the sun, the source of hope and sustenance. Westward was the sea. Israel's traditional stance was with its back to the ocean and the descent of the sun. The ancient Hebrews were not a sea-faring people like the Phoenicians and the Egyptians. For Israel the place of pride was on the east. Hence there we find the triad of tribes headed by Judah, Jacob's fourth son and father of the royal house that leads to King Messiah." ²⁰

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

¹⁷Keil and Delitzsch, 3:17. Cf. Ezek. 1:10; Rev. 4:7. The early Christians used these same symbols to represent the four Gospels. They used a lion to stand for Matthew, an ox for Mark, a man for Luke, and an eagle for John.

¹⁸James Philip, *Numbers*, p. 43.

¹⁹E.g., Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, p. 152; Ashley, p. 74.

²⁰Allen, p. 715.

future redemption. Moreover, God's garden was planted for humankind 'in the east' of Eden (2:8), and it was there that God intended to pour out his blessing on them.

"Throughout the pentateuchal narratives, then, the concept of moving 'eastward' plays an important role as a reminder of the Paradise Lost—the garden in the east of Eden—and a reminder of the hope for a return to God's blessing 'from the east'—the place of waiting in the wilderness. It was not without purpose, then, that the arrangement of the tribes around the tabernacle should reflect the same imagery of hope and redemption."²¹

The placement and number of the Levites and first-born of Israel ch. 3

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

"For the first time after the formative events of the Exodus deliverance and the revelation on Mount Sinai, the people of Israel are organized into a holy people on the march under the leadership of Aaron and Moses with the priests and Levites at the center of the camp. A whole new chapter has opened in the life of the people of Israel, and this new beginning is marked by the toledot formula."²²

God exempted the Levites from military confrontation with Israel's enemies. He did this because He chose the whole tribe to assist the priests, Aaron's family within the tribe of Levi, in the service of the sanctuary (vv. 5-9). The Levites' duties were to guard the holy things from affront of foolish people and to care for the holy things.²³

"The Levites ministered to the priests (3:6) mainly in the outward elements of the worship services, while the priests performed the ceremonial exercises of the worship itself."²⁴

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

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

²¹John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, pp. 371-72.

²²Olson, p. 108.

²³G. Wenham, p. 70; Ashley, p. 69.

²⁴Irving Jensen, *Numbers: Journey to God's Rest-Land*, pp. 28-29.

"The power of a people lies in the birth of its progeny, and so a great value was placed on the first child to be born—a value so great, in fact, that in many nations the eldest son was sacrificed to the gods."²⁵

The tabernacle responsibilities of each group were as follows.

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

The total number of Levite males from one month old and up was 22,000 (v. 39) making it the smallest tribe in Israel by far.²⁶ The fact that this figure does not tally with the totals in verses 22, 28, and 34 may be the result of a "textual corruption,"²⁷ in particular a "copyist's error."²⁸ Verse 28 probably read 8,300 originally.

"3 (Hebrew *s/s*) could quite easily have been corrupted into 6 (*ss*)."²⁹

Moses then numbered all the first-born males in the other tribes from one month old and up. There were 22,273 of them (v. 43). God took 22,000 of the Levites in their places (v. 45). He specified the redemption of the remaining 273. That is, the Israelites had to pay five shekels to the priests for each of these men (vv. 46-48). This freed them from God's claim on them for sanctuary service (cf. 1 Pet. 1:18-19).

"Theologically the section as a whole explores the theme of God's holiness. Viewed in one way the priestly hierarchy is a means of protecting Israel from divine holiness. The introduction of another sacred order between priests and people emphasizes the difference between the fallibility of man and the perfection of God. . . . Viewed in another way the hierarchy constitutes the recognized channel through which God brings stability and well-being to his people."³⁰

"The Levites, the keepers of Yahweh's dwelling place, were to surround the Tabernacle. They were particularly close, both in location and function, because they represented the firstborn of Israel whom Yahweh spared in the Exodus (3:12-13, 44-45; 8:5-26). It was their responsibility to attend to the sanctuary (chap. 4) for it is ever the ministry of the eldest son to serve his father and protect his interests."³¹

²⁵Maarsingh, p. 16.

²⁶See Merrill, "Numbers," p. 220, for defense of the comparatively small number of Levites.

²⁷G. Wenham, p. 71.

²⁸Keil and Delitzsch, 3:23.

²⁹G. Wenham, p. 71.

³⁰Budd, p. 41.

³¹Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 60.

The number of Levites in tabernacle service ch. 4

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

The Kohathites—who included Moses, Aaron, and the priests—were in charge of the tabernacle furniture including the ark. God told them how to prepare the various pieces of furniture for travel and how to carry them. The priests wrapped the articles of furniture, except the laver, and then the other Kohathites carried them. Touching a holy piece of furniture or even looking at one would result in death (vv. 15, 20). The oils, incense, and the flour for the daily meal offering were the special responsibility of Eleazer, the heir to the high priest's office (v. 16).

God also explained the responsibilities of the Gershonites (vv. 21-28) and the Merarites (vv. 29-33).

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

"The truth is that all work in the kingdom of God is royal service, however unostentatious and, from the human standpoint, lowly and insignificant."³²

"The sense of order and organization already observed in this book comes to its finest point in this chapter. Again, we observe that the standard pattern in Hebrew prose is a movement from the general to the specific, from the broad to the particular. Chapters 1—4 follow this concept nicely. . . . The chapters have moved from the nation as a whole to the particular families of the one tribe that has responsibility to maintain the symbols of Israel's worship of the Lord. Each chapter gets more specific, more narrow in focus, with the central emphasis on the worship of the Lord at the Tent of Meeting."³³

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

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

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

³²Philip, p. 63.

³³Allen, p. 731.

"Between covenant promise and covenant possession lay a process of rigorous journey through hostile opposition of terrain and terror. Israel had to understand that occupation of the land could be achieved only through much travail, for Canaan, like creation itself, was under alien dominion and it had to be wrested away by force, by the strong arm of Yahweh, who would fight on behalf of His people."³⁴

Holiness among the people chs. 5—6

The purity of the camp 5:1-4

"The purpose of the writer is to show that at this point in the narrative, Israel's leaders, Moses and Aaron, were following God's will and the people were following them obediently. This theme will not continue long, however. The narrative will soon turn a corner and begin to show that the people quickly deviated from God's way and, with their leaders, Moses and Aaron, failed to continue to trust in God."³⁵

God ordered that individuals who were ceremonially unclean should not live within their tribal communities but should reside on the outskirts of the camp during their uncleanness. The reason for this regulation was not any discrimination against these people based on personal inferiority. It was the need to separate the unclean, as long as they were unclean, from the holy God of Israel who dwelt in the center of the camp. The closer one lived to God the greater was his or her need for personal holiness.

"The Rabbis had a saying which has come down to the modern Western world via the preaching of John Wesley and Matthew Henry, 'Cleanliness is next to godliness,' which catches this suggestion of inseparability."³⁶

Treachery against others and God 5:5-10

To emphasize the importance of maintaining proper interpersonal relationships within the camp Moses repeated the law concerning the restitution of and compensation for a trespass against one's neighbor here (cf. Lev. 5:14—6:7). The expression "sins of mankind" (v. 6) can refer to sins committed *by* a human being and to sins committed *against* a human being.³⁷ The context favors the latter option.

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

³⁴Merrill, "A Theology . . .," p. 60.

³⁵Sailhamer, p. 376.

³⁶Riggins, p. 43.

³⁷Maarsingh, p. 22.

Trespasses against one's neighbor (cf. Lev. 6:1-7) needed atonement because they constituted acts of "unfaithfulness" to God (v. 6).

The Israelites had to maintain proper horizontal relationships with their brethren to maintain a proper vertical relationship with Yahweh (cf. Matt. 5:23-24).

"The point is clear—wrongs committed against God's people were considered wrongs committed against God himself."³⁸

The law of jealousy 5:11-31

The point of this section is the importance of maintaining purity in the marriage relationship to preserve God's blessing on Israel.

In verses 11-15 the writer explained the first steps an Israelite man who suspected his wife of unfaithfulness should take. The offering (v. 15) was a special meal offering. Usually the grain used in the meal offering was wheat ground into fine flour, but in this instance the man presented barley flour. Barley cost only half as much as wheat (2 Kings 7:1, 16, 18). It was the food of the poor and the cattle in the ancient Near East (Judg. 7:13; 1 Kings 5:8; 2 Kings 4:42; Ezek. 4:12).

It may have represented, ". . . the questionable repute in which the woman stood, or the ambiguous, suspicious character of her conduct."³⁹

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

The "earthenware vessel" into which the priest poured the water from the laver was of little value relative to the other utensils of the sanctuary. It was, therefore, a fit receptacle for this test. The "dust" he added to the water probably symbolized the curse of sin. It is what causes humans grief as we toil for a living because of sin's curse.

"Since this dust has been in God's presence, it is holy. As has been said before, one who is unclean is in great danger in the presence of the holy."⁴⁰

The release of the woman's hair, normally bound up, represented the temporary loss of her glory (i.e., her good reputation). Other possibilities are that it symbolized her openness,⁴¹ mourning,⁴² or uncleanness.⁴³

³⁸Sailhamer, p. 376.

³⁹Keil and Delitzsch, 3:31.

⁴⁰Ashley, p. 129.

⁴¹Allen, p. 746.

M. R. DeHaan offered a natural as opposed to a supernatural explanation of what happened in this trial by ordeal that has captured the imagination of some evangelicals. He believed that the treated water that the woman drank reacted to the chemical composition of the juices in her digestive system that had become abnormal because of her guilt. Science has established that certain emotions and nervous disturbances change the chemical composition of our body secretions. While this might be what produced the symptoms described in the text, DeHaan erred in interpreting the "dust" (v. 17) which the priest mixed with the water as a "bitter herb."

"We believe that, if we knew the identity of the bitter herb which Moses used, the same test would work today."⁴⁴

The physical symptoms of God's judgment on the woman if she was guilty (vv. 23, 27) point to a special affliction rather than one of the natural diseases that overtook the Israelites. Josephus said it was ordinary dropsy.⁴⁵ This seems unlikely in view of how Moses described her condition. Merrill believed her sense of guilt produced a psychosomatic reaction.⁴⁶ It is interesting, whatever the cause, that the punishment fell on the organs that had been the instruments of the woman's sin.

"The thigh is often used as a euphemism for the sexual organs."⁴⁷

"The most probable explanation for the phrase ['and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away'] . . . is that the woman suffers a collapse of the sexual organs known as a prolapsed uterus. In this condition, which may occur after multiple pregnancies, the pelvis floor (weakened by the pregnancies) collapses, and the uterus literally falls down. It may lodge in the vagina, or it may actually fall out of the body through the vagina. If it does so, it becomes edematous and swells up like a balloon. Conception becomes impossible, and the woman's procreative life has effectively ended . . ."⁴⁸

⁴²Merrill, in *The Old . . .*, p. 107.

⁴³Ashley, p. 129.

⁴⁴M. R. DeHaan, *The Chemistry of the Blood and Other Stirring Messages*, p. 48.

⁴⁵Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 3:11:6.

⁴⁶Merrill, "Numbers," p. 222; idem, in *The Old . . .*, p. 107.

⁴⁷Riggins, p. 50.

⁴⁸Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah (Numbers V 11-31)," *Vetus Testamentum* 34:1 (January 1984):20-21. See also the same author's more popularly written article, "The Trial Before God of an Accused Adulteress," *Bible Review* 2:3 (Fall 1986):46-49, which, by the way, provides supporting evidence for the widespread prohibition of polygamy in the ancient Near East. Other helpful resources are Michael Fishbane, "Accusations of Adultery: A Study of Law and Scribal Practice in Numbers 5:11-31," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 45 (1974):25-45; Herbert Chanan Brichto, "The Case of the Sota and a Reconsideration of Biblical 'Law,'" *Hebrew Union College Annual* 46 (1975):55-70; W. McKane, "Poison, Trial by Ordeal and the Cup of Wrath," *Vetus Testamentum* 30:4 (October 1980):474-92; and Ashley, pp. 132-33.

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

"The ritual trial of the Sotah [suspected adulteress] ended with the drinking of the potion. Nothing further was done, and we can assume that the woman went home to await the results at some future time."⁴⁹

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

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

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

Note that this procedure protected the wife of an extremely jealous husband who might continually accuse her. He would suffer embarrassment by her innocence since this was a public ceremony.

"This legislation forbids human punishment of a woman on the basis of suspicion alone, and, in fact, protects her from what could be a death sentence at the hands of the community."⁵⁰

"Marital deceit is a matter of such seriousness that the truth must be discovered. It is harmful to the sanctity of the community at large, and destructive of one of the bases of community life."⁵¹

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

⁴⁹Frymer-Kensky, "The Strange Case . . .," p. 22.

⁵⁰Ashley, p. 135.

⁵¹Budd, p. 66.

"The law of jealousy shows that through the role of the priest, God was actively at work in the nation and that no sin of any sort could be tolerated among God's holy people."⁵²

The Nazirite vow 6:1-21

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

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

The "Nazarite" vow was normally temporary. There are two biblical examples of life-long Nazarites: Samson and Samuel.⁵³ It was also normally voluntary. Any male or female could take this vow that involved dedication to God's service.

The vow itself required three commitments. These were not the vow but grew out of it.

1. The separated one abstained from any fruit of the grape vine (v. 4).

Perhaps God commanded this because, ". . . its fruit was regarded as the sum and substance of all sensual enjoyment."⁵⁴

"In itself, wine culture was considered to be good—Israelites regarded the harvest of their vineyards as a blessing—but there was also a dangerous side to it: the possibility of lapsing into a pagan lifestyle."⁵⁵

2. The Nazarite would leave his or her hair uncut (v. 5). The significance of this restriction has had many interpretations by the commentators as have the other restrictions. The most probable explanation, I believe, connects with the fact that hair represented the strength and vitality of the individual (cf. Judg. 16:13; 2 Sam. 14:25-26).⁵⁶ The long hair of the Nazarite would have symbolized the dedication of the Nazarite's strength and vigor to God.

"There might also have been a negative reason [for] this prescription. In many nations at this time, people devoted their hair to their gods."⁵⁷

⁵²Sailhamer, p. 377.

⁵³John the Baptist may have been a third case, but we do not know for sure that he lived as a Nazarite before he began his public ministry.

⁵⁴Keil and Delitzsch, 3:35. Cf. Riggins, p. 53.

⁵⁵Maarsingh, pp. 25-26. Other passages link strong drink with neglect of God's law (e.g., Gen. 9:20-27; 19:32-38; Prov. 31:4-6; Hab. 2:5).

⁵⁶Cf. Ashley, p. 143.

⁵⁷Maarsingh, p. 26.

3. The third commitment was to avoid any physical contact with a human corpse. This is perhaps the easiest restriction to explain. It seems that since the Nazarite had dedicated himself to a period of separation to God and from sin he should avoid contact with even the product of sin, namely, death. Since death was an abnormal condition, contact with dead bodies caused defilement.

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

". . . there was the recognition that some things in life superseded the requirements of the vow. If someone died suddenly in one's presence, for example, the vow could be temporarily suspended (v. 9). After the emergency had passed, there were provisions for completing the vow (vv. 10-12ff)."⁵⁸

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

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

"This law specifically shows that there were provisions not just for the priest but for all members of God's people to commit themselves wholly to God. Complete holiness was not the sole prerogative of the priesthood or the Levites. The Nazirite vow shows that even laypersons, men and women in everyday walks of life, could enter into a state of complete devotion to God. Thus this segment of text teaches that any person in God's nation could be totally committed to holiness."⁵⁹

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

The Nazarite ate part of his offering (v. 19). He physically enjoyed part of the fruits of his dedication to God.

God did not require the taking of vows under the Mosaic Law (cf. Lev. 27). Consequently the fact that Paul took a Nazarite vow (Acts 18:18) and paid the expenses of others who had taken one (Acts 21:26) does not indicate that he was living under the Law of Moses.

⁵⁸Sailhamer, pp. 377-78.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 377.

He was simply practicing a Jewish custom that prevailed as the Mosaic Law regulated that custom. He did this to win Jews to Jesus Christ, not because as a Christian Jew he was under the Mosaic Law (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

"It can hardly be denied that there is a desperate need in the church today for such leadership, for men utterly given over to God for His purposes—not men of fanatical zeal (which can very often be fleshly and even devilish), but men of controlled fire, men who can truly say, 'One thing I do' (Phil. 3:13), men of whom it can be said that the love of Christ constrains them, giving their lives depth, drive, and direction in the service of God."⁶⁰

The Aaronic benediction 6:22-27

The location of this blessing in this context indicates that one of the priest's central tasks was to be a source of blessing for God's people.⁶¹ This blessing, like the preceding Nazirite legislation, deals with the purification of Israel. As the nation prepared to move out toward the Promised Land, God gave this benediction to the priests to offer for the sanctification of the people. God's will was to bless all His people, not just the Nazarites. The priests were the mediators of this blessing from God to the Israelites.

"Whereas Nazarites generally undertook their vows for a short period, the priests were always there pronouncing this blessing at the close of the daily morning service in the temple and later in the synagogues."⁶²

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

"Each of the three clauses, in a different way, gives expression to God's commitment to Israel—a commitment which promises earthly security, prosperity, and general well-being."⁶³

The first blessing is the most general (v. 24). God's blessing is His goodness poured out. The priest called on Him not only to provide for His people but to defend them from all evil.

The second blessing is more specific (v. 25). God's face is the revelation of His personality to people. It radiates as fire does consuming evil and bestowing light and

⁶⁰Philip, pp. 86-87.

⁶¹Sailhamer, p. 379.

⁶²G. Wenham, p. 89.

⁶³Budd, p. 77.

warmth, and it shines as the sun promoting life. God's graciousness refers to the manifestation of His favor and grace in the events of life.

The third blessing is the most specific (v. 26). Lifting up the countenance refers to manifesting power. The priest called on God to manifest His power for His people. Specifically this would produce peace (Heb. *shalom*). "Shalom" does not mean just the absence of aggravation. It is the sum of all God's blessings.

One writer suggested the following alternative translation of verse 27.

"And when they shall name me the Most High of the Israelites, I, on my part, will bless them."⁶⁴

This rendering seems to capture the spirit of God's promise.

". . . the Aaronic blessing concludes the section of text dealing with the bulk of Israel's priestly legislation, and, implicitly, promises that if these laws are kept, the blessing of God will follow. The material in this major section (Lev. 1—Num. 6) comes between the date of the erection of the tabernacle and the movement of the camp some fifty days later (Num. 10:11)."⁶⁵

This blessing has always been a very important part of Israel's worship even to the present day in Judaism.

". . . the high priestly blessing was pronounced whenever the nation of Israel gathered for collective worship and sacrifice as well as when the individual Israelite brought sacrifices to the LORD. The nature of the blessing was that of an oracle, a sure word from God that He had accepted the sacrifice and was pleased with the worshipper. The contents of the blessing were protection, gracious dealings, and peace with God, which assuredly produced the effect of joy, security, and confidence on the part of the people."⁶⁶

"Some people suggest that only spontaneous prayer is 'real' prayer; verses such as these show that such sentiment is not correct."⁶⁷

⁶⁴Pieter de Boer, "Numbers vi 27," *Vetus Testamentum* 32:1 (January 1982):13.

⁶⁵Ashley, pp. 149-50.

⁶⁶Neil W. Arnold, "The High Priestly Blessing," *Exegesis and Exposition* 2:1 (Summer 1987):50. See also "The Priestly Blessing," *Buried History* 18:2 (June 1982):27-30. For other instances of the use of this blessing, see Michael Fishbane, "Form and Reformulation of the Biblical Priestly Blessing," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103:1 (January-March 1983):115-21; and Leon Liebreich, "The Songs of Ascents and the Priestly Blessing," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955):33-36.

⁶⁷Allen, p. 754.

The dedication of the tabernacle chs. 7—9

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

The offerings at the dedication ch. 7

The presentation this chapter records took place at the time the Israelites dedicated the tabernacle (vv. 1-2; cf. Lev. 8:10).

"The purpose of this section of narrative is to show that as the people had been generous in giving to the construction of the tabernacle (Ex 35:4-29), now they showed the same generosity in its dedication."⁶⁸

First, the tribes presented six wagons and 12 oxen to carry the materials of the tabernacle (vv. 1-9). The Gershonites received two wagons and the Merarites four. The Kohathites needed no wagons since they carried the sanctuary furniture with poles on their shoulders (cf. 2 Sam. 6:3, 7-8).

Day in second year ⁶⁹	Event	Text
Day 1, first month	Completion of tabernacle	Exod. 40:2; Num. 7:1
	Laws for offerings begin	Lev. 1:1
	Offerings for altar begin	Num. 7:3
	Ordination of priests begins	Lev. 8:1
Day 8, first month	Ordination of priests completed	Lev. 9:1
Day 12, first month	Offerings for altar completed	Num. 7:78
	Appointment of Levites	Num. 8:5
Day 14, first month	Second Passover	Num. 9:2
Day 1, second month	Census begins	Num. 1:1
Day 14, second month	Passover for those unclean	Num. 9:11
Day 20, second month	The cloud moves, the camp begins its trek	Num. 10:11

This long section—this chapter is the second longest in the Bible—records the presentation of gifts for the altar (v. 10) by each tribal prince (vv. 12-88).⁷⁰ The Israelites spread the presentation out over 12 days, one per day, because it took a whole day to receive and sacrifice what each tribe presented.

⁶⁸Sailhamer, p. 379.

⁶⁹Allen, p. 757, after G. Wenham, p. 91.

⁷⁰The longest chapter in the Bible is Psalm 119.

Each tribe offered exactly the same gifts. No tribe was superior or inferior to the others in this respect. Each had equal privilege and responsibility before God to worship and serve Him.

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

"The account may strike us as repetitious, but this sort of formula was used by people in the ancient Eastern world to reflect ever-increasing joy: look how much these many people gave for their altar!"⁷¹

"The chapter stands as a monument to the pleasure of God who took enjoyment from the repetition—for these were grand gifts in the good days of his early relationship with his people. These were the honeymoon days of the marital relationship of the Lord and Israel (see Jer 2:2-3). Each of the gifts is relished, as presentations by a lover in the early days of the bliss of marriage."⁷²

The fact that Moses heard God's voice speaking to him from the most holy place indicates God's acceptance of these gifts (v. 89). Moses, as the representative of the nation, and God enjoyed a close relationship because of this sacrifice of worship.

