

The Law, Book 4

Numbers

After the interruption of Leviticus, the book of Numbers resumes the narrative begun in the book of Exodus.

The Book of Numbers is the record of the next 39 years of the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness, from Sinai to the River Jordan, in the plains of Moab (there is an interesting summary of their journey in Chapter 33). The Hebrew name of this book is *Bemidbar* ("in the wilderness"). The English name of the book derives from the fact that the two "numberings" (census countings) of Israel took place during this period. The first such census occurred in the second year after leaving Egypt; the second took place 38 years later, just before crossing over Jordan into the Promised Land¹.

It is interesting to note that here the entry into the Promised Land follows a census; and that the delivery of God's greatest promise, that of the Messiah/Redeemer, would also be immediately preceded by a census (a Roman one)².

The Book of Numbers is also a story of the LORD's miraculous provision, including manna and the miraculous provision of enough quail to feed more than 600,000 men, plus more than twice that number of women and children, in a desert land. These things could not be explained in terms of natural laws.

A. Author. As with the other four books of The Law, the human author was Moses, writing as God inspired him, and as a participant in the events described.

B. Place and Date. Numbers was written (or, at least, completed) in the plains of Moab, by the Jordan River, at the end of the final approach to the border of the Promised Land, about 1,460 BC.

C. Occasion. Like the other four books of The Law, Moses wrote Numbers as directed and inspired by God (see in this regard Numbers 33:2).

D. Theme. The theme of Numbers is God's faithfulness and provision for meeting our needs; a secondary theme is its shameful counterpart, the faithlessness of men. This is illustrated vividly as the Israelites continue their ignominious pattern of rebelling, complaining, doubting God, and

¹ There was also David's third (and illicit) numbering (census), about 500 years later; but that one was **not** God's idea, and it got David into deep trouble.

² Luke 2:1-7. Under the Romans, this was an enrolment, or census registration, for the purpose of taxation.

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wishing to return to Egypt and the doubtful security of slavery, interrupted by brief periods of faith and gratitude, when God, in his gracious mercy, supernaturally rescues them.

In the 40 years between Egypt and the Promised Land, the Israelites personified the contemporary expression, "Yeah--but what have you done for me *lately?*"

E. Highlights. Highlights of Numbers include the following:

1. The First Census. (1:1-16, 44-46)

Thirteen months after the Exodus from Egypt, God directs Moses and Aaron to count the number of able-bodied men ("able to go forth to war") in each tribe, of age 20 and above. He directs that they be counted "by their polls." The Hebrew word used here for "polls" is "Gulgoleth," meaning "skull"; thus, God makes it clear that he wants a head count--not an estimate. The total is 603,550³.

2. The Levites Will Not Go to War. (1:47-54)

The tribe of Levi is not to be included in this census, for they are not to go to war. Their total responsibility is the care and moving of the Tabernacle, and to maintain its system of sacrificial worship. Whereas the other tribes will set up their camps in a protective perimeter around the Tabernacle, the Levites will encamp around the Tabernacle, in the very center of the camp. Anyone, other than a consecrated Levite, who shall approach the Tabernacle shall be put to death.

NOTE: Chapter 2 is a detailed recording of the Israelites, tribe by tribe. Verse 54, the last verse, states, "And the children of Israel did according to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so did they." This sounds good; but we might add, as a parenthetical note, "(for the time being)".

3. "The Levites Shall Be Mine." (3:1-4, 11-16, 39-51)

The sons of Aaron, whom he had consecrated to serve as priests, were Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Nadab and Abihu had died "before the Lord" when they offered "strange fire." They had no children, so left no descendants⁴. This had left Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's younger sons, to minister as priests, "in the sight of Aaron their father" (under Aaron's supervision).

³ To better understand the vastness of this potential army, consider the fact that the entire U.S. Marine Corps in WW II, at its all-time high in strength, with six divisions, six air wings, all supporting units, embassy guards and headquarters personnel, numbered only 500,000.

⁴ This strange (by New Covenant standards) episode is related and explained more fully in Leviticus 10:1-7.

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The Lord directs Moses to count males of the tribe of Levi, one month old and above, and He declares that "...the Levites shall be mine." The total number of males above one month in the tribe of Levi is 22,000. Moses is also directed to count the first-born males above one month old in the other 11 tribes, and the number of their first-born is 22,273. Until now, first-born sons and first-born livestock were consecrated for service to the Lord; now, however, the setting apart (sanctification) of the Levites, and of their livestock, will take the place of the first-born in the other 11 tribes. Thus, 22,000 of the first-born males are "redeemed" by being replaced by the 22,000 Levites, but there are still 273 more, unredeemed. The Lord directs that a tax be collected, 5 shekels for each of the remaining 273 first-born males of the other tribes; this tax is called "redemption money," and is used for the support and work of the Levites. Thus, all the first-born of the non-Levites, and their first-born livestock, are released from God's special claim on their lives.

4. Directions for Moving the Holy Objects. (4:1-20)

Chapter 4 contains detailed instructions for disassembling and moving the Tabernacle, and for moving the camp. Each of the three families of Levites (Gershonites, Kohathites & Merarites) is given specific duties, and families of Priests (Eliazar and Ithamar) are assigned specific duties and oversight of the Levites. Levites of the family of Kohath are to carry the Ark of the Covenant plus the altars and implements in the Holy Place, but only after they are covered by the priests (Aaron and his sons); if the Levites see them uncovered, or touch them, they will die⁵. This preparation of the holy objects for moving by Aaron and his priest sons is done in the Tabernacle, and no one else is allowed to see the preparations, lest they die.

First Aaron and his two surviving sons take down the covering veil which encloses the Holy of Holies and with it they cover the Ark of the Covenant. Then, over that, they add a covering of badger skins, and over that a cloth of blue.

After that the Table of Showbread (consecrated bread, kept continually on the table) is covered by a cloth of blue, and the bread and golden instruments are put on the blue cloth covering the table. All of this is covered with a

⁵ The Levites were able to carry the holy objects without touching them because they were carried with gold-covered poles, which were passed through gold rings on the actual holy objects. Thus they touched the poles, but not the actual holy objects. Poor Uzzah, 500 years later, paid a high price for failing to understand this significant difference (see II Samuel 6:1-7).

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scarlet cloth, and over that a covering of badger skins, and the carrying bars are placed within the golden rings.

Next the golden Menorah (seven-part lamp), with all of its implements and supplies, is covered with a blue cloth. Then all of this is placed within a covering of badger skins and suspended from a carrying bar.

The golden altar is covered with a blue cloth, cover that with a covering of badger skins and insert the carrying bars into the rings.

The other instruments of ministry are then placed on a cloth of blue, covered with badger skins and suspended from a carrying bar.

The ashes are taken from the altar of burnt offering and a purple cloth is spread over it. Upon this are placed all of the utensils for ministering there (censers, flesh hooks, basins, etc.), the entire thing is covered with a covering of badger skins, and the carrying bars are inserted into the golden rings.

With all of this done, then the Levites, sons of Kohath, are allowed to enter the Tabernacle to carry the holy objects. They are allowed to touch only the carrying bars, not the covered objects themselves, lest they die.

Eleazar the priest, son of Aaron, is given responsibility for the lamp oil, incense, food offering and anointing oil, and the oversight of the Tabernacle and all that is in it.

Each Kohathite Levite is given specific responsibilities for what he can touch and what he can carry; to go beyond these appointed limits would be to die.

The age of ordination for priests and Levites is 30, and they serve until age 50.

5. Directions for Moving the Tabernacle. (4:21-49)

The Gershonites are to carry the curtains and coverings of the tabernacle, under the supervision of Ithamar, son of Aaron. The Merarites are to carry the framework of the Tabernacle, and they too are to be supervised by Ithamar, the other priest and son of Aaron.

Finally Moses, Aaron, and the (un-named) chief of the congregation number the men between the ages of 20 and 50, of the families involved in the preparation and moving of the Tabernacle and its holy furnishings (Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites), and the total number of these Levites involved in the moving of the Tabernacle is 8,580.

***NOTE:** It may stagger the mind to think of the necessity for so many young men, and the management and supervision of them, in the preparation and moving of the Tabernacle. We might also wonder at the meticulous*

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*instructions for doing so--especially concerning the holy furnishings of the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. This is apparently because the Tabernacle that they are preparing and moving is the earthly residence of **the MOST HIGH GOD--the YHWH Elohim of the Universe**. He has made his **earthly Presence** there, in the very center of his adopted children, in the vast, decidedly imperfect, but well-organized Israelite camp. At various times the children of Israel forgot that, rebelled against the LORD, and suffered for it; but we must not overlook it in our study of the Exodus, from slavery in Egypt to final establishment and freedom in the Promised Land.*

6. Keeping the Unclean "Without the camp." (Chapter 5)

Chapter 5 sets forth the laws for dealing with purity: physical purity, in the case of leprosy; and moral purity concerning accusations of adultery in the case of wives⁶. In the case of lepers, they were to be kept outside the camp, with all other unclean things. In the case of the accused woman, interesting (if not strange) remedies were required to determine her cleanness or uncleanness. The mixture of "holy water" with the soil in the Tabernacle seems to represent a combination of the holiness of GOD and the earthy sinfulness of man⁷.

In the case of lepers this was to keep the camp free of that contagious disease; in the case of adultery, the purpose was to cleanse the camp of moral disease. In all such cases, an unstated purpose was to keep the Israelite people reminded of the absolute holiness of the LORD, compared with the essentially sinful nature of man.

***NOTE:** Interestingly and, I think, significantly, there is no mention of adultery on the part of husbands here. Viewing the Old Testament as a whole, it appears that such behavior among Jewish men was tolerated although, from the vantage point of God, it was not without consequences. For two examples, consider Judah and Tamar (Gen 38:6-30) and King David, Bathsheba and Nathan the prophet (II Sam 11-12).*

7. Nazarite Vows. (6:1-21)

The Lord establishes requirements for Nazarite vows in which, during the period of the vow, the Nazarite is to be completely sanctified and consecrated for service to the Lord. Both men and women can take the

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⁷ This is the only appearance of "holy water" in the Bible; and it seems to refer to consecrated water in the Tabernacle, compared with ordinary water. If there was any setting aside of consecrated water for ongoing use by the priesthood (as is done in liturgical churches today) there is no mention of it.

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vows of a Nazarite, and the vow can be for a limited period of time, or for a lifetime. Samson was a Nazarite for life; in the 1st Century, Paul and others seem to have taken Nazarite vows for a limited period of time (e.g. Acts 21:23-27). During the period of consecration, the hair must not be cut; at the end of the period, the head is shaved and the hair burned on the altar of the accompanying sacrifices. A Nazarite may neither drink wine, nor eat grapes in any form; and he may not drink strong drink. Although this passage does not make it clear, it seems that the head was shaved at the beginning of the period of consecration, as well as at the end.