"The offering of the princes, then, was the spontaneous response of grateful hearts to the goodness and grace of God. This sets the question of Christian liberality in its true perspective, and the scriptural principle is not difficult to see. Where people are conscious of the blessing of God in their lives, they will give spontaneously—and keep on giving. Finance in the church is directly related to faith and consecration."⁷³

The lighting of the lamps 8:1-4

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

The consecration of the Levites 8:5-26

The consecration of the priests had taken place earlier (cf. Lev. 8). Then the people only looked on (Lev. 8:3-4). On the present occasion God set apart to His service the whole tribe of Levi that He had taken in place of the first-born sons (vv. 16-18). Now the people played a role by laying their hands on the Levites (v. 10). The Levites stood in the place of the people as their representatives whereas the priests were closer to God and farther from the people.

⁷¹Maarsingh, p. 29.

⁷²Allen, p. 756.

⁷³Philip, p. 100.

The consecration proceeded after the high priest lit the lamps (vv. 5-22). After the Levites washed and trimmed their hair (Heb. *'abar ta'ar 'al*) to symbolize and affect cleansing, the Israelites placed their hands on them portraying the transference of responsibility from the first-born sons to them (vv. 10, 12). Thus the Levites became living sacrifices unto God (cf. Rom. 12:1-2).

Levites could perform service in the tent of meeting only between the ages of 25 and 50 (vv. 23-26). Carrying the tabernacle in transit was a task for which there were stricter qualifications (cf. 4:47) probably because of the dangers connected with this service (cf. 4:15, 20). As stated above, the Levites had to be 30 to 50 to carry the tabernacle.

"The distinctive emphasis of this section is that the Levites are nevertheless not remote from the community. Through the laying on of hands they in some sense represent the people at large, and constitute an offering from the people. Unlike the priests they do not receive anointing or special vestments. Like laymen they wash their clothes for the special rites. They are perhaps something of a bridge between priests and people."⁷⁴

"Chapter 8 deals with two issues: lamps and Levites. Both the proper setting of the lamps and the distinction of the Levites from the community are further elements in the purification of the nation in preparation for the holy task God had prepared for her. . . . May one suggest that as the lamps were to be properly focused on the bread of the Presence, so the Levites were to have their proper stance within the community as well?"⁷⁵

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

On the first anniversary of the Passover in Egypt, just after the Israelites had dedicated the tabernacle, they observed this feast as God had commanded (v. 5). Most of the males were already circumcised (cf. Josh. 5:5).

This event took place in the first month of the second year after the Exodus (v. 1). The census in chapter 1 occurred in the second month of the same year (1:1). This fact shows that at least these events described in Numbers are not in chronological order.

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

⁷⁴Budd, p. 94.

⁷⁵Allen, p. 764.

"The purpose of including this segment of narrative was perhaps to show that God's laws were not arbitrary and unreasonable. The Israelites themselves even played a part in their formulation."⁷⁶

The covering cloud 9:15-23

The time had come for the Israelites to resume their journey when the people had celebrated the Passover. All that remained for the Israelites to know was how God would lead them. Moses recorded God's revelation of that in this section.

The cloudy pillar stood over the tabernacle (vv. 15-16). It does not appear to have covered the entire camp of Israel.

"Like the Tabernacle, Canaan would be a focal point of Yahweh's residence among men, the place where His sovereignty would find historical expression through His specially chosen people."⁷⁷

The comparatively lengthy description of God's direction of Israel with the cloud (vv. 17-23) indicates God's sovereign and purposeful leadership of His people. The Israelites remained where they were just as long as God wanted them to remain there. Their experiences along the way were not accidental but providential. This description also expressed the "excitement of the occasion."⁷⁸

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

"The writer is intent on showing that at this point in their walk with the Lord, Israel was obedient and followed the Lord's guidance. The writer's concern to make this point can be seen in that seven times in this brief narrative, it is said that they 'obeyed the commandment of the Lord' and thus traveled when the cloud lifted from the tabernacle and moved (9:18, 20, 23; cf. Ex 17:1)."⁷⁹

The chapter closes with another reference to the Israelites' careful and exact obedience to Yahweh's instructions, an important theme in this book.

⁷⁶Sailhamer, p. 380.

⁷⁷Merrill, "A Theology . . .," p. 60.

⁷⁸G. Wenham, pp. 100-101.

⁷⁹Sailhamer, p. 381.

3. The departure from Sinai ch. 10

The two silver trumpets 10:1-10

God ordered that priests should announce His movement of the people by blowing two silver trumpets because the Israelites would not watch the cloud continuously. The blasts from the trumpets would reach the farthest tents in the camp (cf. 1 Thess. 4:16-17).

"Whereas the cloud in Num. 9:15-23 represents the divine initiative in leadership the trumpets constitute the response of the human leadership as it summons the congregation to gather at the tent, and signals the moment of advance for each tribal group."⁸⁰

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

The priests also used these trumpets in times of war in Canaan. They used them to call the people to arms and to remind them to seek God's help so He would deliver them (v. 9).

They also announced the feasts of Israel and the first day of each new month to remind the people to remember their God (v. 10). In this chapter we have the first reference to the new moon celebration (v. 10). The appearance of the new moon signaled the beginning of a new month. The Jews viewed the first day of each new month as consecrated to God in a way similar to the Sabbath (cf. Isa. 1:13). They marked this fresh beginning with special sacrifices (28:11-15) over which the priests blew the silver trumpets (v. 10; Ps. 81:3). On the new moon of the seventh month, the Feast of Trumpets, the people did no work (Lev. 23:25-25; Num. 29:1-6; 2 Kings 4:23).

In Israel's later history the priests blew these trumpets on other festal occasions as well (Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:35, 41; 1 Chron. 15:24; 16:6; 2 Chron. 5:12; 7:6; 29:27).

"The impression that this narrative intends to give is that of an orderly and obedient departure from Sinai. The picture is a far cry from the scene which Moses saw when he first returned from the mountain and found the nation celebrating before the golden calf: 'the people were running wild and Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies' (Ex 32:25). In other words, the author is trying to make a point with this narrative. He shows that after the incident of the golden calf the Mosaic Law was able to bring order and obedience to the nation. The Law, necessitated by the disobedience of the people, was having its effect on them."⁸¹

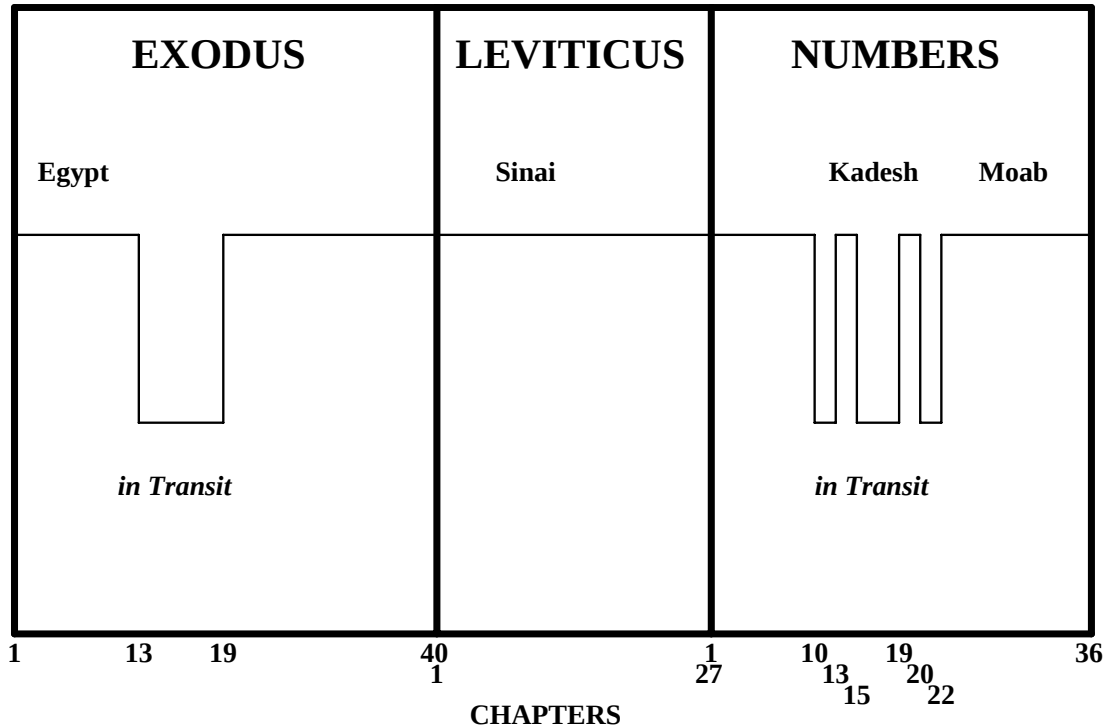
⁸⁰Budd, p. 107.

⁸¹Sailhamer, p. 381.

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

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

Israel's Locations (Exodus through Numbers)



Even though this region contains several oases and some grazing land, these could not have provided for the two million or so Israelites plus their animals during their stay there.⁸² As the text of Scripture implies and sometimes states, God provided for the needs of His people from Egypt to Canaan by giving them an unbroken series of miraculous provisions.

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

"The Desert of Paran is a large plateau in the northeastern Sinai, south of what later would be called the Negev of Judah, and west of the Arabah.

⁸²Merrill, in *The Old . . .*, p. 101, believed Israel's population was more than two and a half million. Allen, p. 689, argued for it being about 250,000 to 300,000.

This forms the southernmost portion of the Promised Land, the presumed staging area for the assault on the land itself. The principal lines of assault on the land of Canaan are from the southwest, following the Way of the Sea from Egypt, and from the northwest, following the Way of the Sea from Phoenicia. Israel's staging for attack in the Desert of Paran was a brilliant strategy. In this way they would avoid the fortified routes to the west, presumably under the control of Egypt. This unusual line of attack from the south would stun the inhabitants of the land. They would come like a sirocco blast from the desert, and the land would be theirs, under the hand of God."⁸³

The Israelites broke camp and proceeded to march as the Lord had commanded them (vv. 13-28; cf. ch. 2). The tabernacle receives special attention in this description in keeping with its central importance in the nation.

"A major component of the covenant promise to the fathers and to Israel the nation was . . . the inheritance and occupation of a land. This land was representative of the whole earth. As man was placed in the Garden of Eden to keep and rule it, so Israel would be placed in Canaan to keep and rule it as a fiefdom from the Great King. At last, when the saving purposes of the Lord will have been accomplished, all the earth—indeed all creation—will fall under the rule of mankind, who will 'have dominion over all things.'"⁸⁴

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

"Moses continued to urge Hobab to join Israel. In a sense this is an act of evangelism. Hobab did not come easily. But subsequent biblical texts indicate that he did come. As such, he is like Ruth who joins Naomi en route to the Land of Promise, leaving all behind, with a promise of something ahead that is of more value than anything left at home."⁸⁵

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

The Israelites apparently carried the ark in front of the whole nation as they marched (v. 33). The cloud was evidently over it but not necessarily over the whole nation (v. 34).

⁸³Ibid., p. 781.

⁸⁴Merrill, "A Theology . . .," pp. 59-60.

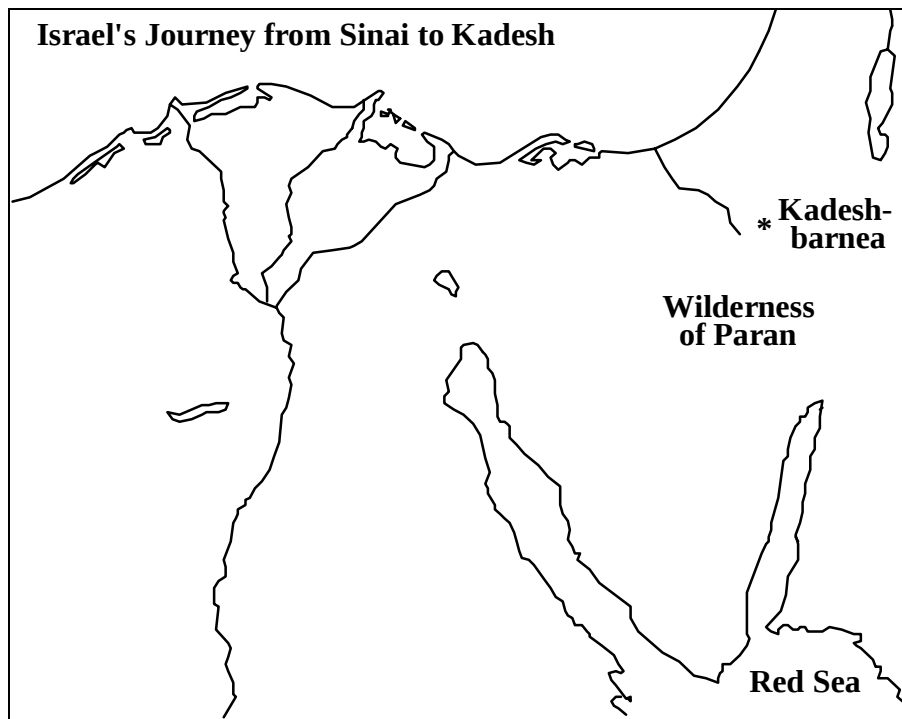
⁸⁵Allen, p. 783.

The cloud stood over the ark and led those carrying it and the nation as the Israelites moved forward.

"It [the ark] is something like a wedding ring: the visible sign of the bond between the Lord and his people."⁸⁶

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

"The theme of this passage is Israel's glorious leadership by Yahweh as the people depart from the Mountain of God for an immediate conquest of Canaan. There is no sense here of the impending doom that awaits Israel's rebellion in the wilderness."⁸⁷



⁸⁶Maarsingh, p. 37.

⁸⁷Ashley, p. 200.

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

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

The end of chapter 10 is the high point of the Book of Numbers spiritually. The beginning of chapter 11 records the beginning of the spiritual decline of Israel that resulted in God's judging the nation. He postponed the fulfillment of His promise to bring her into the Promised Land.

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

"These ten chapters now balance and contrast with the ten chapters that present the record of Israel's preparation."⁸⁸

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

A warning from the Lord 11:1-3

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

Not long after Israel left Sinai the people began to grumble again.

"A modern traveller [*sic*] would sympathize."⁸⁹

"There is a cyclical nature to Israel's rebellions against God; obdurate people tend to repeat the sins of the past. The first rebellion of the redeemed people came on the third day of marching toward the Mount of God after their miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds (Exod 15:22-24). Now, three days out on their triumphal march to Canaan from Mount Sinai, they fall back into their complaining behavior. The pattern of 'three days' in both cases shows both similarity of actions as well as an intemperate, impatient attitude on the part of the people."⁹⁰

⁸⁸Allen, p. 785.

⁸⁹G. Wenham, p. 106.

⁹⁰Allen, p. 786.

To warn them that their dissatisfaction could develop into more serious rebellion God sent fire on the outskirts of the camp. It is not clear whether the fire (lightning?) that God sent killed some of the people or only burned up things such as bushes and tents. Evidently the people recognized this event as a warning from God and cried out to Moses whose intercession moved God to withhold further discipline.

"In the midst of his wrath, the Lord remembers mercy. This is one of the ongoing themes of Scripture and is a particular truism in the Book of Numbers."⁹¹

The people named the site Taberah (burning) in memory of this event.

This is the third time in the Pentateuch that an event such as this happened. God had wrestled with Jacob after Jacob had parted from his father-in-law and before he reentered the Promised Land (Gen. 31:55; 32:22-32). God had sought to kill Moses after Moses had left Sinai and had parted from his father-in-law and before he rejoined the Israelites (Exod. 4:24-26). Now God sent fire from heaven to the Israelites after they had left Sinai and Moses' father-in-law and before they entered the Promised Land. Each incident casts a foreboding mood over events and hints that something worse may follow soon.⁹²

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

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

"To spurn a regularly occurring, abundant and nutritious food only because it is boring is understandably human—a pitiable mark of our tendency toward ingratitude."⁹³

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

Moses' use of the mother figure to describe God (v. 12) is unusual but not unique in Scripture (e.g., Exod. 4:22; Isa. 49:15; 66:13; Hos. 11:1; cf. 1 Thess. 2:7). Normally the Bible presents God as a male because He relates to people in traditionally male roles

⁹¹Ibid., p. 787.

⁹²Sailhamer, p. 384. Note also the fire from heaven in Gen. 19.

⁹³Allen, p. 790.

primarily. However, He also deals with us in ways that are more typically female, and in these instances He compares Himself to females.

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

"Prophesying here does not refer to prediction or even to proclamation but to giving (in song or speech) praise and similar expressions without prior training (see the comparable experience of Saul in 1 Sam. 10:9-11)."⁹⁴

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

". . . in ancient times meat was eaten in Israel only on special occasions. In the wilderness it would have been very much a luxury. In any event, the offense of the demand for meat was just part of the larger offense of romanticizing the time in Egypt, where there had always been an abundance of fish and fresh vegetables. They were saying in effect that the entire so-called 'deliverance' from slavery had turned out to be one huge disappointment."⁹⁵

God's gracious provision of meat was a mixed blessing. He gave them what they requested but kept them where they were for a month (v. 20) and allowed them to get sick from the meat (v. 33; Ps. 106:15). This punishment was not vindictive but disciplinary and designed to teach the people to accept what God sent them as best for them. God permitted their trials in the wilderness to prepare them for the hardships they would face when they entered the land.

"The people were to be broken by the experience because they had despised the gift of God, glorified their stay in Egypt, and characterized their redemption from slavery as a meaningless event."⁹⁶

God's promise to provide meat stretched Moses' faith to its limit (vv. 21-22). God reminded him that His power was limitless. Even Moses had temporarily forgotten the miracles in Egypt.

Evidently the elders' prophesying was a singular occurrence; it happened only on this one occasion (v. 25). This incident indicates that God's bestowal of the Holy Spirit at this time was temporary. The Spirit had not previously been on these elders. Furthermore it

⁹⁴Merrill, "Numbers," p. 227. See also 1 Chron. 25:1.

⁹⁵Maarsingh, p. 39.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 41.

was selective. The Spirit was not on all the Israelites as He was on these elders. Contrast our day when the Spirit indwells all believers permanently (John 14:16-17; 16:7, 13; Acts 2).

"Though the Old Testament does not contain a fully developed theology of the Holy Spirit, it does reveal enough to show that the Spirit was a manifestation of God Himself and not merely a way of referring to some divine attribute (see, for example, Gen. 1:2; 6:3; Exod. 31:3; Num. 24:2; Judg. 3:10; 1 Sam. 10:6, 10; Isa. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1)."⁹⁷

We have no reason to believe that God withdrew the Spirit from the elders. Evidently only their ability to prophesy ceased (v. 25).⁹⁸ This ability was a divine sign to the people that dampened their rebellious spirits.

Joshua's jealousy for Moses' honor in the nation (v. 28) is understandable (cf. Mark 9:38-39), but he had greater concern for Moses' honor than for the good of the people. Moses realized that Israel would be better off if God had given all the people His Spirit and the gift of prophecy. He has given all Christians His Spirit but not all of us this gift. God may have included this incident involving Joshua in the narrative because of his later role as Israel's leader. He also may have done so to emphasize the value of the gift of the Holy Spirit that God graciously gave the people even in their rebellious condition.

"Behind these words [in v. 29] lay a world of faith. We see that Moses understood that the issue was not for him to decide but for God. If necessary God would act on his servant's behalf."⁹⁹

The Spirit (Heb. *ruah*) of Yahweh settled the leadership problem (v. 29), and now the wind (Heb. *ruah*) from Yahweh would solve the food problem (v. 31). The wind was from the southeast (Ps. 78:26) and apparently blew these quails from the Gulf of Aqabah (vv. 31-34). Normally quails migrated to the northeast, from central Africa, so the direction from which these quails came was an abnormal provision of the Lord.¹⁰⁰ The NASB interpreted verse 31 as meaning the quails lay three feet deep on the ground, but the NIV translators understood that they flew about three feet above the ground. The latter interpretation seems more probable to me.

The sickness of the people was a judgment for their greed. They wanted something for themselves that God had not chosen for them.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷Merrill, in *The Old . . .*, p. 112. It is not surprising that Jewish interpreters see this Spirit as Moses' human spirit rather than the Holy Spirit. See, for example, Ze'ev Weisman, "The Personal Spirit as Imparting Authority," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93:2 (1981):225-34.

⁹⁸See Allen, p. 794.

⁹⁹Maarsingh, p. 42.

¹⁰⁰Merrill, "Numbers," p. 227; Keil and Delitzsch, 3:72.

¹⁰¹See Theodore Ouzounellis, "Some Notes on Quail Poisoning," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 211:7 (Feb. 16, 1970):1186-87.

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

"The view expressed by Moses in this narrative is precisely that of the later Israelite prophets in their description of the new covenant [cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 11:20; 36:22-27; Joel 2:28]."¹⁰²

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

The rebellion of Miriam and Aaron ch. 12

Perhaps it was God's exaltation of Moses by bestowing the gift of prophecy on the elders that provoked the envy of Miriam and Aaron. God reminded the people of Moses' special endowment with the Spirit when He blessed the elders with the Spirit.

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

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

". . . the Septuagint and the Vulgate translate 'Cushite' in Numbers 12:1 as 'Ethiopian,' the word used by the Greeks and Romans to refer to the region south of Egypt inhabited by people with black skin."¹⁰³

It seems unlikely that Miriam would have objected at this time to Moses' marrying Zipporah. He had married her years before this incident. The repetition of the phrase "for he had married a Cushite woman" (v. 1) seems to imply a recent marriage. This would explain Miriam's objection at this time better. We may assume, therefore, that Zipporah had died and that Moses had remarried. There is no reason to believe that Moses was married to two women at the same time, though this is possible. Marriage

¹⁰²Sailhamer, pp. 385-86.

¹⁰³J. Daniel Hays, "The Cushites: A Black Nation in the Bible," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:612 (October-December 1996):398. Merrill, "Numbers," p. 228, however, believed that "Cushite" described people who lived in Arabia as well as in Cush proper in which case Moses' wife may not have been black and may have been Zipporah. See idem, in *The Old . . .*, p. 113-14.

to a Cushite was within the will of God. God had only forbidden the Israelites from marrying Canaanites (Exod. 34:16).

Evidently Miriam and Aaron felt their leading roles in Israel as prophetess (Exod. 15:20) and high priest were losing distinctiveness as God gave 70 elders the privilege of mediating His word. Perhaps Miriam saw in Moses' new wife a threat to her role as the leading female in Israel.

The statement of Moses' humility (v. 3) was not a boastful claim by the writer but an inspired statement of fact. We need not conclude that another writer added it later since it is essential to the argument of this passage. That another writer added it later is a distinct possibility, however.¹⁰⁴

12:4-9 God's common method of communicating with His prophets was by giving them visions and dreams (v. 6).¹⁰⁵ Moses was a specially privileged prophet, however, with whom God spoke directly without any special mediation or reserve. He spoke with Moses as friends converse (v. 8; cf. Exod. 33:11).¹⁰⁶

12:10-15 The Lord punished Miriam for her dissatisfaction with her divinely appointed role in the nation. He punished her with leprosy, the disease that specially symbolized sin (Lev. 13—14).¹⁰⁷ All the Israelites probably identified her self-assertion as sin. Perhaps God did not smite Aaron because his involvement was not as great.

"In the present narrative, the sign of Moses' leadership was Miriam's 'leprosy, which was white as snow' (Nu 12:10). Similarly, one of the first signs given to vindicate God's election of Moses as leader of his people was the sign of 'leprosy, white as snow' (Ex 4:6). In the initial narratives dealing with the work of Moses, Moses himself doubted his calling and consequently became a leper. Here, however, it is Miriam who doubts and thus becomes a leper. We should also note that the other sign given to vindicate the role of

¹⁰⁴Cleon Rogers, "Moses: Meek or Miserable?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29:3 (September 1986):257-63, suggested that on the basis of etymology, usage, and context the *qere* reading of the Hebrew word used here is preferable. He believed the Hebrew word should be translated "miserable" rather than "meek."

¹⁰⁵See Richard L. Ruble, "The Doctrine of Dreams," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125:500 (October-December 1968):360-64. For more information on the structure of God's words here, see J. S. Kselman, "A Note on Numbers xii 6-8," *Vetus Testamentum* 26:4 (October 1976):500-504.

¹⁰⁶Michael Fishbane suggested that Paul had verse 8 in mind when he wrote 1 Corinthians 13:8. See "Through the Looking Glass: Reflections on Ezek. 43:3, Num. 12:8 and 1 Cor. 13:8," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986):63-74.

¹⁰⁷Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, p. 204, suggested that Miriam's punishment of white, leprous skin was a divine response to her prejudice against her black sister-in-law. See also Cain H. Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family*, p. 42.

Moses in the earlier narrative was the serpent that came from Moses' rod (Ex 4:3). So also here, when Moses' authority is further questioned by the people at the end of their time in the wilderness (Nu 21:5), God responds by sending serpents against them (21:6)."¹⁰⁸

Moses interceded for Miriam at Aaron's pleading. Ironically Aaron had wanted to be like Moses, but instead of being able to intercede directly with God as Moses did, Aaron had to appeal to Moses who interceded with God.¹⁰⁹ God again showed mercy. He removed her leprosy but punished her with exclusion from the camp for seven days (Lev. 14:8). Spitting in the face (v. 14) was an act of contempt for one who had done something despicable (cf. Deut. 25:9; Job 17:6; 30:10). The people suffered too as a result of Miriam and Aaron's rebellion. God halted their progress toward the Promised Land again (v. 15; cf. 11:20).

"Aaron, on seeing the judgment of leprosy come upon his sister, beseeches Moses for mercy. There is surely in his prayer an implicit recognition of the different kind of authority that Moses had. Indeed, he is acknowledging that Moses possessed a power in intercession with God that he himself could not exercise, hence his appeal to his brother."¹¹⁰

"The purpose of this chapter, then, is to vindicate Moses' divinely given leadership and to brush aside any further suggestion that, because of the establishment of other forms of authority, the type of leadership epitomized in Moses was no longer valid."¹¹¹

12:16 From Hazeroth Israel moved on to the wilderness of Paran and Kadesh on the border of Canaan.

These three failures to be content with God's provisions and plans at Taberah, Kibroth-hattaavah, and Hazeroth prepared the Israelites for an even more serious failure at Kadesh.

The failure of the first generation chs. 13—14

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

¹⁰⁸Sailhamer, pp. 386-87. Cf. 2 Kings 5:27.

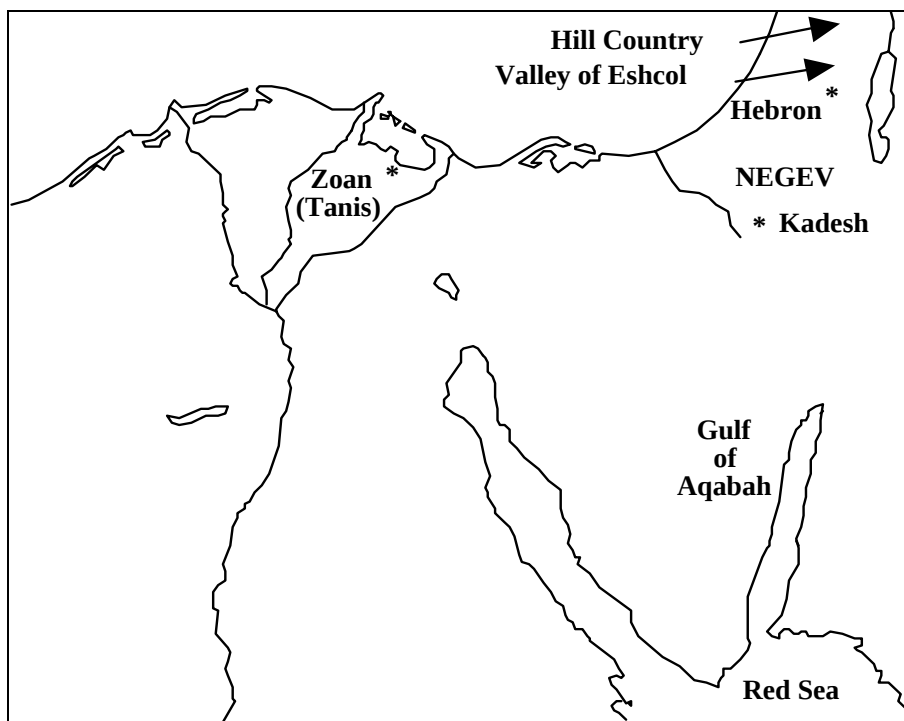
¹⁰⁹Ashley, p. 227.

¹¹⁰Philip, p. 148.

¹¹¹Sailhamer, p. 386.

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

13:1-2 When the people arrived at Kadesh the Lord told them to go up and take possession of the land He had promised them (Deut. 1:19-21). Kadesh stood in the Desert of Zin, which was a section of the great Paran wilderness. The people asked Moses if they could send spies ahead of them. They did so, "that they may search out the land for us, and bring back to us word of the way by which we should go up, and the cities which we shall enter" (Deut. 1:22). Moses allowed this (Deut. 1:23) with God's permission (Num. 13:2). Clearly the Israelites were not rebelling against God by sending the spies, but neither were they stepping forward in bold obedience with strong confidence in God, as they should have done. Why did God not lead Moses to record here (vv. 1-3) the fact that the sending of the spies was the people's idea (Deut. 1:22)? The reason may be that this was not the sin that resulted in God's postponement of their entrance into Canaan. Their reaction to the spies' report caused that result. The mission of the spies had some genuine value to the Israelites (vv. 18-20), but it also opened the possibility of fear and failure to obey God.



13:3-16 The men named as the spies were not the same as the tribal princes (conveners; 1:5-15; 7:12; et al.). Their personal qualifications for this mission may have been the basis for their selection.

"The name [Joshua, v. 16] describes a special role that Moses wished Joshua to have when he renamed him in

Numbers 13:16. Joshua's earlier name, Hoshea, simply means 'he has saved'. In the name Hoshea, the person or god who saves is not made clear. Moses specified the LORD as the source of salvation by renaming Joshua."¹¹²

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

13:21-25 The spies surveyed a very large area. Lebo-hamath (v. 21) stood about 50 miles north of Damascus, 100 miles north of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee).¹¹³

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

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

Zoan (v. 22) is another name for Tanis, the capital city of Egypt from which the Israelites had come.¹¹⁴

The valley of Eshcol was apparently just north of Hebron on the way to Jerusalem.¹¹⁵ The Hebrew word translated "Eshcol" refers to the stalk or stem of some fruit or flower. From this it came to mean a whole bunch or "cluster" (of grapes). A huge cluster of grapes carried on a pole between two men has long been a symbol of the land of Israel. This figure illustrates the great agricultural productivity of the land. It still is a popular symbol of modern Israel today and is the logo of the Department of Tourism.

¹¹²Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 17.

¹¹³Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, pp. 72-73.

¹¹⁴See N. Na'aman, "'Hebron Was Built Seven Years before Zoan in Egypt' (Numbers xiii 22)," *Vetus Testamentum* 31:4 (1981):488-92.

¹¹⁵*The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Eschol," by R. C. Ridall, 2:364.

The report of the spies 13:26-33

The spies reported that the land was indeed as fruitful as they had heard (v. 27), "nevertheless . . ." (v. 28). Everything the spies said from this word on was uncalled for.¹¹⁶ Their commission had been to view the land and to report back on what they saw. It was not their job to determine if the Israelites could overcome the Canaanites. God had promised that He would give the land to His people.

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

They described the tall Anakites as Nephilim (v. 33).

The Nephilim were, "the demi-gods who lived on the earth before the flood (Gn. 6:4)."¹¹⁷

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

"The use of the term *Nephilim* seems to be deliberately provocative of fear, a term not unlike the concept of bogeymen and hobgoblins."¹¹⁸

The rebellion of the people 14:1-12

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

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

¹¹⁶See J. A. Beck, "Geography and the Narrative Shape of Numbers 13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157:627 (July-September 2000):271-80.

¹¹⁷G. Wenham, p. 120.

¹¹⁸Allen, p. 812.

14:10-12 Nevertheless the congregation violently rejected their pleas to trust and obey God (v. 10). God Himself prevented the people from stoning Caleb and Joshua by manifesting Himself (v. 10).

"... the majesty of God flashed out before the eyes of the people in a light which suddenly burst forth from the tabernacle (see at Ex. xxv. 10)."¹¹⁹

As a faithful mediator Moses again interceded for the disobedient Israelites.

The failure of the Israelites grew out of unbelief (v. 11; cf. Heb. 3:19). They failed to believe that God would give them the land of their enemies as He had promised.

Often in Scripture we read of people asking God, "How long?" However here it is God who asked this of Moses. This illustrates the intimate relationship that Moses and God enjoyed (12:7-8).

Was God's threatened action a real possibility, or was He only testing Moses' reaction with this offer? God had threatened a similar punishment at Sinai when the Israelites had made the golden calf (Exod. 32:10). God could have fulfilled His promises to Abraham by destroying and dispossessing all the other living Israelites and by sparing only Moses and his descendants. However, God could not have fulfilled the prophetic promises that He had given through Jacob (Gen. 49) and done so. There would have to be descendants of Judah from whom a great ruler would come (Gen. 49:10) as well as some future for the other tribes.

Perhaps God meant that He would completely destroy that older generation of Israelites immediately (cf. Exod. 32:10). He said that He would also give Moses and his descendants a much larger place in the nation. Perhaps then other peoples would regard Moses as the father of the Israelite nation.

"... this passage intends to show that the people failed to inherit the Promised Land and hence died in the wilderness without inheriting the blessing, not so much for a specific act of disobedience or for fear of the battles that lay ahead, but rather for the simple fact of their unbelief. They failed to trust in God."¹²⁰

¹¹⁹Keil and Delitzsch, 3:92.

¹²⁰Sailhamer, p. 388.

Moses' intercession for the people 14:13-19

Moses interceded again much as he had done at Sinai (cf. Exod. 32:11-13). Moses based his appeal on God's reputation among the Egyptians (vv. 13-14) and the other nations (vv. 15-16). He also cited God's promise that He would be patient (vv. 17-18) and His past loyal love to Israel (v. 19). Moses' words proved effective (v. 20).

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

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

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

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

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

It is noteworthy that in Egypt God sent 10 plagues to build the faith of His people, but in the wilderness they complained against Him in unbelief 10 times. Evidently the measure of their iniquity had reached its capacity from God's viewpoint with this tenth rebellion (cf. Gen. 15:16).

Because the adult generation had failed to trust God He would not defeat their enemies. Therefore He instructed them to march southeast toward the Gulf of Aqabah and away from the Amalekites and Canaanites (v. 25). Since they wanted to return to Egypt, God sent them back toward where they had been. Since they feared their children would die in Canaan, God would preserve those very children in the wilderness and give them a home in Canaan (v. 31). Since the adults had rejected Canaan, God would give it to their children (v. 31). Since they feared dying in Canaan, God would let them die in the wilderness (v. 2).

"Typical of the irony in this story, their punishment is made to fit their crime."¹²¹

"When the Lord asked 'How long?' [v. 27] he meant this was the end. The oath formula 'As I live' [v. 28] was the strongest denial conceivable. The things he said next were irrevocably going to happen. That is what lies behind verses 28, 30, and 35."¹²²

The Bible nowhere specifies a particular age of accountability for children. However the fact that God judged all the Israelites who were 20 years old and older for this sin seems significant. He evidently regarded those who had lived 20 years as responsible adults (v. 29).¹²³

The 40-year duration of the punishment resulted from the 40-day duration of the expedition by the spies (v. 34). These years included those already spent in the wilderness since complaining characterized the people from the time they first departed from Egypt.

"The round number forty (v. 34) may refer to a human lifetime: generally speaking, everyone above the age of twenty would die in the wilderness in a period of forty years, because very few people lived beyond the age of sixty. There is a curious connection between the forty days of preparation for an entry that did not take place and forty years of awesome preparation for an entry that would take place—but only for a new generation."¹²⁴

The 10 spies who brought the majority opinion seem to have died shortly after God pronounced their sentence as a result of a plague He sent (v. 37).

"As an unmistakable evidence that God's word of judgment would be literally fulfilled, the spies, except Joshua and Caleb, at this moment were struck dead with a plague from the Lord."¹²⁵

The presumption of the people 14:39-45

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

"They are like children who had broken a valuable vase and decided to 'make it better' by gluing it back together. The result of such action looks nothing like the original."¹²⁶

¹²¹G. Wenham, p. 123.

¹²²Maarsingh, p. 50.

¹²³Jewish boys became "sons of the covenant" on their thirteenth birthdays in later Judaism. This is what the *bar mitzvah* (lit. son of duty) celebrates.

¹²⁴Maarsingh, p. 51. Forty years seems to be a round figure for a generation.

¹²⁵Jensen, p. 67.

¹²⁶Ashley, p. 270.

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

It is also possible for us Christians to fail to enter into our full reward if we fail to continue to trust and obey God (1 Cor. 9:24—10:13; Heb. 3:12—4:14).¹²⁷ Every genuine Christian will eventually go to heaven, but only the faithful will receive all the rewards God wants each Christian to possess. God will give or withhold these at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; et al.).

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

"Following the account of the people's failure to believe in God in chapters 13 and 14, the writer has attached a further and rather large set of laws dealing with sacrifice and the priesthood (15:1—19:22). Thus, as has been the case throughout the earlier parts of the Pentateuch, after an account of Israel's unbelief, more laws are added within the narrative [cf. Exod. 32; Gal. 3:19-23]."¹²⁸

Battles, this one and the battle with the Canaanites in 21:1-3, frame this section of laws and the Lord's discipline of the Israelites in the wilderness during the next 38 years.¹²⁹

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

Moses recorded few events during the years of Israel's wandering in the wilderness, but those he did preserve have instructive value. Most important among them is the rebellion of Korah's group against Moses and Aaron, and God's confirmation of the Aaronic priesthood that followed (chs. 16—18).

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

¹²⁷Philip, pp. 166-67.

¹²⁸Sailhamer, p. 387.

¹²⁹Ashley, p. 274.

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

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

"It seems that the connecting thought between chapters 14 and 15 is the phrase in 15:2: 'when you enter the land of your dwelling places that I am giving to you' (pers[onal] tr[anslation]). This ties to 14:31: 'I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected.'"130

"Lest there be the mistaken notion that the laws of Sinai, including the laws of offerings, had been abrogated or replaced, the Lord explicitly cited some of them again . . ."131

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

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

15:1-16 "The *first* of these laws had reference to the connection between meat-[meal-]offerings and drink-offerings on the one hand, and burnt-offerings and slain-[peace-]offerings on the other."132

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

The Apostle Paul spoke of his life as a drink offering poured out as a sacrifice to God (Phil. 2:17; 1 Tim. 4:6).

¹³⁰Allen, p. 824.

¹³¹Jensen, p. 69.

¹³²Keil and Delitzsch, 3:100.

- 15:17-21 The *second* law required the presentation of a cake made from the first-fruits of the land to God. The offerer was to lift it up before God and then give it to the priest. This offering expressed gratitude for the grain of the land.
- 15:22-29 The *third* law dealt with the sin offering. Here sins of omission are in view whereas the law in Leviticus 4:13-21 dealt more with sins of commission. In both cases the sin offering covered sins committed unintentionally. This law also covered some deliberate sins if the sinner offered public confession, full restitution, and a sin offering (Lev. 6:1-7).
- 15:30-31 These offerings did not cover sins committed in defiance of God. In these cases the sinner was to die (vv. 30-31). Moses recorded a case involving such a sin in the next section.

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

This incident illustrates the fate of the Israelite or foreigner in Israel who deliberately violated the law of Sabbath observance. It clarifies the meaning of defiant sin as well as what it means to be "cut off from among his people" (vv. 30-31). Violation of this law drew the death penalty (Exod. 31:14-15; 35:2).¹³³ God revealed on this occasion that such an offender was to die by stoning (cf. Lev. 20:2). Whereas Moses had previously recorded the penalty he had not explained the method of execution (v. 34).¹³⁴

"The purpose of these narratives is to show that God's will is not expressed in a once-for-all way. In Israel's ongoing relationship with God, he continued to make his will known to them, and they continued to play a part in the process."¹³⁵

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

"There are eleven offenses punishable by stoning according to the Old Testament: idolatry (Deut. 17:2-7); encouragement of idolatry (Deut. 13:6-10); child sacrifice (Lev. 20:2-5); prophecy in the name of another god (Deut. 13:1-5); divination (Lev. 20:27); blasphemy (Lev. 24:15-16); breaking the Sabbath (here); murder by an ox (Exod. 21:28-29); adultery (Deut. 22:22ff.); rebellion by a son (Deut. 21:18ff.); violation of God's ban on plunder devoted to him (Josh. 7:25)."¹³⁶

¹³³Mark Rooker, *Leviticus*, p. 55, likened this sin to the "unforgivable sin" in the New Testament in that there was no forgiveness of it.

¹³⁴For other occasions on which Moses had to ask God for guidance in difficult cases, see 9:7-8; 27:1-11; and Lev. 24:10-23.

¹³⁵Sailhamer, p. 390.

¹³⁶Riggans, p. 125.

Visual reminders to keep the law 15:37-41

Perhaps God initiated this command in response to the incident of Sabbath-breaking just mentioned.

The Israelites were to wear tassels on the four corners of their upper outer garments (Deut. 22:12). The text does not explain the size of the tassels, but old pictures of tassels on garments that ancient Near Easterners wore show that they were about six inches long.

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

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

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

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

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

"The tassel with a thread of blue signified more than royalty or nobility, however. It also signified the priesthood."¹³⁷

The Israelite was to fasten the tassel to the garment with a blue thread, or it had to contain a blue thread. The blue color, as we noted in our study of the tabernacle coverings, symbolized heavenly origin and royalty. Thus God apparently wanted the blue thread to remind the Israelites of their holy calling as a kingdom of priests. These tassels reminded the Israelites of their privileged position in the world and their noble and holy calling.

The tassels were clearly a visual aid for the Israelites and probably produced a conditioned response in the minds of pious Jews (cf. Deut. 6:6-9). They did not bring to

¹³⁷Jacob Milgrom, "Of Hems and Tassels," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 9:3 (May-June 1983):61-65. This article also contains reproductions of ancient Near Eastern pictures of people wearing garments with tassels on them.

mind any one commandment but reminded the observer that he should observe all of God's laws. He was distinct by virtue of his calling as was the garment he observed. Perhaps God also chose the outer garment because the Israelites were as His outer garment by which the world recognized Him. His people were to be an adornment to Him (cf. Titus 2:10). Thus God specified something that would warn His people *before* they sinned; He did not just specify punishment *after* they sinned.

"There is an intentional selection behind the collections of laws found throughout the Pentateuch. The purpose of that selection appears clear enough. In reading through these laws we can readily see that God is concerned about every detail of human life. Nothing is too small or unimportant. It all has to be made available and dedicated to him."¹³⁸

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

The rebellion of Korah and his followers ch. 16

"As the laws increase and the constraints grow, the people seem less willing or less capable of following them. At this point in the narrative we see that the whole order of the priesthood is thrown open to direct confrontation. God's Word revealed at Sinai, which at first seemed so final and authoritative, is now being challenged on every side."¹³⁹

"In 16:1—17:28 (Eng. [17:]13), three stories illustrate the need for and legitimacy of the Aaronic priesthood [i.e., 16:1-35; 16:36-50; and ch. 17]. As there had been challenges to Moses' leadership in chs. 11—14, so here there are challenges to Aaron's."¹⁴⁰

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

16:1-3 The leaders of this rebellion were Korah—a Levite of the Kohathite branch of the tribe and thus a kinsman of Moses and Aaron—and Dathan, Abiram, and On who were Reubenites. Perhaps these Reubenites felt slighted that their tribe had lost the rights of the firstborn and wanted a larger role in the nation.¹⁴¹ These men gained the support of 250 men

¹³⁸Sailhamer, p. 391.

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Ashley, p. 295.

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 303.

(perhaps a round number) from the other tribes who were leaders among the Israelites.

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

The rebels attributed Moses and Aaron's prominence in the leadership of Israel to personal ambition rather than to obedience to God's commands.

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

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

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

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

"Anytime one begins so heavily to emphasize 'my ministry,' then such a one is in danger of standing in Korah's sandals."¹⁴²

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

¹⁴²Allen, p. 837.