NOTES:

*a. the word "Nazarite" is completely unrelated to the town of Nazareth and the word Nazarene; "Nazarite" is derived from the Hebrew word "nazir," which means "consecrated." Jesus was a Nazarene (one from Nazareth), but was **not** a Nazarite, for He drank wine and touched the dead⁸. Although drawings, paintings and other depictions of Him usually have his hair at shoulder length, whether or not He cut His hair is not known. It seems that for a man to have hair so long as to have the appearance of a woman, was proscribed under both the OT and NT, it seems unlikely that Jesus would have allowed his hair to be longer than shoulder length, or short enough to be mistaken for an Arab or other pagan⁹.*

b. Jewish men (and women) cut their hair with a razor. Although we can know precisely how Greek and Roman men and women wore their hair because the aristocracy left their images in the form of sculpture, murals (including pornographic murals) and, in the case of emperors and other very important people, their images survive on coins. On the other hand, the Israelites left no such imagery¹⁰. We can only conclude by inference, based upon what the Scriptures do tell us, that Jewish men cut their hair periodically, and probably wore it no longer than shoulder length. Most Jewish women probably never cut their hair except when taking a Nazarite vow.

c. Strong drink is never clearly defined in the Bible, but it seems to have been the equivalent of wine (Nu 28:7); the Hebrew word rendered "strong

⁸ The Hebrew word rendered "Nazareth" is *Netzer*, meaning "a branch or a germ (seed)" because of its insignificance. In the First Century Jews called the early Christians "Nazarenes" as a term of derision.

⁹ See in this regard Unger: "Unger's Bible Dictionary," Hair, (2) Hebrew regulations, etc., p 441, and the study guide to I Cor 11:4-16, with footnote and explanatory **NOTES**.

¹⁰ The Herods, after the manner of their Roman masters, did leave their images on coins minted for currency in Israel. Although they practiced (at least superficially) the Jewish religion, they were Edomites, descended from Esau (Edom), and were not Jews.

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drink" is *shekar*, meaning "intoxicant." Perhaps strong drink was wine combined with other substances, such as myrrh, to make the intoxicating effect greater. Such was the numbing effect of the wine offered to Jesus, which He declined in order to fully experience his ultimate sacrifice. When his atonement was finished, however, he was offered the ordinary sour wine, to alleviate his extreme thirst caused by the massive loss of blood. He drank it and then gave up the ghost.

7. The Great Aaronic Blessing. (6:22-27)

After explaining to Moses the law of the Nazarites, the LORD delivers the blessing with which Aaron and his sons (the priesthood) shall forever bless the people. This ancient blessing, pronounced frequently today as a benediction over the people of God, is the one which begins, "The LORD bless thee and keep thee, the LORD make His face to shine upon thee...." The passage ends with the statement that the priests shall speak the blessing over the people, but it will be the LORD who will do the blessing ("...and I will bless them"[emphasis the author's]).

***NOTE:** In 1979 a team of Israeli archeologists, led by Gabriel Barkay, discovered two tiny amulets in the form of cylinders, in a burial cave near Jerusalem. The larger one was described by Prof. Barkay as "about the size of a cigarette butt." This cylinder contained a silver scroll which required 3 years to unroll without destroying it. On the silver scroll there is engraved, in tiny ancient Hebrew letters, the blessing of Numbers 6:24-26, just as we have it in the AV (KJV) Bible.*

*It is from the 7th Century BC, the time of the Great Revival under the prophet Jeremiah and King Josiah, about 630 BC. This is the oldest written portion of Scripture ever found, predating the oldest of the Dead Sea scrolls by at least 400 years. It is also the earliest written example of the unique name of God (YHWH [YAHWEH]) yet found, and the **only** artifact yet found from the time of the First Temple (Solomon's Temple). This creates a serious problem for the critical scholars who insist that none of the Pentateuch was written until about the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, i.e. about 400 BC.*

(Place here the photos of Prof Barkay and the scroll(s).)

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Chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 8 includes detailed instructions for Aaron, the High Priest, and his two sons, the priests, to ordain and sanctify the Levites

between the ages of 25 and 50 for service in the Tabernacle¹¹. Chapter 9 restates the requirement for the keeping of the Passover.

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8. Silver Trumpets, and Back on the Road. (10:1-36)

1. Two Silver Trumpets (vv 1-10). The Lord tells Moses to make two silver trumpets, made "of a whole piece" of silver. The two priests, Eliazar and Ithamar, shall blow the trumpets to call the people to assemble, and to sound alarms. The Lord promises that when they sound the alarm before going into battle, He will save them from their enemies (a very nice promise). Then, on the 20th day of the 2nd month of the 2nd year, the Israelites resume the journey to the Promised Land. They have been encamped at Sinai for 14 months.

***NOTE:** The details concerning this matter of blowing the silver trumpets are not made clear in the text here, nor are they made clear anywhere else in Scripture. They can be inferred from other sources, but it is still not a simple or certain matter. The best source known to me is Unger, Merrill F.: Unger's Bible Dictionary, "Alarm," p 36.*

The same is true of the requirement that the trumpets be made of a single piece of silver. The text is not clear as to whether the two trumpets are to be made of one piece of pure silver, or if each is to be made of a separate piece of pure silver. What we know of the sacredness of such trumpets strongly suggests that each was made of a separate piece of pure silver, beaten into shape--not melted and poured into a mold. In Exodus 25, "pure" gold and "beaten" gold seem to be synonyms. Mrs. Siewert (Amplified Bible) renders v 2 as "Make two trumpets of silver: of hammered or turned work [not molded] you shall make them...." It is understandable that silver (or gold), melted in a crucible and poured into a mold, would contain microscopic impurities, thus it would not be "pure."

2. Moving Again (vv 11-13). On the 20th day of the second month of the second year at Sinai the pillar of cloud rises up from the Tabernacle; and Aaron, Eliazar, Ithamar, and the Levites disassemble the Tabernacle and cover the sacred furnishings. With the disassembled Tabernacle and the sacred furnishings, and with the Ark of the Covenant leading, Moses and the

¹¹ In Chapter 4, vv3-48, the age of ordination for Levites to serve in the Tabernacle is given as 30-50, as opposed to ages 25-50 specified here. The text provides no explanation for this. For a detailed discussion of the possible explanations, see Merrill Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, p 656, "Age and Qualifications."