Korah's rebellion so tragic: a misunderstanding of God's call as to privilege and not to service."¹⁴³

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

"Sheol, the abode of the dead, is pictured as lying immediately under the surface of the ground . . ."¹⁴⁴

"The point is that rebellion against those whom Yahweh has chosen is rebellion against him. This does not mean simply that leaders are always right. It says that *if* the leader is appointed by God, rebellion against the leadership is rebellion against God."¹⁴⁵

The "men who belonged to Korah" (v. 32) were apparently his followers since some if not all of his sons did not die with their father (cf. 26:58; 1 Chron. 6:18-22; 9:19).

God destroyed the 250 leaders with fire that proceeded from Himself, as He had dealt with Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:2).

16:36-50 The Lord created another visual aid to remind the Israelites that offering incense was a ministry of the priests only. The priests overlaid the altar of burnt offerings with a second layer of bronze that they hammered out of the rebels' censers (cf. Exod. 27:2).¹⁴⁶

"As we think about the notion of the 'holy,' we recognize that things are made holy in Scripture, not because people are holy, but because the things are presented to the Lord, who is holy. Since these wicked men presented their censers to the Lord, the censers are holy, despite the men's own wickedness."¹⁴⁷

God's judgment of Korah's company did not cause the congregation as a whole to submit to God's will through Moses and Aaron. The people charged Moses and Aaron with killing their leaders (v. 41). On the contrary, Moses had been responsible for God's sparing the nation through his intercession on several occasions. The fact that the people called

¹⁴³Ashley, p. 309.

¹⁴⁴G. Wenham, p. 137.

¹⁴⁵Ashley, p. 318.

¹⁴⁶See Jonathan Magonet, "The Korah Rebellion," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24 (October 1982):3-25.

¹⁴⁷Allen, p. 843.

Korah's company "the LORD's people" (v. 41) shows how they failed to appreciate what it really meant to be His people (cf. 11:29; Judg. 5:11; 1 Sam. 2:24; 2 Sam. 1:12; 6:21; 2 Kings 9:6; Ezek. 36:20; Zeph. 2:10).

Moses and Aaron fell on their faces when they heard God's intention to judge the whole congregation with death (vv. 43, 45). Since incense symbolizes prayer in Scripture (cf. Exod. 30:8; Ps. 141:2; Luke 1:10; Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4), Aaron apparently moved among the people interceding for them.

The plague (v. 46) was obviously a divine judgment involving sudden death, but more than this Moses did not reveal. A total of 14,700 people died (v. 49).

Why did Moses not intercede again here?

"All the motives which he had hitherto pleaded, in his repeated intercession that this evil congregation might be spared, were now exhausted. He could not stake his life for the nation, as at Horeb (Ex. xxxii. 32), for the nation had rejected him. He could not longer appeal to the honour of Jehovah among the heathen, seeing that the Lord, even when sentencing the rebellious race to fall in the desert, had assured him that the whole earth should be filled with His glory (chap. xiv. 20 sqq.). Still less could he pray to God that He would not be wrathful with all for the sake of one or a few sinners, as in chap. xvi. 22, seeing that the whole congregation had taken part with the rebels. In this condition of things there was but one way left of averting the threatened destruction of the whole nation, namely, to adopt the means which the Lord Himself had given to His congregation, in the high-priestly office, to wipe away their sins, and recover the divine grace which they had forfeited through sin,—viz. the offering of incense which embodied the high-priestly prayer, and the strength and operation of which were not dependent on the sincerity and earnestness of subjective faith, but had a firm and immovable foundation in the objective force of the divine appointment."¹⁴⁸

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

¹⁴⁸Keil and Delitzsch, 3:112.

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

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

"A man's rod was the sign of his position as ruler in the house and congregation; with a prince the rod became a sceptre, the insignia of rule (Gen. xlix. 10)."¹⁴⁹

"Almond blooms early with white blossoms and its fruits were highly prized (Gen. 43:11). White in Scripture symbolizes purity, holiness, and God Himself (e.g., Is. 1:18; Dn. 7:9; Rev. 20:11). Jeremiah associates the almond . . . with watching . . . (Je. 1:11-12). All these qualities were personified by Aaron and the tribe of Levi. They were the holy tribe *par excellence*, who represented Israel before God and God to Israel, and they were responsible for watching over the people by instructing them in the statutes of the Lord (Lv. 10:11)."¹⁵⁰

Aaron's rod fairly burst into flower and fruit because God gave it vital power. This would have helped the Israelites appreciate that God had chosen the Aaronic family because He had sovereignly chosen to impart His divine life to Aaron and his sons by His Spirit. Moses had symbolized this bestowal when he had consecrated Aaron to his office and anointed him with oil.

"The message was clear: just as God could make an apparently dead rod miraculously bear fruit, so he could elect a line of descendants like any other and enable it to render priestly service fruitfully."¹⁵¹

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

The people's terror (vv. 12-13) probably arose as a result of the miracles and judgments that had befallen the Israelites since Korah rebelled. God had vindicated His holiness, the people realized their sinfulness, and they were full of fear.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 3:114.

¹⁵⁰G. Wenham, p. 140. See also idem, "Aaron's Rod (Numbers 17:16-28)," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93:2 (1981):280-81.

¹⁵¹Maarsingh, p. 63.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"5. In contrast with the highly regulated, highly structured patterns demanded of the priests of the Hebrew economy, the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ today has a direct access to God through the Savior that is nearly unbelievable. We are all priests; we can come near the presence of the Lord without an intermediary. Yet our privilege as believer-priests can only really be appreciated against the background of priests in the biblical period."¹⁵²

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

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

¹⁵²Allen, p. 850.

God gave the Levites to the priests as their assistants to help them with certain aspects of the work of the sanctuary (v. 6).

Outsiders, non-priests, and Levites could not intrude on the priestly office or they would die (v. 7).

"The study of the cultic use of *qrb/ngs* demonstrates that its meaning goes beyond simple, physical approach to the more abstract amplifications: 'have access to,' 'be admitted to,' 'be associated with.' In prohibitions . . . it means 'encroach.'"¹⁵³

"A key phrase of this chapter is 'I give you' (18:7; cf. vv. 12, 19, 26, etc.). God takes care of His own."¹⁵⁴

18:8-13 God gave Aaron these instructions too (v. 8).

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

18:14-19 Everything placed under the ban (v. 14) and the first-born of man and beast that the people redeemed or offered (vv. 15-18) were "holy" offerings (vv. 10, 19). The "everlasting covenant of salt" (v. 19) was an indestructible covenant similar to salt (cf. 2 Chron. 13:5). The ancients used salt in the ritual of making some covenants in the Near East.

"At a meal in which a covenant between two parties was sealed, people in ancient times occasionally used salt to signify the incorruptible, firm, and lasting quality of the agreement."¹⁵⁵

"The meaning appears to have been that the salt, with its power to strengthen food and keep it from decay, symbolized the unbending truthfulness of that self-

¹⁵³Jacob Milgrom, "The Cultic Use of *qrb/ngs*," in *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 1:84.

¹⁵⁴Jensen, p. 77.

¹⁵⁵Maarsingh, p. 65.

surrender to the Lord embodied in the sacrifice, by which all impurity and hypocrisy were repelled."¹⁵⁶

God gave the priests five gifts: their office, a spirit of responsibility, helpers, every provision for earthly needs, and Himself.¹⁵⁷

- 18:20 Aaron, the high priest, received a special portion.
- 18:21-24 The tithes of the Israelites became the Levites' possession (vv. 21-24; cf. Lev. 27:30-33). God gave the instructions for receiving the tithes to Moses (v. 25).
- 18:25-32 The Levites were to give a tithe of the tithe they received from the people to the priests. This tithe was to include the best of what the other Israelites gave to them (vv. 30, 32).

"Whereas in heathen states, where there was an hereditary priestly caste, that caste was generally a rich one, and held a firm possession in the soil (in Egypt, for example; see at Gen. xlvii. 22), the Levites received no hereditary landed property in the land of Israel, but only towns to dwell in among the other tribes, with pasturage for their cattle (chap. xxxv.), because Jehovah, the God of Israel, would be their inheritance."¹⁵⁸

Had the Israelites been faithful in their tithing the Levites would have received about five times as much as ordinary Israelites (cf. Gen. 43:34). Unfortunately the Jews were not completely obedient to these laws.

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

¹⁵⁶*Unger's Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Covenant of Salt."

¹⁵⁷Jensen, pp. 78-79.

¹⁵⁸Keil and Delitzsch, 3:119.

ruler, who is anticipated already in the Pentateuch as a prophet, a priest, and a king."¹⁵⁹

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

God gave this law so the nation might maintain purity as the older generation died off in the wilderness. Its purpose was not to remove sin itself but to remove the uncleanness that death represented because of its connection with sin. It was especially appropriate that God gave this law after the death of the approximately 15,000 who died as a result of Korah's rebellion (ch. 16). Special provisions for cleansing were necessary in view of the large number of corpses.

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

The Israelites were to slay the animal outside the camp because of its connection with sin and death. The high priest was to observe the slaying making sure the person in charge did it properly. This was a very important sacrifice.

The sprinkling of the blood shows that this slaying was a sin offering. The animal died for the sin of the congregation (v. 4).

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

Cedar wood was not as subject to decay as most other woods and represented the continuance of life. It was also aromatic and was the best and most expensive wood known.¹⁶⁰ Hyssop stood for purification from corruption, and the priests used it to apply blood, as in the Passover ritual. Scarlet wool symbolized the strong vital energy connected with blood (cf. Lev. 14:6). All of these elements combined to signify all that strengthened life. The person in charge added these elements to the heifer ashes as the heifer was burning.

¹⁵⁹Sailhamer, p. 393.

¹⁶⁰Maarsingh, p. 68.

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

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

"Animals are clean and unclean, not because they necessarily will or will not make a person sick if they are used as food; they are clean and unclean primarily because God desired his people to live in a world of discrimination (see esp. Lev 11:44-47). We may look back from a twentieth-century understanding of infection and disease and remark, 'How kind it was of God that some of the animals he declared to be unclean to Israel are foods that might be conveyers of disease.' But the principal issue is distinction, discrimination, the marking out of that which is different from something else."¹⁶¹

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

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

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

"Hand washing and clothes washing with proper drying were prescribed in Numbers 19:19 . . . Verse 21 notes that 'anyone who touches the water of cleansing will be unclean till evening.' These provisions recognize that not only is washing important in mechanically cleansing one from microbes, but drying ('until evening') is also essential. Pathogenic microbes can live in moisture that remains on skin, dying when the skin is eventually dried. Furthermore

¹⁶¹Allen, pp. 861-62.

Numbers 19:13, 18-21 refers to the provision of 'sprinkling' the water, which indicates the need for running water, not stagnant water. Again this is a more effective means of cleansing, though more cumbersome.

"Did the average Israelite understand the significance of this preventive medical standard God imposed? No doubt he did not. However, God knew and in His wisdom cared for His people."¹⁶²

This sacrifice, then, was a kind of instant sin offering and provided for the cleansing of those who had become ceremonially unclean through contact with a corpse. The unclean person who refused to purify himself would suffer death (vv. 13, 20). To refuse cleansing was to repudiate the divine revelation concerning the relationship of sin and death. This sacrifice kept the Israelites free from the defilement that would hinder their fellowship with God (cf. 1 John 1:7-9; Heb. 9:13-14).¹⁶³

"This chapter provides an alternative remedy which marked the seriousness of the pollution caused by death, yet dealt with it without the cost and inconvenience of sacrifice. Instead, those who have come in contact with the dead can be treated with a concoction of water that contains all the ingredients of a sin offering."¹⁶⁴

"The writer's concern for the ritual of the red heifer at this point in the narrative . . . finds its roots in the earliest narratives of Genesis where death itself is viewed as the ultimate defilement of God's good creation. As such his point appears to be to show that just as in the beginning, so now among God's covenant people, death is the arch enemy."¹⁶⁵

The departure from Kadesh ch. 20

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

1. From Egypt to Sinai (Exod. 12—19)
2. From Sinai to Kadesh (Num. 11—12)
3. From Kadesh back to Kadesh—38 years of wilderness wandering (Num. 15—19)
4. From Kadesh to Transjordan (Num. 20—21)

¹⁶²Jay D. Fawver and R. Larry Overstreet, "Moses and Preventive Medicine," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:587 (July-September):280-81.

¹⁶³Jacob Milgrom, "The Paradox of the Red Cow (Num. xix)," *Vetus Testamentum* 31:1 (1981):62-72, believed this offering was thought to exorcise a demon that came with corpse contamination.

¹⁶⁴G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 146.

¹⁶⁵Sailhamer, p. 395.

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

"The focus of the narratives in chs. 13—19 has been the sin of the people and the trouble caused by it. In chs. 20—21 this focus is still present, to be sure (20:2-13; 21:4-9), but it is beginning to shift to victories given by Yahweh as the people approach Canaan (21:1-3, 21-35). It should be remembered that these victories were given to the old generation that was under a death sentence in the wilderness. A new day is coming for the Israelites."¹⁶⁶

Moses' rebellion at Kadesh 20:1-13

At the end of 37 years the Israelites returned to the wilderness of Zin and Kadesh. Kadesh was a large area of desert located on the edge of the wilderness of Zin. God had previously judged the older generation of Israelites for not believing Him (ch. 14). Now He judged Moses for the same thing. Miriam and Aaron also died in the wilderness for their sins. The leaders fell before the same temptation as the people.

"Failure to enjoy God's promises was the result of unbelief. At this point in the narrative the writer shows that it was not a failure to keep the law that led to their death in the wilderness."¹⁶⁷

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

The root of Moses' sin in disobeying God (v. 11) was unbelief (v. 12). Quite clearly this was not a failure to believe that God could or would provide water for the people. Rather it was a failure to believe that simple obedience to God's command was best (cf. Gen. 4:1-7).

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

"Faith is the correct response to God's word, whether it is a word of promise or a word of command."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶Ashley, p. 375.

¹⁶⁷Sailhamer, p. 397.

¹⁶⁸G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 151.

Instead of speaking to the rock (v. 8) Moses spoke to the Israelites (v. 10) "rashly" (Ps. 106:33; cf. Lev. 5:4). He struck the rock twice with the rod with which he had done many miracles (v. 11) as though this miracle required his power rather than simply the power of God.¹⁶⁹ Evidently Moses, in his frustration with the people, thought that he was the performer of the miracle rather than only God's instrument. This is a common error in modern ministry, and it still produces great frustration: thinking that we need to be manufacturers rather than simply distributors of blessing to others.¹⁷⁰

"The promise was that the moment the word was spoken to the lifeless rock, the miracle would occur before the eyes of all the people and the water would gush from the rock in amounts sufficient to quench the thirst of man and beast. This was God's intention, a change from his attitude in the case of earlier rebellions: here mercy won over judgment. To accept this kindness toward a sinful people demanded even more faith from Moses (especially when we recall Num. 16:15, in which we read that he asked God to turn away from the people who so seriously but falsely accused him). God's power and God's mercy—these are the two focal points that were to be brought once more to the attention of the people."¹⁷¹

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

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

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

"Judging from the passage alone, the faithlessness of Moses does not appear to have consisted in his striking the rock or in his harsh words but rather lies just out of reach somewhere in the numerous 'gaps' of the story. We should stress that this is not a result of a deficiency in the story. It rather appears to be part of the story's design. It is just at the point of recounting the nature of their sin that the author abbreviates the narrative and moves on to the divine speech (Num 20:12). Moreover, it is just this

¹⁶⁹The interpretation of M. Margalith (Windreich) in "The Transgression of Moses and Aaron—Num. 20:1-13," *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, p. 225, that, ". . . the short speech of verse 10b, not the hitting of the rock, constituted the actual transgression," is not borne out by the text.

¹⁷⁰For development of this insight, see Warren W. Wiersbe, *On Being a Servant of God*, pp. 5-8.

¹⁷¹Maarsingh, p. 71.

divine speech that 'fills the gap' with the word about faith, giving the story a sense far larger than that of its own immediate concerns. . . . The rebellion of Moses and Aaron (. . ., 20:24), which appears at some point to have been an important feature of the narrative, has been replaced with the focus on their faithlessness (. . ., 20:12). Such an interpretation has raised the actions of Moses and Aaron in the narrative to a higher level of theological reflection—the issue of faith versus obedience to the law. Their actions epitomize the negative side of the message of faith. Moses and Aaron, who held high positions under the law, did not enjoy God's gift of the land. They died in the wilderness because they did not believe."¹⁷²

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

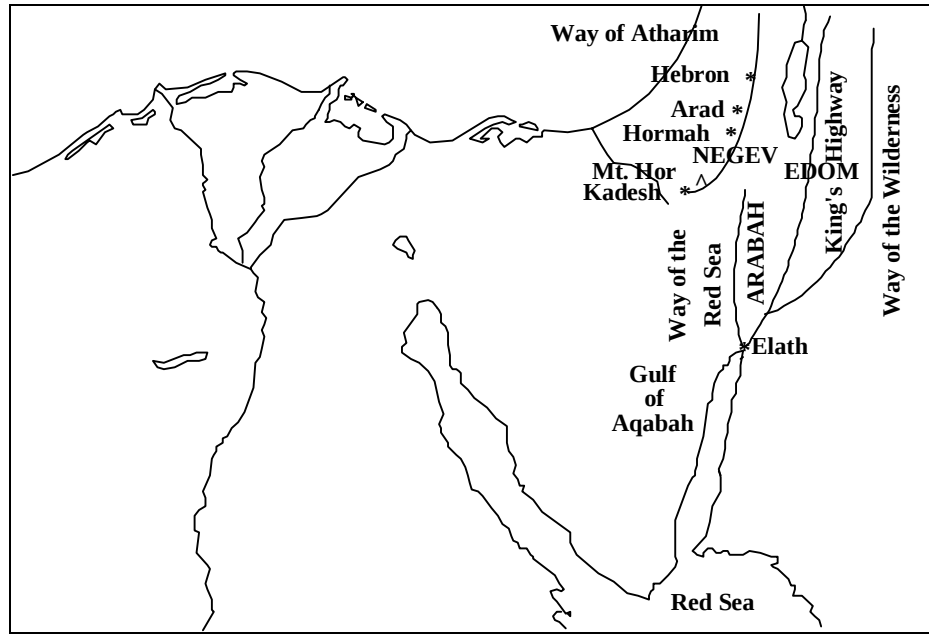
Meribah (Contention) is the name the Israelites gave the water that came out of the rock. It is also the name of the site where this incident took place (v. 13). The people had already named another place Meribah (Exod. 17:7). The present incident doubtless brought the former to memory.

In spite of Moses' disobedience God still provided for the people by giving them water. God blesses people even through His disobedient servants. Nevertheless this in no way justifies a light view of sin. Moses experienced severe discipline for his unfaithfulness to God.

"The lesson is clear: grace is never a ground for complacency or presumption. By our carelessness, by our sinful neglect, we can sin away forever some of the privileges of our calling—not salvation itself, but our opportunities for service, our possibility for usefulness, our contribution to the ongoing purposes of God."¹⁷³

¹⁷²John H. Sailhamer, "The Mosaic Law and the Theology of the Pentateuch," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (Fall 1991):258-60.

¹⁷³Philip, p. 225. Cf. Rom. 11:20.



The Edomites' resistance 20:14-21

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

The Edomites were Israel's "brother" (v. 14) in that they were the descendants of Esau.

The "king's highway" (vv. 17, 19) was a broad major thoroughfare through Edom that caravans and armies as well as private citizens travelled. It was part of a trade route connecting Damascus and Arabia.¹⁷⁴ The Israelites did not take this route.

Moses took an irenic approach in dealing with the Edomites because they were the Israelites' relatives. They were not Canaanites that God had commanded His people to attack and destroy.

The Edomites refused to let Israel pass. This antagonistic attitude characterized Edom's approach to Israel throughout the history of these two nations and finally drew God's judgment upon Edom (cf. Obad. 10-14).

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

¹⁷⁴G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 152.

"A close reading of these narratives shows that the pattern in the account of Israel's failure to believe (Nu 14) is repeated in this account of Moses' unbelief. The complaints of the people (14:1-4; 20:2-5) lead the Lord to conclude that Israel (14:11) and Moses (20:12) are lacking in faith. Moreover, both narratives are followed by an account of Israel's aborted attempt to gain immediate entrance into the Promised Land. In chapter 14, it was Israel's defeat by the Amalekites (14:40-45), and in the present passage it is Edom's refusal to let Israel pass through their land (20:14-21). In these various ways, the author seems intent on showing the similarities between Israel's failure of faith and that of Moses. Both failed to believe God and hence could not go into the land."¹⁷⁵

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

Mount Hor seems to have stood on the western border of Edom (v. 23).¹⁷⁶

Aaron died on the first day of the fifth month in Israel's fortieth year (33:37-38). He was 123 years old (33:39).

Before Aaron died, Moses formally removed his brother's high priestly vestments and clothed Eleazar, Aaron's son, with them. Israel now had a new high priest.¹⁷⁷

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

"So ends the dark chapter. In it has been recorded the death of a prophetess, the critical sin of Moses and Aaron, the refusal of negotiation, the death of Aaron, and the mourning of the people. The chapter has emphasized the limitations of man—even God's leaders! Now with a brighter spotlight on the grace and glory of God, Numbers resumes its story of advance."¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 399.

¹⁷⁶Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁷⁷Similarly before Moses died, God installed Joshua as Israel's new leader (cf. Deut. 34:9).

¹⁷⁸Jensen, p. 87.

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

25

The destruction of Arad 21:1-3

"Arad was a large town in the northern Negeb, about 17 miles . . . south of Hebron."¹⁷⁹

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

The Canaanites of Arad took the offensive against Israel. Perhaps they did so because 38 years earlier the Israelites had suffered defeat at Hormah (which means "destruction"). Hormah lay very near Arad. The Israelites had experienced this defeat when they sought to enter the land after God had sentenced them to wander in the wilderness for 38 more years (14:45).¹⁸⁰

"As being at Kadesh forms a framework for the wilderness wanderings, so does being at Hormah. After this victory at Hormah, where there had once been defeat, the Israelites are victorious regularly (21:21-35)."¹⁸¹

This was the Israelites' first victory over the Canaanites, and it was undoubtedly a great confidence builder. It came after the Israelites vowed to obey God completely by exterminating these Canaanites if He would give them victory as He had promised. In this vow the Israelites simply promised to obey God. The conquest of Canaan must have seemed more certain to the Israelites now than ever before.

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

¹⁷⁹G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 154.

¹⁸⁰See Ze'ev Herzog, Miriam Aharoni, and Anson Rainey, "Arad," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13:2 (March-April 1987):16-35; and Ruth Amiran, Rolf Goethert, and Ornit Ilan, "The Well at Arad," *ibid.*, pp. 40-44.

¹⁸¹Ashley, pp. 398-99.

The bronze snake 21:4-9

The Israelites next traveled to the southeast around the southern border of Edom. They took "the way of the Red Sea" (v. 4), a road to the town of Elath that stood at the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqabah.¹⁸²

This route took them through the Arabah. The Arabah was a low-lying plain that runs from north of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee), through that Sea, the Jordan Valley, and the Dead Sea, south to the Gulf of Aqabah. Steep mountain walls border the Arabah to the south of the Dead Sea.

It is, ". . . a horrible desert, with a loose sandy soil, and drifts of granite and other stones, where terrible sandstorms sometimes arise from the neighborhood of the Red Sea" ¹⁸³

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

The serpents that the Lord sent to discipline the people were "fiery" probably because their bite caused intense burning.¹⁸⁴ However poisonous snakes with red spots on their bodies still afflict the Bedouins in this desert.¹⁸⁵

God's discipline moved the Israelites to confess their sin and to request Moses' intercession (v. 7; cf. 11:2). As usual, this proved effective (v. 8).

The serpent that God told Moses to make was probably copper to resemble the color of the real snakes.

It was not a real snake but an image, ". . . in which the fiery serpent was stiffened, as it were, into dead brass, as a sign that the deadly poison of the fiery serpents was overcome in this brazen serpent." ¹⁸⁶

"I suggest that the clue to the symbolism should be sought in the general principles underlying the sacrifices and purificatory rites in the Old Testament. Animals are killed, so that sinful men who deserve to die may live. Blood which pollutes when it is spilled can be used to sanctify and purify men and articles. The ashes of a dead heifer cleanse those who suffer from the impurity caused by death. In all these rituals there is an inversion: normally polluting substances or actions may in a ritual context have the opposite effect and serve to purify. In the case of the copper serpent similar principles operate. Those inflamed and dying through the

¹⁸²See Denis Baly, "Elath, Ezion-geber, and the Red Sea," *Biblical Illustrator* 9:3 (Spring 1983):66-69.

¹⁸³Keil and Delitzsch, 3:138-39.

¹⁸⁴Ashley, p. 404; Keil and Delitzsch, 3:139; Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 157.

¹⁸⁵Keil and Delitzsch, 3:139.

¹⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 3:140.

bite of living snakes were restored to life by a dead reddish-coloured snake. It may be that copper was chosen not only because its hue matched the inflammation caused by the bites, but because red is the colour that symbolizes atonement and purification."¹⁸⁷

Rather than physically touching the substitute sacrifice, as God normally required, visual contact was all that was necessary in this case.

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

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

"The purpose of such parallels is to underscore the basic themes of the book. In both narratives, the writer emphasizes the necessity of the people's response of faith in the sign. They must look to the sign in faith before they can be delivered."¹⁸⁸

Jesus Christ identified the copper serpent as a type of Himself (John 3:14). Like Christ someone lifted this serpent up from the earth on a pole. Both Christ and this serpent were completely harmless as they hung on their poles. Furthermore if a fatally wounded person wanted deliverance, he or she had simply to look on the serpent or on Christ in faith relying on God's promise of salvation.¹⁸⁹

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

"The bread is a picture of Jesus; as the Bread of Heaven he is the proper nourisher of his people. The bronze snake is a picture of Jesus, who became sin for us as he hung on that awful tree. The manna had to be eaten. The snake had to be seen. The commands of Scripture are for doing. The manna was no good if left to rot. The metal snake would not avail if none looked at it. The manna and the snake are twin aspects of the grace of God."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷G. Wenham, *Numbers*, pp. 157-58.

¹⁸⁸Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 402

¹⁸⁹See James Van Oosting, "Moses, Hezekiah, and Yale's gang of four," *Reformed Journal* 33:11 (November 1983):7-8, for some comments on the hermeneutics of this passage.

¹⁹⁰Allen, p. 879.

The journey toward Moab 21:10-20

The list of stopping places Moses recorded here differs from the one in 33:41-49. Apparently neither list is complete but both are selective. Archaeologists have not yet identified most of the sites Moses mentioned here. The route of the Israelites was around Edom in a counter-clockwise direction until they came to the Wadi Zered (v. 12).¹⁹¹ A wadi (Arabic, Heb. *nahal*) was a river or stream bed that was dry during most of the year but became a rushing torrent during the rainy season. The Israelites took the Way of the Wilderness, a route that ran generally parallel to but east of the King's Highway (20:17, 19).

The Zered flowed westward, in the rainy season, into the Arabah near the south end of the Dead Sea. It constituted the boundary between Edom and Moab.

Moving farther north, through Moab, the nation crossed the Arnon Wadi that feeds into the east side of the Dead Sea about at its mid-point north to south. This river was the border between the Moabites and the Amorites (v. 13). This crossing brought Israel to the threshold of the Promised Land.

The Amorites were, ". . . the mightiest of all the tribes of the Canaanites."¹⁹²

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

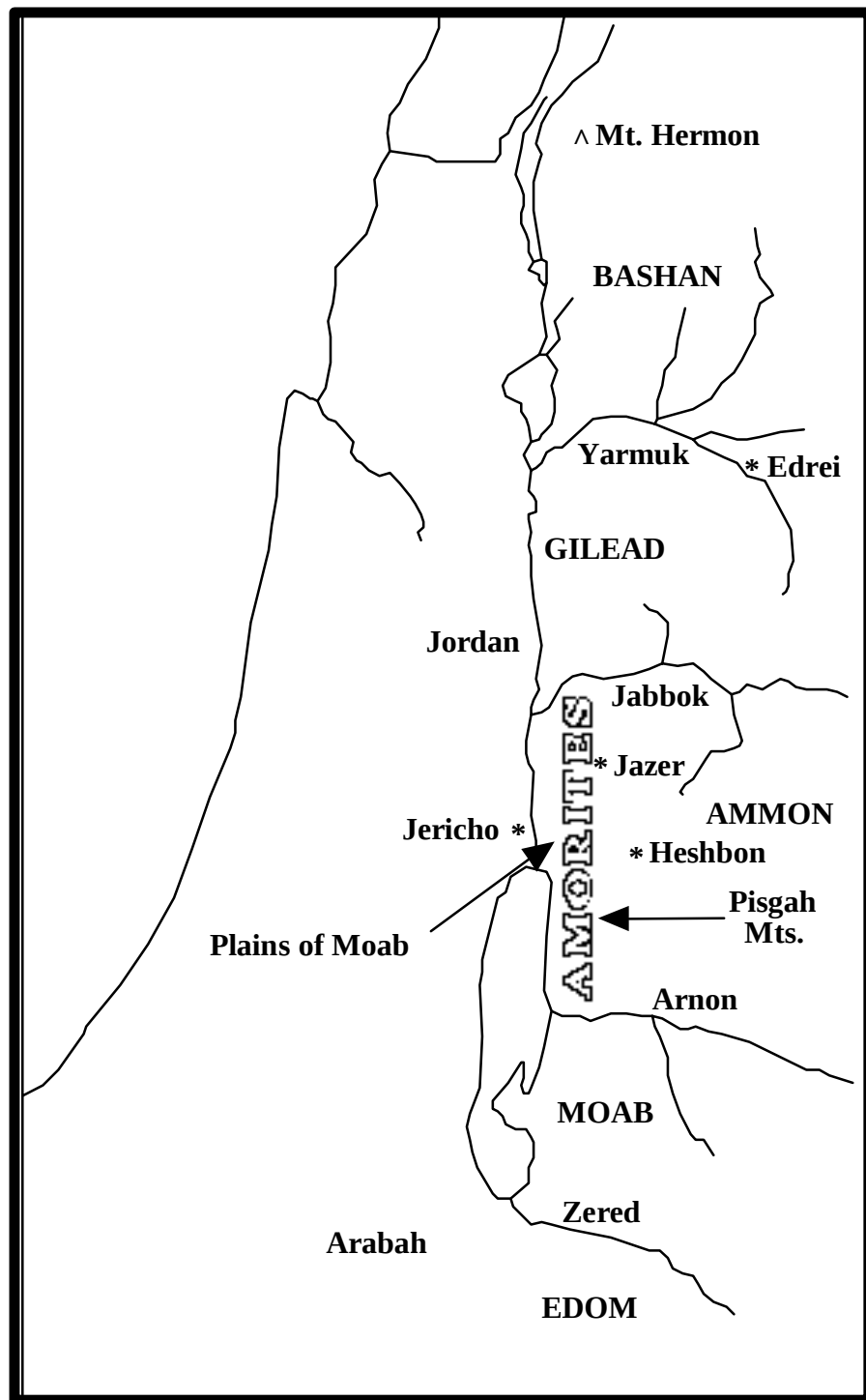
The "Book of the Wars of the Lord" (v. 14) was a collection of songs that commemorated God's glorious acts on behalf of the Israelites. Apparently Moses or one of his contemporaries wrote or edited it. The fragment of one of these songs that the writer included here (vv. 14-15) describes the Arnon. The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

At Beer (lit. Well) God provided water for the people by instructing them to dig wells (vv. 16-18). This proved to be another occasion of great rejoicing as God provided for His needy people.

Moses mentioned several other sites as camping places before the nation settled down on the tableland of the Pisgah range of mountains. This area lay east of the place where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea. The "wasteland" (Jeshimon) is the desert directly to the northeast of the Dead Sea.

¹⁹¹See J. Maxwell Miller, "The Israelite Journey through (around) Moab and Moabite Toponymy," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108:4 (1989):577-95.

¹⁹²Keil and Delitzsch, 3:145. See Siegfried Schwantes, "The Amorites as Rulers of Mesopotamia," chapter 4 in *A Short History of the Ancient Near East*, for more information about these powerful and influential people.



Israel's defeat of Sihon 21:21-32

This account fits chronologically after 21:13. It records two great victories that God gave His people over two of the mighty Amorite kings.

"The term Amorite has various meanings in the OT: Canaanites generally (e.g., Gen. 15:16), inhabitants of the land west of the Jordan (e.g., Josh. 5:1), inhabitants of the regions of Judah (e.g., Josh. 10:5-6), inhabitants of the Negeb and the region to the southeast of the Dead Sea (e.g., Gen. 14:7), and very often, as here, the inhabitants east of the Jordan under the rule of Sihon and Og . . ." ¹⁹³

Moses made his peaceful request for permission to pass through Sihon's territory and into the Promised Land (v. 22) realizing that Sihon would not allow this (cf. Deut. 2:24-26). ¹⁹⁴

" . . . this was done simply to leave the decision of his fate in his own hand . . ." ¹⁹⁵

Sihon then attacked Israel (v. 23), but Israel defeated his army (v. 24). ¹⁹⁶ This victory gave the Israelites possession of all of Sihon's territory. It extended south to the Arnon and north to the Jabbok that flows into the Jordan River from the east about halfway between the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee) and the Dead Sea. It included Jazer, a town that the Israelites defeated (v. 32).

This victory over one of the most powerful of the Canaanite city-states, Heshbon, inspired poets in Israel who wrote proverbs (v. 27) to compose songs commemorating God's deliverance (vv. 27-30).

"The summons to come to Heshbon and build this ruined city again [v. 27], was not addressed to the Israelites, but to the conquered Amorites, and is to be interpreted as ironical . . ." ¹⁹⁷

Chemosh (v. 29) was the chief Moabite and Ammonite deity and was similar to the Canaanite god Baal. ¹⁹⁸

Israel's defeat of Og 21:33-35

Heshbon was a city, but Bashan was a territory. Bashan lay north of the Yarmuk Wadi. Evidently at the time of Israel's conquest Og controlled the territory south of the Yarmuk

¹⁹³Ashley, pp. 418-19.

¹⁹⁴Compare Moses' request that Pharaoh would let the Israelites go in Exodus 5:1 (cf. Exod. 3:19).

¹⁹⁵Keil and Delitzsch, 3:150.

¹⁹⁶See George W. Coats, "Conquest Traditions in the Wilderness Theme," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95:2 (1976):177-90, for further discussion of Moses' lack of prominence in Israel's battles during this period. Moses had very little to do with the acquisition of any land for Israel.

¹⁹⁷Keil and Delitzsch, 3:152.

¹⁹⁸See Deuteronomy 2:16-37 for another account of this victory. John Van Seters, "The Conquest of Sihon's Kingdom: A Literary Examination," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91:2 (June 1972):182-97, argued that Numbers 21:21-25 derives from conflation of Deut. 2:26-37 and Judg. 11:19-26. John R. Bartlett, "The Conquest of Sihon's Kingdom: A Literary Re-examination," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97:3 (September 1978):347-51, countered that the Numbers passage is the source of the other two accounts.

as far as the Jabbok, the area known as Gilead.¹⁹⁹ Og's domain lay north of the Jabbok Wadi and extended north as far as Mt. Hermon, about 60 miles north of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee). The town of Edrei (v. 33) stood near the border of Bashan.²⁰⁰

The Israelites moved their camp from Mt. Pisgah (21:20) farther west and a little north to the plains of Moab (v. 1) between Beth-jeshimoth and Abel-shittim (33:49). This site was closer to the Jordan River and opposite Jericho, which stood about five miles west of the Jordan. The people stayed at this location until they crossed the Jordan under Joshua's leadership (Josh. 3:1). The remaining events Moses recorded in Numbers and all those he penned in Deuteronomy took place here.

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

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

Balak's arrangement with Balaam ch. 22

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

Israel's victories over the two mighty Amorite kings filled Balak, the King of Moab, with fear (vv. 5-6). He allied with Midian and sent for Balaam, a famous magician, to curse the Israelites. Balaam's town, Pethor (v. 5), was probably the Mesopotamian village of Pitru by the Euphrates River (cf. Deut. 23:4).

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

"As a biblical character . . . Balaam appears to be neither fish nor fowl."²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 89.

²⁰⁰See Deuteronomy 3:1-17 for a fuller description of this victory.

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

"As the old saying goes, 'The Lord can strike a mighty blow with a crooked stick,' . . ." ²⁰²

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

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

Nevertheless Balaam knew Yahweh, submitted to Him, and received revelations from Him (22:8, 13, 18-20, 38; 23:5, 12, 16; 24:1, 13). There are many indications in the narrative that Balaam genuinely feared Yahweh. He seems to have been sincerely sympathetic with the Israelites, and he praised them (23:10).

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

"Balaam is the pagan counterpart to Moses the man of God. The recovery of prophetic texts of Balaam in Aramaic from the sixth century at Deir-'Allah in Jordan shows how very

²⁰¹Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch* . . . , p. 405.

²⁰²Ashley, pp. 435, 436.

famous this man was in the ancient Near East, even centuries after his death."²⁰³

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

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

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

"Balak believed, in common with the whole of the ancient world, in the real power and operation of the curses, anathemas, and incantations pronounced by priests, soothsayers, and *goetoe*."²⁰⁴

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

"The custom of cursing an enemy before battle was widespread in the ancient world"²⁰⁵

"In the ancient Near East it was believed that an enemy could be combatted in two ways: with arms or by means of incantations, and if possible by means of a combination of the two. The incantations are based on the concept that a

²⁰³Allen, p. 887. See also Jacob Hoftijzer, "The Prophet Balaam in a 6th-Century Aramaic Inscription," *Biblical Archaeologist* 39:1 (March 1976):11-17; "Prophecy of Balaam found in Jordan," *Bible and Spade* 6:4 (Autumn 1977):121-24; and Andre Lamaire, "Fragments from the Book of Balaam Found at Deir Alla," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 11:5 (September-October 1985):27-39.

²⁰⁴Keil and Delitzsch, 3:165.

²⁰⁵Philip, p. 243.

people and its deity constitute a unit; they seek to force, by means of various kinds of magic, the deity of the enemy to withhold his power from his people. Thus the enemy will be powerless and become an easy prey for the opponent. Moab does not dare use the first means, since Israel has already proven to be superior in military power to Sihon, whom Moab had been forced to acknowledge as their superior in the past. This leaves only the second means; they must find the kind of man who in the Euphrates-Tigris valley is called a *baru* ('seer'). The *baru* belongs to the priestly class, and his specialty is 'seeing' what will happen on the basis of phenomena that escape the common person, but are found e.g., in the liver of a ritually slaughtered animal, or in the configuration of drops of oil on water, or in the stars, or in the shape of the clouds. Such *barus* were believed to be able to influence the will of the gods because of their secret knowledge and mysterious manipulations, and to force the gods to do, or not to do, a given thing."²⁰⁶

Had Balaam been completely faithful to Yahweh he would have sent the messengers home and refused to entertain them again (vv. 7-14). Unfortunately his love for reward led him to compromise later.

". . . from the early part of the narrative, when he first encounters the true God in visions, and in the humorous narrative of the journey on the donkey, Balaam begins to learn what for him was a strange, bizarre, even incomprehensible lesson: An encounter with the God of reality was fundamentally different than anything he had ever known."²⁰⁷

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

1. Extispicy was the examination of the entrails of a sacrificed sheep by a trained specialist to determine messages from the gods. The intricate arrangements of the internal organs are what believers in this form of divination regarded as indicative of divine revelation.
2. Astrology studied the arrangements of the moon, sun, meteors, planets, and fixed stars to discover the future. Eclipses were particularly significant.

²⁰⁶A. Noordtjiz, *Numbers*, p. 199. See also Morris Jastrow Jr., *Aspects of Religious Belief and Practice in Babylonia and Assyria*, p. 162-74.

²⁰⁷Allen, p. 887.

3. Augury was the study of the appearance, movements, and behavior of birds. The seers supposed the direction and manner of flight of birds was revelatory.
4. Kleromancy was divination by means of lots. The various configurations of symbolic objects, actors, and areas yielded a binary ("yes" or "no") answer to a given question.
5. Oneiromancy was revelation by dreams that sometimes contained verbal communication from a god or non-verbal communication. In the latter type certain colors, animals, or activities corresponded to types of misfortune, happiness, or success.

In all the types of divination, fortunetellers used tricks to deceive and impress their clients. They often clothed their predictions in mysterious ambiguous language to cover possible error. Devout Israelites were to reject divination as a way of discovering the likely outcome of events and to rely on God to make known what He wanted them to know.²⁰⁸

Balaam's mind had apparently been dwelling on the reward Balak's messengers had mentioned since he named his price in a clever way (vv. 18-20). He would not go for a large sum, but when his visitors offered a sum larger than what he had mentioned would be inadequate, he reconsidered (v. 18).

God evidently allowed Balaam to go with the messengers because He intended to bless Israel (v. 20). God had previously prohibited him from going (v. 12) because He would not curse Israel. The change was due to God's yielding to Balaam's desire.²⁰⁹ Balaam was aware that he must be obedient in revealing God's message whether for good or ill (v. 20). This conviction apparently came to him as a result of God's changed permission. God seems to have been teaching Balaam by these two words that He is the true God who is flexible but all-powerful. Balaam was learning that Yahweh was not like the lesser spirits with whom he had dealt previously.

"The story of Balaam is thus an example of the folly of attempting to destroy the eternal blessing of the people of the Lord."²¹⁰

²⁰⁸See Harry A. Hoffner Jr., "Ancient Views of Prophecy and Fulfillment: Mesopotamia and Asia Minor," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30:3 (September 1987):257-65.

²⁰⁹Compare God's yielding to Moses' intercessory prayers and God giving the Israelites meat.

²¹⁰Allen, p. 888.

22:21-41 Balaam was sensitive to the spirit world. Either he did not sense the presence of the Angel of the Lord or his greed had blinded him to the Angel's presence.

The Angel had drawn his sword (v. 23) symbolic of God's wrath against Balaam for acting as he was doing (cf. Gen. 3:24; Exod. 12:12).

God finally caught Balaam's attention by speaking through the donkey (v. 28; cf. 1 Cor. 1:27). Then he saw the Angel and bowed in submission before Him (v. 31).

"... even a beast is more capable of discerning things from the higher world, than a man blinded by sinful desires."²¹¹

Hopefully Balaam made the connection between his own lack of insight and his donkey's ability to discern God's will.

"We see the prophet Balaam as a blind seer, seeing less than the dumb animal. . . . The long shadow of Moses falls across the pages of the Balaam story even though Moses is never named once. Moses spoke face to face with God (see ch. 12); Balaam does not even know that God is near—but his donkey does!"²¹²

Why did Balaam answer his donkey as though he normally conversed with it (v. 29)? Perhaps spirits had spoken to him through animals previously. Probably the donkey exasperated him to the point that he answered before he realized what he was doing.

"The donkey's acts and words anticipate the problems Balaam is about to face. The ass was caught three times between the angel's sword and Balaam's stick. Soon Balaam will find himself trapped between Balak's demands and God's prohibitions. Through his third encounter with God, Balaam was reminded that God wields a sword and that disobedience means death. So he goes on his way fully committed to declaring God's words rather than submitting to Balak's wishes (35)."²¹³

"The Lord tells Balaam to continue on his journey but to 'speak only what I tell you' (v. 35). This is the point of the whole chapter: Balaam the pagan mantic will not be able to speak cursing as he had planned. Instead, he would be the

²¹¹Keil and Delitzsch, 3:173.

²¹²Allen, p. 893.

²¹³G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 171.

most surprised of all; he would be the most remarkable instrument of God in the blessing of his people, Israel."²¹⁴

Some ancient and modern interpreters have pointed out the similarities and differences between the stories of Balaam's donkey in this pericope and Abraham's binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:1-19). The stories appear in inverse form as a reflection in a mirror. God through Moses may have subtly contrasted Balaam with Abraham to put Balaam in a bad light and to glorify Abraham.²¹⁵

Balak was a bit put out with Balaam for delaying his arrival. He assumed Balaam's hesitancy was due to doubt concerning Balak's ability to pay him (v. 37).

The sacrifices (v. 40) were probably to secure the favor of Balak's gods.

"The pieces given to Balaam presumably would have included the livers; for as a *baru* diviner, Balaam was a specialist in liver divination."²¹⁶

Balak assumed that Balaam would be more susceptible to receiving supernatural power and it would be more effective if he had Israel in view. This is why he took Balaam to places where he could see Israel.

"In order to lay a spell on a people, it was considered necessary to be able to see them, if only in part."²¹⁷

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

Verse 41 contains one of the first references to Baal worship in the Old Testament.

"Israel struggled with Baal and his worshippers from the beginning to the end of her national history. Baal worship was the most serious challenge and threat to the worship of Yahweh of all the pagan religions in the ancient Near East. This was true because some similarities and some vast differences existed between Baal and Yahweh."²¹⁸

²¹⁴Allen, p. 894.