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Israelite multitude move out. The pillar of cloud moves ahead, protecting them and showing the way, and stops in the Wilderness of Paran to the north.

3. Organization for Moving; and a Standard for Each Tribe (vv 14-28). They had been organized by tribes for the encampment, and now they are organized for the march. First will go the pillar of cloud, to guide and protect the Israelites, then Moses, the priests and the Ark of the Covenant, followed by the Levites, the disassembled Tabernacle, and the sacred furnishings (the Ark is in a sacred class all its own).

Each tribe carries at its head a standard, to identify it. We are told almost nothing about the size and form of the standards, but they were probably on high poles for visibility, each distinct and recognizable, and were almost certainly not fluttering flags, as we think of battle flags. Rather, they were probably rigid, and designed after the manner of the Egyptian battle standards. Leading the people will be the Tribe of Judah, with its standard held high; the other tribes will follow in the prescribed order, each with its standard in the lead.

4. A Helper for Moses and a Three-Day Journey (vv 29-36). Hobab, a Midianite associated with Moses, wants to go home. He is generally believed to have been the son of Jethro, the father-in-law and advisor to Moses¹². Moses urges him to stay and be an advisor on the journey concerning the pagans that inhabit the land through which they will be traveling; it seems that Hobab stayed.

The Israelites move out on the first leg of their journey and travel for three days, searching for a resting place. This may have been what is called in the Naval Service a "shake-down cruise," to test their system and equipment, before launching out for the rest of the journey. With the pillar of cloud leading, and with the Ark at the head of the caravan, followed by Moses, the command group and the parts of the Tabernacle, the children of Israel move out.

As they begin to move Moses prays in beautiful Hebrew poetry, asking the LORD to "rise up" and scatter his enemies before them and, when they stop and encamp, to stop with the Israelite multitude and protect them. The children of Israel must be experiencing excitement at finally heading into the Promised Land, mixed with some fear of the unknown that lies ahead. But

¹² Here the father of Hobab is called Raguel (apparently another name for Jethro, Midianite father-in-law to Moses). This would make Hobab the brother of Miriam, and Moses' brother-in-law. Jethro has apparently already returned to Midian.

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they will soon be in very serious trouble with the Lord for complaining and failing to trust Him.

9. Consuming Fire and Quail for the People. (11:1-35)

In the first three verses of Chapter 11 we are told a very great deal about very important things, in a very brief passage; and, once more, we are left with some things not explained--things that leave us wondering.

Dissatisfaction is again growing among the people about their hardships and about having nothing but manna to eat. The LORD's anger is kindled and He sends fire among the people, in the outer limits of the camp. Many die, Moses intercedes, the LORD halts the fire and the dead are buried. The place is given the name, "Taberah " (burning)¹³.

The people, including a "mixed multitude" dwelling among them, continue to grumble. They complain about eating only manna, they long for the food they had as slaves in Egypt, and the Lord's anger is "kindled greatly." Moses is also angry, and discouraged. He complains to the LORD about the burden of leadership and the LORD tells Moses to select 70 leaders from among the tribes and assemble them at the Tabernacle. Moses does so, and the LORD takes a portion of the anointing on Moses, grants it to each of the 70 elders; and they begin to prophesy. Two of them, Eldad and Medad, who did not get to the assembly are also anointed, and they also prophesy. When some of the people complain to Moses about this, he rebukes them and says that he wishes all of Israel were anointed and would prophesy.

The LORD is still angry with the people's lack of trust and complaining, and He will teach them a lesson. He sends quail--so many that they cover the ground outside the camp, "a day's journey" outward from the camp, and three feet deep. As a lesson for them, they will have to eat it for a month ("until it come out at your nostrils and it be loathsome unto you"). The people gather the quail for two days and one night, they dress them and spread them on the ground to preserve them by drying. As they begin to eat the quail, the greedy ones are smitten by the LORD with a plague and are buried there. The place is named *Kib-roth-hat-ta-a-vah* (the graves of sensuous desire). These are serious attitude adjustments; and the LORD continues to cleanse the camp.

NOTES:

¹³ We must wonder why the lethal fire from Heaven struck only the people in the outer limits of the camp. It is likely that it struck only the "mixed multitude" who lived on the fringes of the camp; they would be the ones most likely to complain, and to call on their pagan gods for help. Mrs. Siewert, in her Amplified Bible, calls them "the rabble who followed Israel from Egypt." Remember that fire represents cleansing.

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a. The "mixed multitude" mentioned in v 4 is not explained. It probably consisted of Egyptians who came with the Israelites out of Egypt, plus those descendants of mixed marriages between Israelites and Egyptians. They are also mentioned in Ex 12:38, at the beginning of the Exodus.

b. The phrase "a day's journey" can mean a Sabbath day's journey, or a measure of distance traveled in a normal day. Since a day's journey for a traveler could be 10-25 miles, depending on circumstances, the meaning here is surely a Sabbath day's journey, i.e. 2,000 cubits, or about 1/2 mile¹⁴.

c. The Lord sent quail once before, as a gracious gesture, the night before sending manna for the first time; this time, however, He sent much, much more, as an angry object lesson about trusting Him.

10. Miriam and Aaron Rebel. (12:1-16)

Miriam and Aaron tire of the authority of Moses, and apparently are offended by his choice of an Ethiopian wife. They rebel. The Lord descends in the pillar of cloud, and stands at the door of the Tabernacle. He calls Aaron and Miriam forward, rebukes them for their rebellion, and makes it clear that Moses is in a **unique** relationship with Him, one they cannot have, and He smites Miriam with leprosy. Aaron repents (we must assume that she also repents), Moses intercedes, and Miriam is healed; yet she must remain outside the camp in shame for seven days, after which the people move on, northward to Paran.

There is a lesson here for us: even the most prominent, chosen leaders of God's people are susceptible to gross sin, including rebellion against God. A second lesson is that, although we can be forgiven, there may still be consequences of our bad choices with which we must live.

***NOTE:** It appears that, by this time, Zipporah the Midianite, Moses' first wife, had died. The Hebrew word here rendered "Ethiopian" (v 1) is kushi, meaning a Cushite, a descendant of Cush, son of Ham. It is rendered in the Authorized Version as both "Ethiopian" and "Cushite." The land of Cush is on the southern border of Egypt, and today it is called Sudan. Marriage to a Canaanite was forbidden, but marriage to an Egyptian or a Cushite was permitted; Joseph's wife was Egyptian (Gen 41:45).*

11. A Reconnaissance Mission and a New Name for a Leader. (13:1-20)

At the border of the Promised Land, the people encamp and the Lord orders the selection of one prominent leader from each tribe for a

¹⁴ See in this regard Acts 1:12.



And they came unto the brook of Eschol, and cut down...a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon a staff.

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reconnaissance of the Promised Land, to be led by Oshea, whose name Moses changes to Je-hoshua (Joshua). They are directed to "spy out the land" and to bring back samples of the fruit of the land. It was the time of the first ripe grapes.

***NOTE:** As in the cases of Abraham and Sarah, the name change was made by inclusion of one letter from JHVH, symbolizing God's choosing him for very special, consecrated service¹⁵. Moses surely made this name change at the direction of the Lord, for to have done so on his own initiative would have been extreme presumption. The change from Oshea ("savior" or "salvation") to Joshua ("he shall save" or "JEHOVAH is salvation") probably reflects the position he would later assume as successor to Moses as leader of all of Israel.*

12. A Successful Reconnaissance, but an Evil Report. (13:21-14:5)

The 12 scouts spy out the land for 40 days, and return with a huge cluster of grapes, plus pomegranates, and figs, and present a two-part "evil report": (1) it is a great place, rich, lush, and flowing with milk and honey¹⁶; (2) however, the people are mighty, they live in walled cities, there are giants in the land, and we should stay away¹⁷. They complain against the entire Exodus operation and take up the recurring lament: "Take us back to Egypt."

***NOTE:** The tremulous scouts had grown up in the lush land of Goshen in the Nile Delta, and had probably never seen a walled city or giants. It was probably the sight of the walled cities, and the giants, that convinced them that they had no chance of conquering the Promised Land. Of course, they had forgotten the key to victory: the LORD GOD of the Universe would be with them.*

13. Two of the Scouts Dissent, and the People Go Mad (14:6-10).

Two of the 12 scouts, Joshua and Caleb, present a dissenting opinion saying that the land can easily be taken, walled cities, giants and all, because the LORD will be with them. Further, they say the Canaanites fear the Israelites and "they are bread for us [and] their defense is departed from

¹⁵ The Tetragrammaton, the four-letter unique name of GOD is sometimes spelled "JHVH" and sometimes as "YHWH" because in Hebrew "J" is pronounced like "Y" and "V" is pronounced like "W."

¹⁶ It appears that the expression, "a land that flows with milk and honey," used 13 times in the Bible, all in the OT, is a metaphor for a land rich in good things, and is not to be taken literally; for the same expression is used, referring to Egypt, in the rebellion of Korah (16:13)

¹⁷ In verse 26 is the origin of the expression "went and" before a verb, still used in the South, especially in the Appalachian Mountains where remnants of Elizabethan English survive. The modern equivalent of "went and came to Moses" would be "proceeded to come to Moses."

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them¹⁸." The people won't hear them, become hysterical with fear, and prepare to stone them (and, probably, Moses and Aaron as well)¹⁹.

NOTE: Mrs. Siewert, in her Amplified Bible, footnotes v 28 with "But God makes all the difference between cowards and Calebs."

14. The LORD Is Furious, and Moses Intercedes. (14:11-37)

The LORD wants to destroy the Israelites completely and start over again with Moses and Aaron, Joshua and Caleb; but Moses intercedes and the LORD relents. The people will pay for their rebellious unbelief, however, by wandering in the desert for 40 years and dying there; only their young children will be spared and will inherit the land, as will Joshua and Caleb²⁰.

The 10 scouts who rendered the evil report, however, paid the price immediately: they were struck with the pestilence that the Lord intended for the entire nation, and "died by the plague before the Lord."

*NOTE: Here, in v 11, the LORD expresses the fundamental sin of the people of Israel: their failure to believe and trust Him. In the cry of His divine heart he asks Moses, "...how long will it be ere they **believe** me...?" (emphasis mine).*

15. A Little Repentance, Foolish Presumption, and Defeat. (14:38-45)

Seeing the death of the 10 faithless scouts who rendered the "evil report," the people repent and decide to attack the Amalekites and Canaanites to the north, although the LORD has told them to turn south toward the Red Sea. Moses rebukes them and tells them that he will not go with them, nor will the Ark of the Covenant leave the camp. He says that the Lord will not be with them, and they will be defeated. In rebellion they go up into the hill country the next morning and attack. They are defeated and driven back to the camp²¹.

NOTE: Chapter 15 consists of detailed instructions for various offerings, plus designated punishments for certain violations of the Law.