²¹⁵See Jonathan D. Safren, "Balaam and Abraham," *Vetus Testamentum* 38:1 (January 1988):105-13.

²¹⁶Allen, p. 895.

²¹⁷Maarsingh, p. 84.

²¹⁸Ralph L. Smith, "Baal," *Biblical Illustrator* 10:2 (Winter 1984):15.

Balaam's seven oracles chs. 23—24

"Chapters 23 and 24 are two of the brightest chapters in the book of Numbers. Scores of wonderful things are said about Israel, mainly prophetic. The dark sins of the past were forgotten; only happy deliverance from Egypt was cited."²¹⁹

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

"The most arresting element of the introductory section is in the words 'God met with him' (v. 4) and 'the LORD put a message in Balaam's mouth' (v. 5). Despite the pagan and unsavory actions of this ungodly man, the Lord deigns to meet with him and to speak through him. This is utterly remarkable. We often say that God will never use an unclean vessel. This is not quite accurate. God may use whatever vessel he wishes; the issue concerns what happens to an unclean vessel when God has finished using it for his purposes."²²⁰

Aram (v. 7) is Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. (Remember Paddan-aram from Genesis?)

Israel was not reckoned among the nations (v. 9) because of her divine vocation in the earth that set her apart from all other peoples.

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

"The account of Pharaoh's first attempt [to suppress God's blessing of Israel in Egypt] (Ex 1:11-14) is intended to show that 'the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread' (Ex 1:12). In his first oracle Balaam focused precisely on this point: 'How can I curse those whom God had not cursed?' (Nu 22[sic]:8), and he

²¹⁹Jensen, p. 99.

²²⁰Allen, p. 896.

concluded by stressing the phenomenal growth of God's people: 'Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?' (22[sic]:10)."²²¹

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

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

23:13-26 The new site afforded a better view of Israel, though the whole nation was still not in view. Balak repeated the same ritual of sacrifice.

God does not change His ultimate purposes or go back on His solemn promises. He does, of course, respond to the words and actions of people by adjusting His plans. It is from God's larger purposes that He does not "repent" (v. 19).²²² The point is that God is not fickle. No one can induce Him to curse those whom He has chosen to bless.

"Balaam is constantly shifting, prevaricating, equivocating, changing—he is himself the prime example of the distinction between God and man."²²³

"It may be of interest to note that Pharaoh's plans were stymied by the apparent deception of the Hebrew midwives and that in Balaam's second oracle he states, 'God is not a man, that he should lie' (Nu 23:19)."²²⁴

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

²²¹Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 407.

²²²See Thomas L. Constable, "What Prayer Will and Will Not Change," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 99-113; idem, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer*, pp. 147-52; Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (October-December 1995):387-99; idem, "Does God Deceive?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:617 (January-March 1998):11-28; Ashley, p. 478.

²²³Allen, p. 901.

²²⁴Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 407.

"Only in the family is the sinfulness of the people addressed. Since Yahweh the King is in their midst, they are invincible from outside attack."²²⁵

Israel would be victorious in battle as well as enjoy God's blessing (v. 24; cf. Gen. 49:9; Mic. 5:8). This was the opposite of what Balak wanted to hear.

Since Balaam's curses had turned out to be blessings Balak instructed Balaam to say nothing rather than continue to prophesy.

This oracle, as the first, began with a criticism of Balak's theological assumption that people can manipulate God. In this oracle Balaam saw Israel blessed and God as King walking among His people (v. 21). The Exodus was the supreme example of God's care for Israel (v. 22). Israel's future would be bright just as her past had been (vv. 23-24). Balaam also alluded to Israel's possession of the *land* as God had promised Abraham (v. 26).²²⁶

23:27—24:14 Still hopeful Balak took Balaam to a third site from which he could view the whole of the Israelite camp. Again he offered sacrifices as before.

Balaam had learned that God would bless Israel even though Balak had not. Consequently this time he did not seek indications of the will of God in omens as he had done previously (v. 1). He simply proclaimed the message the Holy Spirit revealed to him (v. 2).

Balaam intended his opening words (vv. 3-4) to impress upon Balak that the Almighty God had inspired his oracle.

The phrase "falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered" (found also in v. 16), ". . . has usually been interpreted as describing the particular state in which the prophet-seer received his revelations (e.g., that he was in a prophetic trance or sleep . . . or was falling down in awe, or in the overpowering presence of the spirit of prophecy . . .)." ²²⁷

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

Balaam pictured Israel as a man carrying two buckets overflowing with water (v. 7). Water was the source of material prosperity and blessing in

²²⁵Allen, p. 902.

²²⁶For more detailed study of the first two oracles, see Angelo Tosato, "The Literary Structure of the First Two Poems of Balaam (Num. xxiii 7-10, 18-24)," *Vetus Testamentum* 29:1 (January 1979):98-106.

²²⁷J. M. Allegro, "The Meaning of *nophel* in Numbers xxiv. 4, 16," *Expository Times* 65 (July 1954):317.

the hot and arid Near East. Israel's seed would enjoy the richest blessing (i.e., would grow up beside many waters).

"In an ironic reversal of the evil intended by Pharaoh's order to cast the seed of Abraham into the river, Balaam's third oracle uses the well-watered gardens that spread out along the banks of a river to speak of the abundance of Israel's 'seed.' A literal reading of Balaam's remark in Numbers 24:7 is 'Their seed is in the abundant waters' . . . Thus what was once the intended means for the destruction of the promised seed, that is, the 'abundant waters,' has now become the poetic image of God's faithfulness to his promise."²²⁸

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

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

"The writer's purpose appears to be to view the reign of the future king in terms taken from God's great acts of salvation in the past. The future is going to be like the past. What God did for Israel in the past is seen as a type of what he will do for them in the future when he sends his promised king."²²⁹

"The stunning climax is in the blessing of God on all who bless Israel [v. 9; cf. v. 17; Gen. 12:3; 27:29; 49:9]. This, of course, takes us back to the original promise of God to Abram. The irony cannot be missed by Balaam or by any who hear his words. In his actions he brings a curse on his own head, even as he speaks blessing!"²³⁰

Balak sent Balaam home without pay because he failed to produce the curse Balak had hired him to deliver.

²²⁸Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch* . . . , p. 407.

²²⁹ibid., p. 408.

²³⁰Allen, p. 907.

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

"Like Pharaoh before him, Balak also made three attempts to thwart God's blessing for Israel (23:1-12, 13-26; 23:27—24:9), and each attempt was turned into a blessing (23:11-12, 25-26; 24:10-11)."²³¹

24:15-19 Before Balaam departed he gave Balak four more revelations from God. They dealt with the future of Israel, Moab, and Israel's other neighbors. They were entirely futuristic in their prophecies. Each one began with the phrase "took up his discourse and said." In all Baalam made seven discourses that Moses recorded in the text.

The fourth oracle dealt with Israel, Moab, and Edom. Balaam seemed to sense that what he predicted would take place in the distant future: "I see him, *but not now*, . . ." (v. 17).

Saul and David partially fulfilled these prophecies. However Jewish and Christian interpreters have seen them as looking beyond the early monarchy to Messiah at His first and second advents.

The "star" (v. 17) was a common symbol for a king in biblical and non-biblical ancient Near Eastern literature (cf. Isa. 14:12; Ezek. 32:7; Rev. 22:16).²³² This identification finds support in the reference to the "scepter" in the next line (cf. Gen. 49:10; Amos 1:5, 8; Ps. 45:6). One wonders if it might have been this prophecy that was in the minds of the three wise men who came from Balaam's country to Bethlehem to look for the promised King of the Jews (Matt. 2:1-2).

"If . . . we compare Balaam's prophesy of the star . . . and the sceptre . . . with the prediction of the patriarch Jacob, of the sceptre that should not depart from Judah, till the *Shiloh* came whom the nations would obey (Gen. xlix. 10), it is easy to observe that Balaam not only foretold more clearly the attitude of Israel to the nations of the world, and the victory of the kingdom of God over every hostile kingdom of the world; but that he also proclaimed the Bringer of Peace expected by Jacob at the end of the days to be a mighty ruler, whose sceptre would break in pieces and destroy all the enemies of the nation of God."²³³

²³¹Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch* . . . , p. 406.

²³²Riggins, p. 186; Merrill, "Numbers," p. 244.

²³³Keil and Delitzsch, 3:201.

"An interesting implication of the parallels presented here between the account of the birth of Moses in Exodus 2 and the announcement of the 'star' to arise from the family of Jacob in Numbers 24 is that Moses thus appears to be portrayed in these narratives as a prototype of the 'star of Jacob.' Such a view of Moses is consistent with the fact that elsewhere in the Pentateuch Moses is cast as a figure of the coming king (Dt 33:5) and prophet (Dt 18 and 34). This is also consistent with the fact that later biblical writers often saw in Moses a picture of the future Messiah (e.g., Hos 2:2)."²³⁴

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

24:20 This oracle deals with the Amalekites who lived in southern Canaan and the Sinai peninsula and were implacable foes of Israel (cf. Exod. 17:8-16; Num. 14:43-45; Judg. 6:3, 33; et al.). Saul and David both defeated the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:18; 30:17), but this nation finally suffered complete destruction in King Hezekiah's time in fulfillment of this prophecy (1 Chron. 4:43).

24:21-22 The Kenites, who were identical to or part of the Midianites, were Israel's neighbors to the southwest of the Dead Sea (cf. 10:29; Judg. 1:16; 1 Sam. 15:6; 27:10; 30:29). The Asshurites who lived in the northern Sinai (Gen. 25:3, 18; 2 Sam. 2:9) and the Assyrians eventually defeated them. "Asshur" may refer to either or both of these nations. Probably Balaam prophesied concerning the future great Assyrian Empire.

"Why the Kenites come under attack here is not sure, except that it is possible that they became associated with the Midianites who come under the scourge of Israel (Num 31). The mention of Assyria is also a surprise, as its ascendancy to power in the ancient Near East was centuries

²³⁴Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, pp. 406-7.

away from Balaam's day; yet Assyria was known as a powerful city-state even in Abraham's day."²³⁵

24:23-25 The final prophetic oracle deals with the overthrow of other powers of the ancient world. "Kittim" refers to Cyprus as representative of western powers (the Philistines, Greeks, Romans, and others at various times). "Asshur" here probably refers to the eastern Semites including the Assyrians. "Eber" includes the western Semites descended from Eber (Gen. 10:21) who settled in Canaan excluding the Israelites. Thus verse 24 is a very broad prophecy ranging over thousands of years foretelling the ultimate destruction of these Semites by western powers. Final fulfillment awaits the Tribulation period and the second advent of Messiah.

Balaam returned to "his place," perhaps in Ammon or Mesopotamia (31:8, 16; Josh. 13:22).²³⁶

In summary, the first three oracles were a reconfirmation of the Abrahamic promises to Israel and a testimony to their partial fulfillment thus far in Israel's history.

Oracle 1:	seed promise (23:10)
Oracle 2:	land promise (23:24)
Oracle 3:	blessing promise (24:9)

In each case the allusion to the promise concludes these oracles. The writer showed that God's promise to bless those nations that blessed Abraham's descendants and curse those who cursed them was reliable. The key to the future prosperity of Israel's neighbor nations was their treatment of God's chosen people.

The fourth through seventh oracles differ from the others in that they looked farther down the corridors of time. They prophesied the success of Israel in the years ahead culminating in Israel's ultimate glory under her great Messiah's reign.

"Not only do the Balaam narratives play an important role in developing the themes of the Abrahamic covenant, but they also serve as an *inclusio* to the Exodus-wilderness narratives. That is, the Balaam narratives restate the central themes of these narratives at their conclusion in a way that parallels the statement of these themes at their beginning.

"The Balaam story, which lies at the close of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, parallels many of the events and ideas of the story of Pharaoh at the beginning of the book of Exodus."²³⁷

²³⁵Allen, p. 912.

²³⁶See idem, "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles," in *Tradition and Testament*, pp. 79-119. For a sermon on Balaam, see John Marshall, "The Prophet Balaam," *The Banner of Truth* 275-76 (August-September 1986):41-54.

²³⁷Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 43.

Israel's final rebellion and the termination of the older generation ch. 25

This chapter contains one of the great failures of Israel that followed one of its great blessings.²³⁸ As God was preparing to bless His people they were preparing to disobey Him.

"So now we come to the ultimate rebellion of Israel in the desert. The time is the end of the forty-year period of their desert experience. The place is the staging area for the conquest of the land of Canaan. The issue is that of apostasy from the Lord by participation in the debased, sexually centered Canaanite religious rites of Baal worship—that which would become the bane of Israel's experience in the land. This chapter is an end and a beginning. It marks the end of the first generation; it also points to the beginning of a whole new series of wicked acts that will finally lead to Israel's punishment But this chapter is unique in the record of the experience of Israel in their move from Sinai to Moab—it describes their involvement in the worship of another deity [cf. Exod. 32]."²³⁹

"The chapter is placed between the Balaam oracles and the second census account for theological and literary reasons. In relation to the Balaam oracles it shows that, even while God was blessing Israel through Balaam on the heights of Peor, below on the plains of Moab Israel was showing its weak and sinful character. The parallel between this incident and that of the Torah at Sinai and the golden calf (Exod. 20—32) is obvious."²⁴⁰

25:1-5 The Moabites and Midianites were partners in the spiritual and sexual seduction of the Israelites. Ironically the Midianites, among whom Moses had found refuge from Pharaoh and from whom he had taken his wife, became one of the instigators of Israel's major religious apostasy since she left Sinai. The plan to curse Israel had failed, so now these enemies undertook a second approach that proved successful.²⁴¹ In chapters 22—24 the Moabites took the lead in overthrowing Israel and Midian played a minor role, but in this chapter the Midianites take the lead with the Moabites supporting them. The Moabites seduced the Israelites to idolatry. Balaam had counseled them to intermarry with the Israelites (31:16). The princes of these people led this plot. Cozbi (v. 15) was the daughter of a Midianite prince. The worship of Moab's gods involved sacred prostitution and eating sacrifices offered to the dead (Ps. 106:28).

²³⁸Compare the giving of the Mosaic Law and the making of the golden calf, the consecration of Aaron and the failure of his sons, etc.

²³⁹Allen, "Numbers," pp. 914-15.

²⁴⁰Ashley, p. 515.

²⁴¹Compare Pharaoh's three plans to suppress the Israelites in Egypt (Exod. 1).

"It was the assumption of the [Baal Peor] cult that the fertility of people, cattle, and crops depended on the sexual linkage of a god and goddess. By imitating this union of the gods, men and women would seek to induce the gods to grant a greater measure of fertility. Such cultic practices were common in all of the nations surrounding the Israelites."²⁴²

This violation of the heart of the Mosaic Covenant, which demanded total and exclusive allegiance to Yahweh, resulted in a plague that killed 24,000 people (v. 9; cf. Exod. 32:35). To stop the plague God ordered the making of atonement by sacrificing the leaders within Israel. Since the whole nation had sinned God executed punishment on its leaders who stood for the people and should have restrained their apostasy. Israel's judges carried out this order (v. 5).

"As the animals and birds had been cut in half in the covenant ceremony at the beginnings of Israel's history (Gen 15:10), so the bodies of these rebels were to be dismembered and displayed in an awful symbol of divine judgment.

"Chapter 25 is the nadir of the Book of Numbers. It is worse even than the sins of chapters 12—14. Here is the great sin at the end of the road."²⁴³

25:6-9 The situation took a turn for the worse when Zimri brought Cozbi into the camp. Until now, the sinning had taken place in the Moabite and Midianite camps. Evidently Zimri had contempt for the covenant, the tabernacle, Moses, the priests, and God's judgment on the leaders of Israel including his father (v. 14). He took Cozbi into the tabernacle and had intercourse with her there before Moses. They did this according to the custom of Baal worship. We should view Phinehas' act, therefore, as divine judgment on this attitude and action, not as murder. He slew them in the act of intercourse by driving his spear through both their bodies (lit. bellies). Thus Phinehas (an Egyptian name meaning "the dark-skinned one"), the son of the high priest, atoned for this sin (v. 13).

"The point was that in joining the sexual frenzies of the sacrificial feasts of Baal, the man and his priestess-partner now act to transform the worship of the Lord into the type of sexual rites that were the mode of Canaan. Had this outrage not been stopped, there could never have been true worship in the Holy Place again. They were making the

²⁴²Maarsingh, p. 92.

²⁴³Allen, "Numbers," p. 917.

place of entrance into a bordello, the entrance of the meeting of God and man into a trysting spot.

"We may observe that while priests were always male in Israel, priests could be women in the pagan religions that surrounded Israel. In fact, the sexually centered religions of Canaan would have catered to women in their priesthood. Women priests were so very closely tied to the sexual outrages of Baal and Asherah worship that the very notion of a women [sic] priest conjured up images of sexual worship. Perhaps this is the principal reason that Israel had no women priests."²⁴⁴

"Amid the time of apostasy, the writer points to . . . the need for new forms of leadership. . . . In this narrative, Moses is remarkably ineffective in the face of a blatant transgression (v. 6). The day was saved, however, by the decisive action of one from the next generation of priests, Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron."²⁴⁵

25:10-13 The priests were to represent God to the people. This is exactly what Phinehas did on this occasion. He executed God's wrath against sin and punished the sinners. In so doing he atoned for the sin by representing Israel before God, and he restored the covenant. God rewarded him by promising that his descendants would enjoy peace and would occupy the office of the high priest forever (cf. Ps. 106:30-31). This they did (cf. Judg. 20:18) with the exception of a short interruption in Eli's days. The Romans finally broke up the Israelite priesthood.

This everlasting covenant of peace guaranteed a privileged position of service to God to Phinehas and his descendants. It will find final fulfillment when the descendants of Phinehas through Zadok's branch of Phinehas' family serve God in the millennial system of worship by offering memorial sacrifices in the temple.²⁴⁶

25:14-18 This incident, as the others in which Israel departed from God, shows the inveterate sinfulness of humans even when God blesses us greatly. It also demonstrates the holiness of God, the seriousness of sin in that it destroys fellowship with God, and the necessity of atonement by blood to restore sinners to fellowship with God.

²⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 919, 920.

²⁴⁵Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 410.

²⁴⁶See Ronald Rushing, "Phinehas' Covenant of Peace" (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1988).

"This chapter is a pivotal section in the theology of the Torah."²⁴⁷

II. PROSPECTS OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION IN THE LAND CHS. 26—36

The focus of Numbers now changes from the older unbelieving generation of Israelites doomed to die in the wilderness to the younger generation that would enter the Promised Land.

"The parallels and contrasts between this narrative and the book of Ruth suggest that both texts are dealing with similar ideas. In fact, the picture of Ruth provides an excellent counterexample [*sic*] to that of the men of Israel in this episode. Ruth the Moabitess married an Israelite man and forsook her nation's gods to follow the Lord. For this she was given an inheritance in Israel. In this respect she is also like the daughters of Zelophehad in the next chapters of Numbers who also gained an inheritance among the men of Israel (Nu 27:1-11)."²⁴⁸

A. PREPARATIONS FOR ENTERING THE PROMISED LAND FROM THE EAST CHS. 26—32

The first section of this second part of the book records God's gracious preparation of the younger generation for their entrance into their inheritance.

1. The second census ch. 26

Before going into battle against the Midianites as God commanded (25:18), the Lord directed Moses to take another census of the Israelites. Evidently the 24,000 who died in the recent plague (25:9) were the last of the generation who had refused to enter the land 38 years earlier. Only Caleb, Joshua, and Moses remained from the older generation (vv. 64-65).²⁴⁹

Moses again counted the men 20 years of age and older in all the tribes except Levi as in the census taken just before Israel departed from Sinai (chs. 1—4). The primary purpose of this census was military, namely, to organize the nation for its battles with the Canaanites as well as with the Midianites. However a second important purpose was to discover the size of each tribe so Moses could allocate territory in the Promised Land proportionately (vv. 53-54). This list also had historical value for later generations enabling them to trace their genealogies. Notice that this is a list of families or clans, not

²⁴⁷Allen, "Numbers," p. 922.

²⁴⁸Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 410.

²⁴⁹Leon Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, p. 119, calculated that if 1,200,000 of the older generation died in 38 years, there would have been an average of 85 funerals per day in the wilderness. Of course, on some occasions many more died at once due to divine judgments such as the one described in 25:9.

individuals. The preservation of the nation is a monument to God's faithfulness to His promises concerning Israel.

" . . . His covenanted promises to the patriarchs might be delayed by human sin, but they could not be ultimately frustrated."²⁵⁰

A table of the size of the 12 tribes when Moses took the two censuses follows.

Tribe	First Census	Second Census	Difference
Reuben	46,500	43,730	-2,770
Simeon	59,300	22,200	-37,100
Gad	46,650	40,500	-5,150
Judah	74,600	76,500	+1,900
Issachar	54,400	64,300	+9,900
Zebulun	57,400	60,500	+3,100
Ephraim	40,500	32,500	-8,000
Manasseh	32,200	52,700	+20,900
Benjamin	35,400	45,600	+10,200
Dan	62,700	64,400	+1,700
Asher	41,500	53,400	+11,900
Naphtali	53,400	45,400	-8,000
Totals	603,550	601,730	-1,820

Zimri was a Simeonite (25:14). Perhaps the large number of Simeonites who died resulted from his kinsmen joining him in his apostasy in chapter 25.

Moses also counted the Levite males from one month old and older (vv. 57-62).

Levi	22,000	23,000	+1,000
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Probably there were about 13,000 males 20 years of age or older in Levi. This would have made this tribe the smallest by far.

26:1-51 The writer recorded the numbers of each tribe in these verses. He also included historical notes recalling the sins of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (vv. 9-11) as well as those of Er and Onan (v. 19). Perhaps he included these to remind the Israelites of these sins so they would not repeat them in the future.

²⁵⁰Philip, p. 275.

A comparison of the censuses demonstrates that God could still fulfill His promises to the patriarchs even though the Israelites' failures had postponed their fulfillment. This is one of the most important revelations of the Book of Numbers.