16. The Rebellion of Korah and His Amazing Punishment. (16:1-35)

Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Levites, with 250 leaders of the Israelites, rebel against Moses and Aaron, and presume to take over the leadership;

¹⁸ In this statement Joshua and Caleb were prophetic, as we shall see in Joshua 2:9-11. The Canaanites feared the Israelites because they had heard about the miracles of their GOD, from the parting of the Red Sea onward.

¹⁹ There is no reasoning with a mob, especially one maddened and bent on mayhem; and yet the mere appearance of the glorious presence of the LORD stops them in their tracks! Notice also that this great miracle almost passes unmentioned; it is merely implied--not even stated.

²⁰ See in this regard Hebrews 3:17-19.

²¹ For a more detailed account of this event see Deuteronomy 1:40-46.

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they also think they should be priests²². Challenged by Moses to bring their rebellious group to the door of the Tabernacle with incense burners (censors) the next day for God to judge among them, Korah instead brings the entire congregation, less Dathan and Abiram, who refuse even to appear at the Tabernacle. The Lord, furious at the rebels, again wants to destroy the entire congregation and start over with Moses and the faithful few, but Moses again intercedes. Moses warns the congregation to move away from the three rebelling Levites, the people flee from them, and the earth opens up and swallows the three Levites and all their families and possessions. Then the Lord sends fire from Heaven and consumes the 250 leaders who joined in Korah's rebellion.

NOTES:

a. If this didn't get the attention of these unfaithful, rebellious people-- permanently--what could?!? It seems that part of man's unredeemed nature is to rebel against authority; and, in rebelling against the authority of God is to make the same fatal error as that of Lucifer: to place one's self, and his will, on the same level as, or on a higher level than, that of Almighty GOD. Later, the prophet Samuel, speaking for Almighty GOD, will tell King Saul that "rebellion [against the LORD] is as the sin of witchcraft," which is to make the fatal error of Korah and his followers²³.

b. There are some interesting things in this passage that can easily be overlooked.

(1) In vv 20-22 the LORD threatens to consume the entire population "in a moment" (apparently with fire, which in the Bible represents cleansing), and Moses and Aaron intercede. In interceding for the masses of the Israelites they address God in an interesting way, as "the God [in Hebrew, Elohim, the true and faithful One Who keeps covenants] of the spirits of all flesh." The significance of this is easy to miss. In addressing Him as Elohim they are reminding Him that he has made a covenant with the people, and that He is faithful to keep his promises. And in calling Him the "the God of the spirits of all flesh" we are reminded that all flesh eventually dies, but spirits are eternal and do not die.

(2) In vv 28-33 we see that the three leaders of the rebellion and all that belonged to them were swallowed up by the earth and "went down to the pit alive." Then, in v 35 we see that the 250 subordinate leaders of the

²² Korah was Levi's great-grandson, and a cousin to Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

²³ I Samuel 15:17-23.

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rebellion were consumed by fire from the LORD; thus the leaders of the rebellion were removed from the scene and the camp was cleansed.

(3) But when these wicked leaders died, was there any hope for them and their families? Yes, and herein is expressed a terribly important fact. Under the Old Covenant, when people died (the righteous and the wicked), their bodies ("flesh" v 22) died, but their spirits ("spirits of all flesh" v 22) went directly to "the pit" (v33) . The Hebrew word translated "pit" is Sheol, the resting place of the spirits where they awaited the coming of the Messiah (Jesus the Christ) to offer them redemption. Their spirits would live forever, either in Heaven or the Lake of Fire; the choice would be theirs.

17. Additional Brass Plates to Cover the Altar of Burnt Offering. (16:36-40)

After the cleansing of the camp by the death of Korah and company the tells Moses to have Eleazar, son of Aaron, the priest, to gather the brass censors of the 250 men who had presumptuously offered incense, empty them of ashes "yonder" (an unstated distance from the Tabernacle). The LORD says that since the censors have been used to make an offering to the LORD (even though the offering was illicit), they are "hallowed" (holy). The censors are then to be hammered into plates of brass to add to the covering of the brazen altar of burnt offering. Eleazar obeys, and the added plates of brass are to be a reminder that only descendants of Aaron may offer sacrifices of incense, lest offenders make such offerings presumtuosly and suffer the fate of Korah and his company.

***NOTE:** The Hebrew word translated as brass in this and other passages speaking of the sacred instruments in the Tabernacle and the brazen altar is "nekh-o-sheth" meaning copper or metals made from it (brass or bronze). The Authorized Version renders it "brass," and modern versions usually render it "bronze." In the case of sacred objects, brass makes better sense to me because brass is much more beautiful than bronze. The specifications for making the altar of burnt offering are that it is to be made of acacia (shittim) wood, covered with brass (Ex 27:1-3), and these hammered censors were added to that covering.*

18. The People Rebel Again, and Pay Dearly for It. (16:41-50)

The fear of God resulting from the punishment of Korah and the other rebels doesn't last long; **the very next day** the people, unbelievably, are angry at Moses, blaming him for the deaths of Korah and his company! One must wonder how they could be so thick-headed and uncomprehending; but they definitely are! Again, the LORD intends to destroy the entire

congregation; and, although Moses again intercedes, 14,700 more die. Those people have crossed a line that GOD will not ignore; but the survivors don't seem to have learned much.

19. Who's in Charge Here?--the Budding of Aaron's Rod. (17:1-13)

The Lord, completely sick of the murmuring of the Israelites and their rebelling against the authority of His chosen leaders, speaks to Moses. Moses is told to take the rod (walking stick) from each of the leaders ("princes") of the 12 tribes; Aaron's rod is to be the one for the tribe of Levi²⁴. The rods are to be placed by Moses before the Ark of the Covenant, and the Lord will indicate His choice of spiritual leader by causing one of the dead rods to sprout with new life. The next day, Aaron's rod has not only budded, but has bloomed and born fruit (almonds)! The other 11 rods, still dry and dead, are returned to their owners and the people, temporarily, are impressed. Aaron's rod is to be kept as a reminder, in the Holy of Holies with the Ark of the Covenant.

NOTE: At the end of Chapt 19, the record goes fast-forward, to skip a period of 38 years. One must assume that nothing significant occurred during those years of wandering and waiting; or, perhaps the Lord just spared us the depressing and repetitious details. Chapter 20 resumes the Wilderness narrative, and all that follows in the Book of Numbers (Chapts 20-36) took place during the 40th, and final, year of wandering. Like the first year after the Exodus, that final year was as packed with momentous events, as the previous 38 years apparently lacked them.

18. Miriam Dies and Water from a Rock (Again). (20:1-13)

Thirty-nine years have passed since leaving Egypt, and the Israelites are at Kadesh, on the borders of Edom, back in the area of Rephidim, near the place where they had rebelled 38 years earlier²⁵. There Miriam dies, and is buried. Their numbers have multiplied greatly, and the area is still without a water source (at least, there is no source adequate for such a multitude). The people rebel because there is no water, and Moses asks the Lord for guidance. He is told to speak to the rock and water will flow supernaturally as before²⁶. Moses, however, is angry (and a bit presumptuous and proud

²⁴ Most men had a walking stick (rod); in the case of leaders, it was also a symbol of their authority. These were 12 sticks of dead wood, carved and dried--**not** 12 green sticks with living bark.

²⁵ This town called Kadesh is probably not Kadesh-barnea, which is far to the north, on the border of the Promised Land.

²⁶ Although the Israelites are in the same area as they were at the time of the first such miracle, it appears that the rock here is not the same one as before, for Psalm 78:15-20, in referring to these miracles, uses the plural ("rocks" and "waters").

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["must we..."]); instead of speaking to the rock, he strikes it twice with his rod. The water flows as before, but the Lord is displeased with Moses and Aaron, and He tells Moses that he will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land²⁷.

19. Aaron Dies. (20:14-29)

The King of Edom refuses to allow the Israelites to pass through his land, demonstrating the old enmity between Esau (father of the Edomites) and Jacob. The Israelites move on, around Edom, and reach Mount Hor, where Aaron will die. Moses, directed by the Lord, takes Aaron and Eleazar (his son) to the top of the mountain. In sight of the people, he takes the vestments of the High Priest off Aaron, and puts them on Eleazar. Aaron dies there and, apparently, was buried there.

20. Fiery Serpents and a Serpent of Brass. (21:4-9)

The Israelites tire of the journey around Edom, tire of the diet of manna, and become rebellious again. They even speak wickedly against God! The Lord sends venomous, "fiery [venomous] Serpents" among the people, biting them, and many die. Once more, the people get the message, repent, and ask Moses to intercede. The Lord tells Moses to make a fiery serpent of brass, and mount it on a pole²⁸. Moses lifts up the brazen serpent and those who are bitten, but who look upon it, live.

***NOTE:** One must wonder why the remedy for death from the serpent bites was a serpent, the symbol of Satan; it would seem more appropriate to have put a brazen lamb on the pole, as a symbol of our coming Redeemer and Healer. I believe that the answer is that Jesus, on the cross, would become sin for us in that moment of redemption when the Father looked away from Him. For that horrible moment Jesus not only paid the redemptive price for our sins but, in some way, became the totality of sin for us. It was this, I believe, that caused Him such dread that he sweat blood and asked to be spared "this cup." See John 3:14-16, John 12:32-33 and II Cor 5:21 (underline "became"). This brazen serpent, which healed and preserved life, was a fore-shadow of what Jesus would become on the cross when He would become sin for us. And, in looking unto Him, we obtain everlasting life (Hebr 12:2, et al).*

21. Balaam and His Talking Jackass. (Chapters 22-24)

²⁷ Concerning the messianic symbolism in speaking to the rock, see **NOTE b** under Exodus Highlight 41 (17:1-7).

²⁸ This is the origin of the caduceus, the twining serpents on a pole, the symbol of healing and the practice of medicine, dentistry and nursing.

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The King of the Amorites refuses to allow the Israelites to pass through his land; the result is war, with the destruction of the Amorites. The King of Bashan makes the same mistake and is wiped out. Seeing this, Balak, King of Moab, knows that he will need supernatural help to defeat the Israelites. He sends for Balaam, a prophet of God, but a strangely corrupt one, who appears to have dabbled in paganism (see 24:1); and here begins one of the strangest stories in the Bible. Balaam is directed to go meet with Balak, but to speak only the words the Lord gives him. Yet, somehow, the fact that Balaam is willing to go so angers the Lord that He sends “the angel of the LORD” who is ready to kill Balaam if he proceeds²⁹. The animal sees the angel and balks, but Balaam, who doesn’t, beats him. The ass saves Balaam’s life by falling down, and then speaks miraculously to Balaam, reproaching him for the beatings. Balaam replies, as if it were normal to be conversing with a farm animal; then Balaam’s vision is opened to see the angel, and he falls on his face in repentance. The angel repeats the Lord’s directions to go see Balak, but to say only the words the Lord gives him to say. Repeatedly, Balak tries to bribe Balaam to curse the Israelites, but Balaam instead blesses them and, interestingly, with some of the most beautiful blessings in the Bible. In 24:17 this corrupt prophet speaks a prophecy of the coming Messiah. Balak finally gives up on the project, Balaam returns home, and disappears from history, except for his ignominious death, later that year, in Moses’ last battle (which we shall see in Chapter 31).