"It is utterly remarkable that the total number has remained nearly unchanged even though the people have lived under the most trying conditions for a period of thirty-eight years. . . . God's faithfulness to his people is grandly celebrated with this triumphant chapter of census!"²⁵¹

- 26:52-56 Moses apportioned the land to each tribe according to its population. The casting of lots determined the location of each tribal inheritance in Canaan later (26:54; Josh. 13:7-33).
- 26:57-62 Here Moses recorded the census of the Levites. Moses and Aaron were Kohathites (Exod. 6:18-20). Their parents' names were Amram and Jochebed (v. 59).
- 26:63-65 The chapter closes with a testimony to the faithfulness of God. All but Caleb and Joshua had died in the wilderness, as He had promised. God had preserved the nation and would bring her into the land as He had guaranteed the patriarchs. Nevertheless He had judged the unbelieving generation.

This chapter looks backward over the past 38 years and forward to entrance into Canaan.

2. Provisions and commands to observe in preparation for entering the land chs. 27—30

"Just as the censuses of chs. 1, 3, and 4 led to a flurry of preparations for departure from Sinai, so the second censuses in ch. 26 lead to preparations for departure from the plains of Moab and entry into the land of Canaan."²⁵²

The inheritance of women in the land 27:1-11

The writer probably included this incident in the text because it resulted in a further definition of the laws governing inheritance in the land in a common situation. It also shows the faith of these women. They believed God would bring them into the land. Furthermore it reveals the fairness and compassion of God in His provision for these women whose father had died in the wilderness.

²⁵¹Allen, "Numbers," p. 938.

²⁵²Ashley, p. 547.

Normally when a father died, his sons divided his property with the eldest receiving a double portion. Daughters did not receive an inheritance other than their dowry. The dowry was a substantial present their father gave them when they married. The term dowry also refers to a gift the groom gave to his father-in-law when he married his daughter.

Notice that after Moses heard the women's complaint he took their case to the Lord (v. 5). This is another mark of Moses' spiritual leadership.

God decreed that in Israel when a man had no sons his daughters would divide his property (v. 8). If he had neither sons nor daughters, the father's nearest relative would receive his inheritance (vv. 9-11). Later (ch. 36) the Lord placed a restriction on daughters who inherited their father's estate. They had to marry within their own tribe to keep the inheritance within that tribe as it would have remained if the father had had sons.

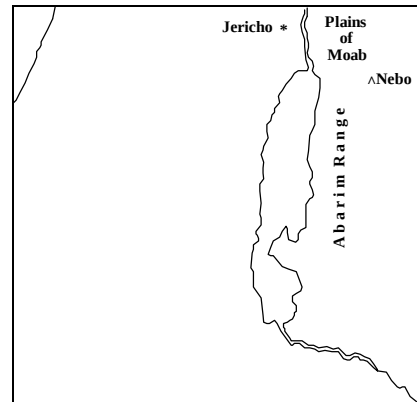
This passage is interesting because it shows how case law developed in Israel. When a situation not covered by existing laws arose, like this one, the people involved would go to Moses and the high priest who would inquire of God. God would reveal what the people should do. This revelation then became precedent for similar cases that might arise later.

Moses' successor 27:12-23

Another preparation for entering Canaan involved appointing a new leader to take Moses' place.

God foretold that Moses would die without entering the land (cf. 20:1-13). Graciously He allowed His servant to see the Promised Land from Mt. Nebo (Deut. 32:48-52). Nebo was one of the mountains of the Abarim range that runs north and south just east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea in Moab's territory. Pisgah (21:20; Deut. 3:27; 34:1) is the name of the northern part of this mountain range. The plains of Moab sloped down from the Abarim mountains toward the Jordan River.

Moses' reaction to God's announcement of his death was admirable. He did not panic like King Saul (1 Sam. 28:20) or even pray for a few more years like King Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:1-3). Instead he prayed for the welfare of Israel, the nation that had caused him so much grief. Many leaders prefer to select their successor, but Moses asked God to make this crucial choice. In so doing he gave practical testimony to his acceptance of Yahweh's sovereignty over Israel.



Joshua was a likely choice since he had served Moses and worked closely with him for years. Most importantly, as one of the two loyal spies,

he was a man of faith. Moses laid his hands on him (v. 18) symbolically imputing his authority to him.

"This spirit was not something that now came upon Joshua, or was temporary (such as the coming of the spirit on the elders in 11:17, 25-26); it already existed in Joshua and was the basis of God's choice of him. Deut. 34:9 applies the phrase 'full of the spirit of Wisdom' to Joshua, confirming the thought here."²⁵³

Joshua served as an associate leader of Israel with and under Moses from this time until Moses died (v. 20). When Joshua began sole leadership he functioned differently from Moses. Whereas God had given Moses directions for Israel "face to face" Joshua would normally receive his divine guidance through the high priest who would obtain this by using the Urim and Thummim. Only rarely did the Lord speak to Joshua directly.

Conflict for the leadership of Israel occurred frequently in the later history of the Northern Kingdom following the split between Judah and Israel. Moses wisely anticipated the problems that might arise if God removed him before the Lord had identified his successor. Therefore he interceded again, and again God granted his request by identifying Joshua at this time. This action by Moses was extremely important because it precluded countless problems for Israel that might have arisen when Moses died.

"The portrayal of Moses' passing his authority (splendor or majesty) over to Joshua and Joshua's reception of the Spirit is noticeably similar to the transition of prophetic office from Elijah to Elisha in 2 Kings 2:7-15. It appears that the writer of the book of Kings has intentionally worked some of these themes into his narrative to draw out the comparison. . . . The type of leadership exhibited by Moses and Joshua is the same as that of Elijah and Elisha. It is a leadership that is guided by the Spirit of God."²⁵⁴

Commands regarding offerings chs. 28—29

Another step in preparing to enter Canaan involved setting forth in an organized fashion all the sacrifices that God required the priests to offer for the whole nation during a year. These offerings maintained fellowship with God. These two chapters contain a list of the minimum number of sacrifices that they were to offer each year for the nation as a whole. Individuals could and did bring other sacrifices in addition to these.

"The real key to successful conquest of Canaan and happy living within its borders was *continual fellowship with God*. Hence it was that God at this time presented to the new generation by way of Moses a finalized and complete set of regulations for offerings, most of which had already been given at Sinai. Their observance would encourage an intimate worship of

²⁵³Ibid., p. 552.

²⁵⁴Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch* . . . , pp. 412-13.

God by the people in the land (cf. Exod. 23:14-17; 29:38-42; 31:12-17; Lev. 23; Num. 25:1-12)."²⁵⁵

"As we, the modern readers of Numbers, think scripturally, this overwhelming emphasis on sacrificial worship has one intent: to cause each reader to think of the enormity of the offense of our sin against the holiness of God, thus driving the repentant sinner to the foot of the Cross. All sacrifices—whether of the morning or evening, of Sabbath or New Moon—have their ultimate meaning in the death the Savior died. Apart from his death, these sacrifices were just the killing of animals and the burning of their flesh with attendant ceremonies. After his death, sacrifices such as these are redundant—indeed, offensive—for they would suggest that something was needed in addition to the Savior's death. But before his death, these sacrifices were the very means God gave his people in love to help them face the enormity of their sin, the reality of their need for his grace, and—in some mysterious way—to point them to the coming cross of Savior Jesus."²⁵⁶

The arrangement in which Moses listed the sacrifices here is by their frequency: daily (28:3-8), weekly (28:9-10), monthly (28:11-15), and yearly in chronological order (28:16—29:38).

Meal and drink offerings accompanied burnt offerings.

"In this cycle of holy periods, regulated as it was by the number seven, and ever expanding into larger and larger circles, there was embodied the whole revolution of annually recurring festivals, established to commemorate the mighty works of the Lord for the preservation and inspiration of His people."²⁵⁷

The chart below indicates what the priests offered on each special day. Note the prominence of the number seven.

²⁵⁵Jensen, pp. 110-11.

²⁵⁶Allen, "Numbers," p. 949.

²⁵⁷Keil and Delitzsch, 3:218.

	Occasion	Day	Burnt Offerings			Sin Offerings	References
			<i>Bulls</i>	<i>Rams</i>	<i>Lambs</i>	<i>Goats</i>	
A.	Daily	Every Day			2		28:3-8
B.	Weekly	Every Sabbath			2+A		28:9-10
C.	Monthly	First of every new month (the new moon)	2	1	7+A	1	28:11-15 (cf. 10:10; 1 Sam. 20:5, 25, 29)
D.	Passover	14th of 1st month			1+A		28:16
E.	Unleavened Bread	15th - 21st of 1st month			B		28:17-25
		1st day	2	1	7+A	1	
		2nd day	2	1	7+A	1	
		3rd day	2	1	7+A	1	
		4th day	2	1	7+A	1	
		5th day	2	1	7+A	1	
		6th day	2	1	7+A	1	
		7th day	2	1	7+A	1	
F.	Firstfruits	4th of 3rd month	2	1	7+A	1	28:26-31
G.	Trumpets	1st of 7th month	1+C	1+C	7+A+C	1	29:1-6
H.	Atonement	10th of 7th month	1	1	7+A	2	29:7-11

Occasion	Day	Burnt Offerings			Sin Offerings	References
		<i>Bulls</i>	<i>Rams</i>	<i>Lambs</i>	<i>Goats</i>	
I. Tabernacles	15th - 22nd of 7th month			B		29:12-38
	1st day	13	2	14+A	1	
	2nd day	12	2	14+A	1	
	3rd day	11	2	14+A	1	
	4th day	10	2	14+A	1	
	5th day	9	2	14+A	1	
	6th day	8	2	14+A	1	
	7th day	7	2	14+A	1	
	8th day	1	1	7+A	1	

Each day was to be a day of worship for the Israelites. They offered sacrifices daily for this purpose. The Sabbath in one sense was not a special day of worship. It was a day of rest for all but the priests for whom this day meant additional service.

"The Tabernacle's daily offering of two lambs with a few pints of oil, flour and wine is as nothing compared with (e.g.) the *daily* offering of 5,500 loaves, 54 cakes, 204 jugs of beer, up to 50 geese, an ox, and a variety of other items all regularly presented at either of the two Ramesside temples just mentioned [in western Thebes in the thirteenth century B.C.]." ²⁵⁸

"Every year in future the priests will have to sacrifice 113 bulls, 32 rams, and 1086 lambs and offer more than a ton of flour and a thousand bottles of oil and wine." ²⁵⁹

Commands regarding vows ch. 30

The last chapter of Leviticus (ch. 27) contains instructions regarding how the Israelites were to handle vows under the Mosaic Law. In contrast this chapter deals with when and under what circumstances they could annul vows and when they had to remain in force.

"The reason for the nature of the pentateuchal laws may be that the Israelites *assumed*, with much of the culture around them, that vows were

²⁵⁸Kenneth Kitchen, *The Bible In Its World*, p. 86.

²⁵⁹G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 197.

a legitimate expression of devotion to one's god(s), hence only specific ordinances governing the vows were seen as necessary."²⁶⁰

Perhaps Moses included this section in this context of matters dealing with preparations for entering Canaan because in times of war people tend to make more vows. This is true of soldiers and their wives and children especially. Also vows are a kind of offering to God, so comment on them here is fitting in view of the previous discussion of offerings (chs. 28—29).

Vows were voluntary promises to do or not do specified things if God would or would not do something else. They usually involved fasting or abstaining from other lawful things or giving God some special gift or offering.

Moses explained the basic principles governing vows first (v. 2). The Israelites were to take their promises to God seriously and not break them (cf. Eccles. 5:4). Then follow four cases some of which constituted an exception to this rule. Others did not.

A girl or young woman living under the authority of her father had a responsibility to obey her father that was more important than her responsibility to keep a self-imposed vow (vv. 3-5).

A woman who married a husband after she took her vow was to place the importance of her submission to her husband above her vow (vv. 6-8).

Another person could not void a widow's vow because she was directly responsible to God, not to her father or husband (v. 9).

A woman who took a vow after she became married was under the authority of her husband primarily and under the authority of the terms of her vow secondarily (vv. 10-12).

Another rule follows (vv. 13-15). A husband could annul his wife's vow when he became aware of it, but if he did not annul it when he first became aware of it, it would remain in force.

"The assumed culpability of Adam in Genesis 3 may stem from the principle behind this law. In 3:6, Adam's wife makes a rash decision in his presence: 'She took from the tree and ate and gave it to her husband who was with her.' In view of this passage in Numbers, Adam's silence in the narrative makes him culpable for his wife's action."²⁶¹

This section clarifies the important principle that one should not regard self-imposed religious obligations as more important than God-given duties.

²⁶⁰Ashley, p. 574.

²⁶¹Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 417.

"The matter of vowing a vow or making a pledge was taken very seriously in Israel. If the foundation of the faith was the immovable trustworthiness of God, no wonder a premium was put on being true to one's promises in general."²⁶²

3. Reprisal against the Midianites and the settlement of the Transjordanian tribes chs. 31—32

Moses' last campaign ch. 31

The writer now recorded the fulfillment of God's instructions to Moses that Israel should destroy the Midianites (25:16-18). In this account, the aftermath of the battle receives more attention than the battle itself. Evidently God included this chapter here for two reasons at least. It records Israel's victory over one of her enemies, and it explains the way she conducted the war and the manner in which she handled the spoils of war. These procedures provided a precedent for the Israelites in their future battles with the Canaanites. This section then gives more information concerning God's preparations of the Israelites for entering the land.

31:1-24 The "vengeance" Israel was to take (v. 2) was for the spiritual and sexual seduction the Midianites had led the Moabites to practice with them. This had resulted in the defeat of God's people (ch. 25). Her enemies had lured Israel away from her true husband, Yahweh.

Moses did not give us the name of Israel's military leader in this battle. However Phinehas, the high priest's son, is the prominent person in the record (v. 6). This phenomenon points to the nature of the battle as being primarily for spiritual purposes. Israel did not annihilate the Midianites simply because they were her political and military enemies. She did so primarily because she was God's instrument of judgment for the Midianites' spiritual sins (idolatry, sacred prostitution, etc.). This was holy war.

"The battle . . . had the character of an execution, in the form of a *ban*. The ban was a religious institution exercised for a time in Israel as well as among some of its Semitic neighbors that placed people judged to be hostile to the deity under a sentence of destruction."²⁶³

The Israelites killed every male Midianite (v. 7) yet we read about the Midianites existing after this battle. Perhaps Moses meant they killed every Midianite they encountered.²⁶⁴ Another writer explained this problem as follows.

²⁶²Maarsingh, p. 106.

²⁶³Ibid., p. 107. Cf. Josh. 6—7; 1 Sam. 15.

²⁶⁴Ashley, p. 592.

"The Midianites were a larger confederation of tribes, associated with various smaller groups such as the Ishmaelites (Gn. 37:28; Jdg. 8:22, 24), the Moabites (Nu. 22:4, 7), the Amalekites (Jdg. 6:3, 33), and Ephah (Gn. 25:4; Is. 60:6). They roamed through the arid lands of Sinai, the Negeb and Transjordan. Here it is those Midianites associated with Moab that are picked out for vengeance (8, 16; cf. chapters 22 and 25), not the whole group."²⁶⁵

Among the men killed were Zur and Balaam (v. 8). Zur was probably the father of Cozbi (cf. 25:15).

Burning enemy cities and taking spoil and living beings captive, mainly women and children, became standard procedure in Israel's wars with the Canaanites (vv. 10-11). The soldiers brought what they had captured to the leaders of the congregation rather than personally appropriating these things (v. 12).

Normally Israel spared the enemy women in battle since the Israelites viewed them as less responsible for the war than the men. However in this case the women had actively solicited the Israelites to idolatry through their prostitution. Therefore God ordered that His people should spare only women who were virgins in this battle. They brought these women into Israel, and in due course most of them married Israelite men.

"It is, it seems, essential for the very existence of a new emergent community that discipline be harsh and stringent."²⁶⁶

The warriors had to undergo the rites of purification as did the prisoners because they had contracted ritual uncleanness through contact with dead bodies. They also purified the booty taken as the spoils of war. The objects that were not combustible they passed through fire, and the others they washed with water. These laws reminded the Israelites that even in victory death is a terrible disruption of God's creation.

". . . this is the only example of fire being required for purification in the Bible and is therefore highly unique.

"Fire, a more intensive form of purification, is chosen to accord with corpse-contamination, a more intensive form of impurity."²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵G. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 209.

²⁶⁶Philip, p. 313. Cf. Acts 5.

"Moses' speech in vss. 19-20 is based solidly on the prescriptions of Num xix, deviating only in regard to how they apply to the particular war situation. Had Moses continued with vss. 22-23, it would have appeared that he was inventing the new regulations out of thin air. Consequently, Eleazer begins to speak, prefacing his remarks by the statement 'this is the decree of the ritual prescription which the Lord commanded Moses,' showing that what he is about to say is not in fact new, but actually part of the original revelation given to Moses. From a literary point of view, to have Eleazer speak allows the law of Num. xix to be amended or clarified without raising the suspicion of human invention."²⁶⁸

31:25-54 The warriors shared the booty equally with the Israelites who remained in the camp. They were no privileged class nor did they receive a special reward for their actions. They simply served one function and the other Israelites served another in carrying out the will of God (cf. 1 Sam. 30:24-25). From the warriors' share 1/500 went to the priests and from the congregation's share 1/50 went to the Levites (cf. 18:26).

The 32 virgins that the priests received (v. 40) probably became servants in the tabernacle (cf. Exod. 38:8; 1 Sam. 2:22).

Not one Israelite soldier died in this battle (v. 49). God gave His people a complete victory. This unusual record makes sense in part because the Midianites were not a warring people. They were nomads who normally moved on when they encountered trouble. Apparently they were not ready to defend themselves against the attacking Israelites. However there is a more important reason for Israel's success.

"There is a clear line that runs from Numbers 31:1-24 to the conquest of Jericho according to Joshua 6 and 7. For in fact that city fell not by military violence but by the force of Israel's obedient faith. And the same thing is true of the conquest of Midian described in Judges 7: it was not the military might of Gideon's band that was decisive but rather the power of faith. In all three cases the stories have about them something unnatural, something unreal, something exaggerated, and in all three it was obedience to God's command that turned the tide."²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷David Wright, "Purification from Corpse Contamination in Numbers XXXI 19-24," *Vetus Testamentum* 35:2 (1985):222, 223. Cf. Lev. 11:32; Num. 19:11-22.

²⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 223.

²⁶⁹Maarsingh, p. 107.

The officers brought a large gift to the Lord to recompense Him for the lives of the Israelite soldiers He had granted Israel in this victory, (v. 50). This payment was an "atonement" (ransom) in that it replaced the Israelite lives that God had spared. The officers realized that He could have taken many of the Israelites' lives in the battle.

The gift consisted of a large quantity of gold jewelry that the soldiers had captured. Midianite traders had a great love for gold jewelry (cf. Judg. 8:26). The people made this gift a memorial of this victory and kept it in the tabernacle (v. 54).

In this chapter we have a basic model for Israel's battles with the Canaanites in the land. This battle with the Midianites was a preparation for those later encounters. It was also a great encouragement to the Israelites as they looked forward to more battles like this one.²⁷⁰

The settlement of the Transjordanian tribes ch. 32

Another instance of incomplete obedience followed the great victory God gave His people and the military commanders' sacrificial, voluntary worship of Yahweh.

32:1-19 Maybe the leaders of Reuben and Gad concluded that their brethren could easily handle the remaining Canaanites without their help. The Israelites had defeated the Midianites and earlier Sihon and Og so easily. Also the pastures of Gilead attracted them. Their request revealed a selfish desire that would have cost their brethren dearly. The remaining tribes would have had to fight their battles without Reuben and Gad's help.

"In verse 1 the sons of Reuben are mentioned before the sons of Gad, but in subsequent references this order is reversed. The reason is very likely that the tribe of Gad was more important than that of Reuben [cf. Gen. 49:4]. There is an oblique confirmation of this supposition on a stone that King Mesha of Moab set up around 850 B.C., following his defeat of the Israelites [i.e., the Moabite Stone]. This stone bears an inscription that refers to Gad as a people that lived there from times immemorial."²⁷¹

Moses saw this request as potentially very discouraging to the other tribes and warned Reuben and Gad against disheartening their brothers.

²⁷⁰On Israel's policy of completely annihilating the Canaanites, see John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God*, especially ch. 8.

²⁷¹Maarsingh, p. 110.

32:20-32 To preclude another Kadesh-barnea tragedy Moses commanded Reuben and Gad to go into battle with their brethren. If they would do this they could have their desired land after the fighting ended. Moses' concern was that the whole nation should enter the land and carry out God's will by destroying the Canaanites. If after they did this these tribes wanted to live on the other side of the Jordan, that decision would not constitute an act of disobedience to God. Transjordan was part of the Promised Land, but most of the people God commanded the Israelites to destroy lived west of the Jordan River.

Moses then instructed his successor, Joshua, in the terms of this agreement. Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh committed themselves to fight alongside their brethren. This is the first mention of the half tribe of Manasseh. Its leaders were apparently not as aggressive in this plan as the leaders of Reuben and Gad were.

32:33-42 With this agreement behind them the two and one-half tribes proceeded to settle in Transjordan until called upon to cross the Jordan River as part of Israel's fighting force.

"The eastern territory of Manasseh, divided between the clans of Makir and Jair, was essentially identical to the old kingdom of Og. The Makirites took the southern part, that is, Gilead as far south as the allocation of Reuben and Gad. The Jairites received the region north of Gilead, defined more precisely as Og's kingdom of Argob. It presumably extended as far north as Mount Hermon and was bordered on the south by the little kingdoms of Maacah and Geshur, just above the Yarmuk (Deut. 3:13-14). A third entity, Nobah, has no apparent connection with Manasseh, but took in Kenath and the surrounding villages (Num. 32:42). Kenath (Qanawat) was located about sixty miles due east of the Sea of Galilee, deep in the Hauran Desert."²⁷²

Though these tribes did fulfill their military obligation (Josh. 4:12-13, 22), their plan was not a good one. It created a potential problem of disunity in Israel. Furthermore it demonstrated a desire for what looked good physically and materially (cf. Lot) in preference to what God said He would give them that they had not yet seen. Distance from the other tribes produced misunderstanding and disunity later (Josh. 22). The lack of natural defenses on the north, east, and south of Transjordan made this area especially vulnerable to attack by Israel's enemies. This area was often the first to experience invasion, and Israel lost control of it several times in her later history (e.g., 2 Kings 15:29).

²⁷²Merrill, *Kingdom of . . .*, p. 91.