22. Serious Sin and a Serious Remedy. (25:1-18)

The Israelites make their final wilderness encampment at Shittim, by the Jordan River, on the border of Canaan, and immediately enter into the paganism of the Moabites--the sexual worship of Baal. In a particularly flagrant act of rebellion, a prince of the tribe of Simeon, joining in the pagan orgy, brought the daughter of a prince of Midian to his tent, in plain sight of Moses, and the two commenced their coupling. Their sinful act was so outrageous that their names are forever recorded in infamy (vv 6, 14-15). As the righteous Israelites wept over the rebellion against God, one Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, took immediate action: he took a lance and

²⁹ Here we see an apparent Christophany, an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ (“the angel of the LORD”), Who is willing to wield the sword and kill. There is a mystery here in the apparent contradiction of the Lord’s permission for Baalam to go, yet His anger that Baalam is willing to go (22:20-22).

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skewered the two, with one thrust³⁰. The Lord ordered Moses to have all those participating in the Baal worship killed, beheaded, and their heads hung up “before the Lord against the sun” as a lesson to the rest. 24,000 rebellious Israelites died that day; and, had it not been for the bold, immediate correction of Phinehas, the Lord may have killed all of them.

NOTE: *The wording of this passage may mean that leaders in the rebellion (“heads of the people”) were hanged, for the Hebrew verb here is “yaqa,” which can mean, “sever,” “impale,” or “hang up.” Whatever the mode of execution, the heads were displayed facing the east, the direction sacred to the pagans and the direction they faced to worship the rising sun. The Israelites (and the pagans) had, displayed before them, a vivid demonstration of the wages of sin.*

23. The Second Census (“Numbering”). (26:1-4, 63-65)

After the affair of the pagan rebellion, the Lord directs Moses and Eleazar the High Priest to count the men, 20 years old and above, who are able to go to war. The total number of able-bodied men is 601,730. Of the 603,550 able-bodied men counted in the first census only two, Joshua and Caleb, are still living to be included in the second census, thus fulfilling literally what the Lord had promised 39 years earlier.

NOTE: *In Chapt 27 some of the authority of Moses is publicly transferred to Joshua, by the laying on of Moses’ hands before Eleazar the priest. It appears that this marked the beginning of the transition to Joshua’s soon-coming position as leader of the Israelites, replacing Moses (27:18-23). It speaks well for Moses that he took this as reasonable and wise, and not as a lessening of his own prestige.*

24. The Final Battle for Moses. (31:1-8)

The Lord tells Moses that he is to fight one last battle, and then his work on earth will be finished. 12,000 warriors (1,000 from each tribe) are to go out against the army of Midian to eliminate the source of the recent rebellion. They will be led by Phinehas, the hero in putting down the rebellion (highlight 22). The Midianites are completely destroyed, including their kings. Also slain in the battle is the corrupt prophet Balaam, who seems to have played a key role in bringing about the rebellion.

NOTE: *Moses’ father-in-law and wise counselor, Jethro, was a Midianite, descended from Esau, as was Zipporah, Jethro’s daughter and Moses’ wife.*

³⁰ In the Marine Corps, we call this “on-the-spot correction”; it clears the air, and nips a problem in the bud before it gets worse. Of course, in this day, it doesn't require this kind of violence.

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They undoubtedly had relatives in the army of Midian, which was killed to a man. One must wonder how this affected them emotionally. Even Moses had relatives by marriage among the Midianites, yet he ordered all the male Midianite children killed, along with all Midianite women and girls who were not virgins; and he was furious that it had not already been done. We are not told how Jethro and Zipporah felt about this.

25. The Cities of Refuge. (35:1-28)

As the Lord prepares to divide the Promised Land among the tribes, He provides for 48 cities for the Levites to live in, some in the area of each tribe, with enough land around them to provide room for their livestock³¹. The Levites had no need to till the land for raising food crops, for their food was provided; however, if they wanted to have their own grape vines and fig trees, they had room for them. Six of these 48 cities are to be “cities of refuge,” scattered over the Promised Land³². To these, one who has accidentally caused the death of another (a “manslayer”), may flee for refuge³³. One who flees (whether Israelite or foreigner) to a city of refuge is safe from acts of vengeance until the death is investigated and guilt or innocence is determined; however, if the manslayer leaves the city of refuge, he is on his own. An interesting provision is that, although he is in a sense a prisoner, forced to remain in the city of refuge, he may leave upon the death of the High Priest, and is still protected from retaliation. Like the laws of retribution, this provision prevented the endless tragedy of blood feuds.

NOTE: *Here, in the concept of the cities of refuge, is the biblical origin of the concept, in modern law, that we know as manslaughter, i.e., unintentionally causing the death of another, a crime less serious than murder.*

And, it is important to remember that British Common Law was based entirely upon the Bible; and our Constitutional legal system was based upon British Common Law, thus upon the Bible. Our sin-sick nation has drifted far from that godly foundation.

26. The Lineage of the Tribes Must Be Kept Intact. The descendants of Joseph speak to Moses about their concerns that if a daughter of one tribe marries a man of another tribe, then the inherited land, allotted to each tribe

³¹ The translators of the King James Bible called the open areas around the Levitical cities “suburbs,” and the word has retained this meaning to this day.

³² Moses will establish only three of these, on the east side of the Jordan River; Joshua will later establish the other three, west of the Jordan (which Moses is not allowed to cross).

³³

when the Israelites settle in the promised land, will be lost to that tribe. As a result, the real estate allotted to the tribes will become mixed and not remain intact. Moses agrees with the wisdom of this suggestion and decrees that women who marry must marry men of their own tribes. (Chapter 36)

***NOTE:** There will be an exception to this rule later, after the near-extinction of the tribe of Benjamin, when virgins from other tribes will be taken for wives of the surviving Benjamites, to prevent the extinction of the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 21).*

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