Whenever the Bible mentions cities of this area allotted to Reuben, especially Heshbon and Mediba, they regularly appear to be under the control of either Moab or Ammon (Isa. 15:4; 16:8-9; Jer. 48:2, 45; 1 Chron. 19:7). Reuben is seldom even mentioned (only in Judg. 5:15-16; 2 Kings 10:33; 1 Chron. 5:6, 26; 12:37; 27:16) after the Moabite oppression and never in a way to show that it controlled its allotted land.²⁷³

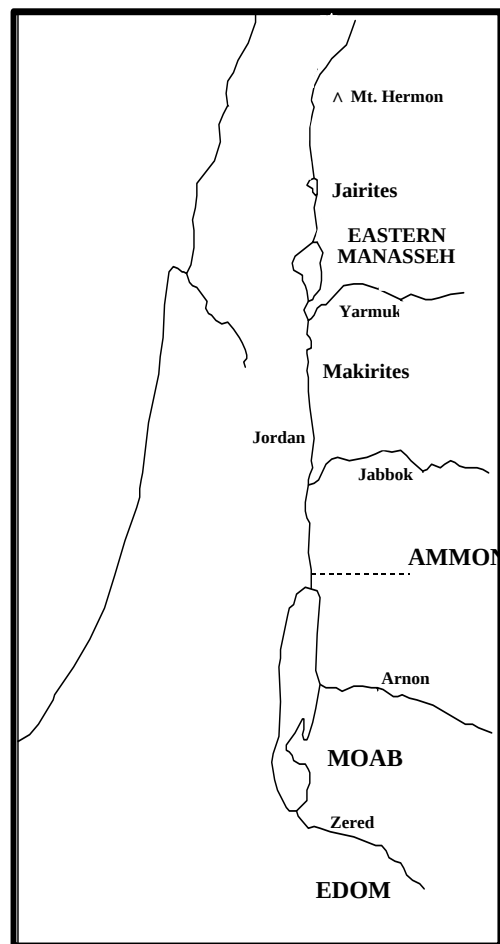
Transjordan was part of the land God included in the Abrahamic Covenant. However, God's purpose for Israel at this time was to drive out the Canaanite tribes that lived primarily west of the Jordan. We may assume that if these tribes had simply followed Moses' leadership God would have done something even better for them than what their own plan provided. This is what God often does in such situations ample testimony to which we find throughout Scripture.

**B. WARNING AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF
THE YOUNGER GENERATION CHS.
33—36**

God gave the final laws governing Israel's entrance into the Promised Land (33:50—36:13). However first Moses recorded at God's command this list of places from which the Israelites had set out on their journey from Egypt to Canaan.²⁷⁴ This list constitutes a memorial to the grace and faithfulness of God in thus far fulfilling His promises to the patriarchs. As a reminder of God's care of His people, it would have been a great encouragement as the Israelites looked forward to taking their final step into the land.

**1. Review of Israel's journey
from Egypt 33:1-49**

Forty-two stations appear in the list. Eighteen do not appear elsewhere in the record of the journey (vv. 13, 19-29), and four mentioned previously are absent in this chapter (cf. 11:3; 21:19). Obviously this is a selective list. What was God's criterion for including what He did here? As one studies this account of Israel's experiences since leaving Egypt certain patterns begin to emerge. For example, similar events recurred with regularity such as judgment by death, victory over enemies, provision of water and food, and opposition from within Israel. Evidently Moses intended this record to help the Israelites recognize first, their failure to



²⁷³Leon Wood, *Israel's United Monarchy*, p. 37, n. 12.

²⁷⁴This is the only statement in Numbers that directly claims Mosaic authorship, though the whole book assumes it (cf. Exod. 17:14; 24:4; 34:28; Deut. 31:9, 22, 24).

learn from their past, and second, God's continuing faithfulness in spite of this inability.²⁷⁵

Archaeologists have not yet discovered many of the sites named. They were probably only camping places in the desert.

33:1-49 After introductory comments (vv. 1-2), Moses gave a list of 12 important places where Israel stopped from Egypt to Mt. Sinai (vv. 3-15). Note that he did not describe the march by identifying the places where Israel stopped but by citing them as places from which they set out (v. 2). This emphasizes the importance of the goal of their journey: the Promised Land. They set out from these places on their trek to the land.

Moses described the journey from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh and from Kadesh back to Kadesh next (vv. 16-36). This includes the period of 38 years in which Israel wandered while the older generations died out. From the comparatively small number of sites mentioned it is probable that Israel stayed at some locations for long periods of time. The nation was probably at rest much more than it was in transit during these years.

Some scholars believe Israel reversed directions after leaving Mt. Hor (20:23) and marched north to bypass Edom at its north end rather than its south.²⁷⁶ This view depends on identifying Punon and Obotoh (vv. 42-44; cf. 21:10-11) with modern Feinan and el-Weibah, both of which are on Edom's west side rather than the east. These identifications are not sure, however. Deuteronomy 2:8 says the Israelites turned at Elath and Ezion-geber, which are at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Therefore this view seems unlikely.²⁷⁷

The last leg of the journey was from Kadesh, the second time, to the plains of Moab (vv. 37-49; cf. chs. 20-21).²⁷⁸

"His [Aaron's] death [vv. 38-39] came at a great age—a mark of God's blessing in his life. By the mercy of the Lord, his time was extended to the very last year of Israel's desert experience; his own sin (Num 20) kept him from living into the time of the conquest of the land."²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵For a further development of the cycles of Israel's experience discernible in the six groups of seven stations, see G. Wenham, *Numbers*, pp. 217-19.

²⁷⁶E.g., Aharoni, p. 51.

²⁷⁷Wood, p. 36, n. 11.

²⁷⁸See Z. Kallai, "The Wandering-Traditions from Kadesh-Barnea to Canaan: A Study in Biblical Historiography," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33:1-2 (Spring-Autumn 1982):175-184.

²⁷⁹Allen, "Numbers," p. 989.

"Within the list of encampments are two short narratives that focus on the work of Moses (vv. 2-3) and Aaron (vv. 38-39). . . . Both narratives have the same comment that Moses (v. 2) and Aaron (v. 38) obeyed 'the command of the LORD.' Thus one of the purposes of this list within the larger strategy of the book appears to be to give a brief review of the work of these two great leaders. God used them and their obedience to lead the people in the wilderness for the forty years."²⁸⁰

"One impression cannot escape the student who has followed the account of Numbers up to this point, that is, the long-suffering grace of God in preserving a people as He had originally promised, through all the experiences of this vast number of places."²⁸¹

2. Anticipation of the Promised Land 33:50—36:13

"The section breaks down into two groups of three laws each, carefully introduced by the clause 'and Yahweh spoke to Moses' (. . . , 33:50; 34:1, 16; 35:1, 9; cf. 36:6) and surrounded by the phrase 'on the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho' (. . . , 33:50; 35:1; 36:13)."²⁸²

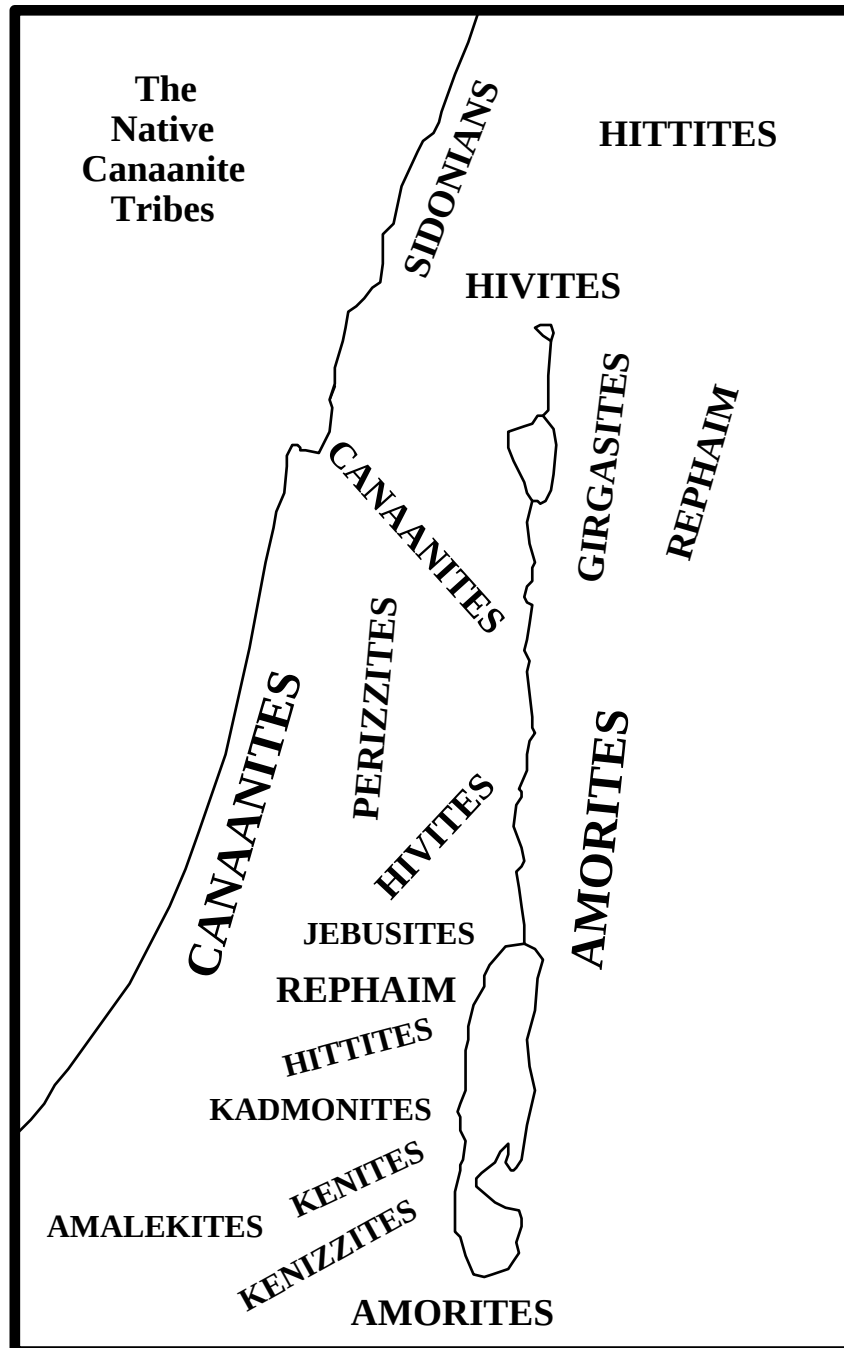
Instructions to drive out the Canaanites 33:50-56

This brief section of instructions introduces specific directions concerning the division of the land and its towns that follow in chapters 34—36.

²⁸⁰Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch* . . . , p. 419.

²⁸¹Jensen, p. 119.

²⁸²Ashley, p. 634.



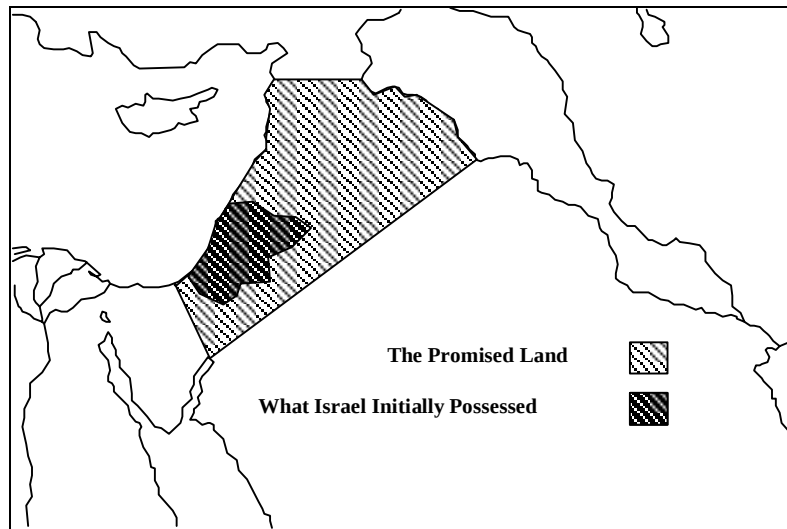
The repetition of "all" (v. 52) stresses the importance of completely clearing the land of its inhabitants and their religious paraphernalia. God wanted to clean up the land spiritually and to make it a "holy land." The land was a gift from God to His first-born son, Israel (v. 53). God warned the Israelites what would happen to them if they were not completely obedient (vv. 55-56). The Canaanites would be a constant source of irritation to them, and God would deal with His people as He planned to deal with the Canaanites.

A preview of the land ch. 34

The borders of the land 34:1-15

Moses described the border of the land from south (vv. 3-5) to west (v. 6) to north (vv. 7-9) to east (v. 12). This boundary encompassed the territory the people would divide among the nine and one-half tribes. This was not the same border promised to Abraham but was what God gave the Israelites at their entrance into the land. If they had been obedient to Him, He would have eventually enlarged their border to include the whole area promised to Abraham. Even though they disobeyed God He still enlarged their border beyond the boundaries given here later in their history though not yet to the extent promised Abraham.

"... on any estimate and interpretation, the 'Canaan' that was the inheritance given to Israel was larger and more extensive than they were ever able to possess, even in David's and Solomon's time."²⁸³



Some of the sites mentioned are still unknown to archaeologists. Hamath (v. 8) was a kingdom and a city, the capital of the kingdom. This reference is probably to the kingdom since there is no biblical record that the city of Hamath ever belonged to Israel.

The land included within these boundaries was about 150 miles long and 50 miles wide, about 7,500 square miles. It was the approximate size of New Jersey. One hundred fifty miles is the distance from Dallas to Bryan, Texas. Fifty miles is the distance from West Fort Worth to East Dallas.

"God is portrayed elsewhere in the Pentateuch as one who apportions the boundaries of all the nations (Ge 10; Dt 32:8), and here he is shown doing the same for his own people."²⁸⁴

²⁸³Philip, p. 340.

The leaders responsible for dividing the land 34:16-29

God next selected ten men, one from each tribe that would settle in Canaan, who would assist Eleazer, the high priest, and Joshua, the military leader of Israel, in apportioning the land. Only Caleb's name is familiar. None of the other men's names appear earlier in the text. These were not the heads of the tribes but men chosen specifically for this purpose. Moses listed the tribes here in the general order in which they settled in the land from south to north.

Special cities in the land ch. 35

Levitical cities 35:1-8

The previous chapter dealt with the general borders of the land and its tribal boundaries. This one gives regulations concerning special towns in the land.²⁸⁵

According to the plan of revelation established previously in Numbers, directions regarding the Levites follow directions regarding the other tribes (cf. 1:1-46 and 47-54; ch. 2 and 3:1-49; 26:1-56 and 57-62).

The Levites received four towns for each of the 12 tribes. However there were more Levitical towns in the larger tribes and fewer in the smaller tribes. The writer of the Book of Joshua identified these towns in Joshua 21.²⁸⁶ Very few Israelites lived more than 10 miles from a Levitical town. God provided so that the Levites, whose responsibilities included the teaching and counseling of the other Israelites in the law, would not live far from anyone in Israel.²⁸⁷

The pasture lands provided the Levites with a small agricultural income, but they received most of their support from the tithes and offerings of God's people.

Cities of refuge 35:9-34

Six of these Levitical towns were also cities of refuge.

The appointment of cities of refuge was a divine provision for the safety of a killer who was not guilty of premeditated murder (cf. Deut. 19:1-13; Josh. 20:1-9). God had told the Israelites not to murder (Exod. 20:13). The right and duty of man to execute murderers were ancient (Gen. 4:15; 9:5-6). Ancient Near Easterners practiced it widely as part of the

²⁸⁴Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 420.

²⁸⁵See Menahem Haran, "Studies in the Account of the Levitical Cities," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80:1 (March 1961):45-54, and 80:2 (June 1961):156-65.

²⁸⁶See my notes on Joshua 21 for a map showing these cities.

²⁸⁷See Jacob Milgrom, "The Levitical Town: An Exercise in Realistic Planning," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33:12 (Spring-Autumn 1982):185-88.

law of retaliation. The Mosaic Law regarding the cities of refuge regulated this practice of retaliating in harmony with God's will.

Three of the cities stood west of the Jordan (Hebron, Shechem, and Kedesh), and three east (Bezer, Ramoth-gilead, and Golan; Deut. 4:43; Josh. 20:7-8; 21:13, 21, 27, 32, 36, 38).

A manslayer (i.e., an unintentional murderer) could find refuge in one of these cities, but a murderer (one who premeditated his act) could not. The next of kin to the victim (the blood avenger, v. 19) was not just free to kill the murderer, but he had an obligation to do so (vv. 19, 21). This was the duty of the next of kin. Moses called him the "avenger of blood."

When a manslayer fled to a city of refuge, the residents of that city would determine if the guilty person was a murderer or a manslayer. The residents were mainly Levites since the cities of refuge were Levitical cities. If they judged him to be a murderer, the residents would turn him over to the avenger of blood who would kill him. If he was a manslayer, he would have to live in the city of refuge until the high priest died. He could not leave the city. It became his prison. If he left the city, he would be sinning. In this case the avenger of blood could hunt him down and kill him for his double offense of manslaughter and leaving his city of refuge.

"The sanctity of human life is clear both from the fact of capital punishment as the only suitable punishment for murder (Gen. 9:5-9) and, on the other hand, from the prohibition against enacting the death penalty in cases where premeditation cannot be proved. To execute the innocent is as evil in God's sight as to exonerate the guilty."²⁸⁸

The death of the high priest atoned for the sins of manslayers. The death of the high priest had atoning value. Consequently after the high priest died, the manslayer was free to go home. However, until the high priest died, his act of killing another human being, even though it was unintentional, rendered him guilty before God.

"His death may have been understood as fulfilling the principle that shed human blood can only be expiated by shed human blood (Gen. 9:6). In this case, the high priest's death was on behalf of the killer, much as the priest offers sacrifices on behalf of the people elsewhere."²⁸⁹

God required at least two witnesses to give testimony before anyone in Israel suffered execution as a murderer.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁸Merrill, in *The Old . . .*, p. 126.

²⁸⁹Ashley, p. 654. Cf. Keil and Delitzsch, 3:265; Budd, p. 384.

²⁹⁰This was a requirement in the ancient Near East generally. See Code of Hammurabi, sections 9-11, in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, p. 166.

In some cases of law-breaking the guilty party could pay for his redemption. He could substitute a payment of money that the priest took as a covering for his sin. However, God did not permit this in the case of murderers or manslayers. The reason for this was that "blood pollutes the land" (v. 33). That is, these crimes brought uncleanness on the land because they involved death. The land was to be clean in this sense because the Lord dwelt in it among His people (v. 34). Canaan was not just the Promised Land. It was to be the Holy Land as well.

These regulations underscore again the uniqueness and value of human life. We see this both in the consequences for killing another person and in the safeguards granted the killer. The basic human rights of people are extremely important to God.

A review of the inheritance of women ch. 36

The revelation of the laws of the division of the land just explained precipitated the incident that Moses recorded here. What would happen if the heiress to her father's property married someone from a different tribe? In that case the land of their father would become the property of another tribe and the tribal allotments would become intermixed and confused. The leaders of a family in the tribe of Manasseh brought the problem to Moses, namely, the family of Zelophehad who had only female heiresses (cf. 27:11).

God responded to the question they raised by giving the following ordinance. In cases like this the heiresses had to marry within their tribe. This prevented property from transferring to another tribe, but it still gave the heiresses freedom to marry.

The five daughters of Zelophehad did as the Lord directed and married within their tribe of Manasseh. Perhaps Moses recorded the names of these women as a tribute to their commitment to do God's will. This testimony would have encouraged all the Israelites to do the same.

"The reason this passage is placed here rather than with chapter 27 is twofold. First, it concerns the issue of tribal allotments, which is the focus of these last chapters of Numbers. Second, it is customary for large sections of the Hebrew Bible, including whole books, to conclude on a positive note."²⁹¹

"Rather than being haphazardly separated and/or appended to the end of the book, Num 27:1-11 and 36:1-13 form an *inclusio* that frames the deliberately unfinished story of the second generation. Zelophehad's daughters exemplified the faith that tenaciously clung to the Lord despite adverse circumstances. In contrast to the shortsightedness and concomitant unbelief of the first generation, the daughters' eschatological outlook

²⁹¹Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p. 422.

provided the necessary impetus for obeying the stipulations of the covenant."²⁹²

The Book of Numbers closes with the positive example of obedience that these women provided for Israel. This book that is so full of negative examples of unbelief and disobedience ends optimistically. With people like Zelophehad's daughters in Israel, the future of the nation looked promising.

²⁹²Dean R. Ulrich, "The Framing Function of the Narratives about Zelophehad's Daughters," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41:4 (December 1998):538.

Conclusion

The Book of Numbers is a lesson in the importance of trust and obedience. The Israelites frequently failed to trust and obey God in the hours of their trials, and consequently God postponed His blessing. Most of them never enjoyed the good things that God had for them. Obedience to God is essential on our part.

"... the point of the book of Numbers is important for God's people in any age: Exact obedience to God is crucial. Numbers makes the point most especially through examples of *disobedience* such as those found in chs. 11—21."²⁹³

The book also teaches us that the failures of His chosen human instruments do not frustrate God's plans any more than the opposition of His enemies can overturn them. The Israelites' unfaithfulness to God did not turn Him back from faithfully carrying out His commitments to His chosen people. I believe the outstanding characteristic of God that Numbers reveals is His graciousness.

"Perhaps the most prominent theme is that of the gracious providence of the Lord in caring for all of Israel's needs—militarily, physically, nutritionally and spiritually—in spite of constant rebellions by the people, both leadership and rank and file."²⁹⁴

The process of divine discipline is another important revelation. We see in Numbers how God deals with His people when they fail to trust and obey Him. On the one hand He does not permit them to enjoy what He has promised. On the other hand He works with them to prepare them to be stronger when they face the same tests again. Where their sin abounds, His grace abounds even more greatly. He makes the broken bone stronger at the place of the break than it was before the break.

Regarding the Israelites' and our entering into all that God wants us to enjoy, everything depends on one's attitude toward God. If we allow the giants and walls that stand between ourselves and God's will to block our view of God, we will fail. Unbelief will lead to disobedience that will lead to discipline that will lead to frustration and death. However if we see the giants and walls overshadowed by God, as Caleb and Joshua did, we will succeed. Trust will lead to obedience that will lead to blessing that will lead to progress and life.

"Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience" (Heb. 4:11).

²⁹³Ashley, p. ix.

²⁹⁴Riggans, p. 2.

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