
NUMBERS 1-36

Lesson 10, Old Testament, Adult Religion Class, Tuesday, 1 Nov 2011

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INTRODUCTION

The name of this book comes from the two censuses taken, one at the beginning to count those coming out of Egypt and the other at the end to count those entering the Promised Land. The Hebrew name, as with the other books of the Torah, is taken from some of the first words: "in the wilderness."

Numbers is a book of transitions. The host of Israel goes from Sinai to the edge of the Promised Land; they move from wickedness and rejection of the Lord to acceptance; they move from rebellion to punishment—ultimately death for those who first left Egypt.

It is a story of wickedness that is consistently punished by the Lord very directly and after the manner of the wickedness itself as he struggles to teach Israel about following the Law he has given, the schoolmaster that is supposed to bring them to a full understanding of the Atonement.

Ultimately, Numbers is a book of redemption as Israel endured a trial that prepared them for the blessings the Lord so desired to impart. Reaching the plains of Moab in the end, they were ready to realize those blessings.

ISRAEL AT MOUNT SINAI (1:1 – 10:10)

INTRODUCTION

Since their arrival in Exodus 19 to the end of this section, Israel has been camped in “the wilderness of Sinai” (Exodus 19:1). There they received the Lord’s Law twice, recorded the details of the book of Leviticus, and now prepared to move toward the Promised Land by performing several critical tasks,

including taking a census, preparing the camp to move, including the tabernacle, and dedicating the Levites to the service of the Lord. Concluding with a great Passover celebration, Israel was ready to break camp and head north.

COMMENTARY

The first census (1:1-54)

The Lord commanded Moses to take “the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel” (1:2). This was not a census in the way we do it today. Rather, they were to count just males over 20—this was a count to see how big of an army they could muster. The numbers are huge. The smallest tribe, Manasseh, had 32,200, while the largest, Judah, had 74,600. The total of all men over twenty was 603,550. Given that count, that means that the total number of Israelites should have been between 2 and 3 million.

The logistical challenges of feeding, clothing, and moving that many people in the desert are overwhelming. Of course, nothing is impossible with the Lord, but many have taken a look at those numbers and come up with some suggestions that might help account for them (see Student Manual, 193-195).

First, this is a place where scribal error could easily occur. Copying numbers is harder than text because there is no context—they are just numbers. Hebrew numbers were written out using the alphabet characters, not with separate number characters as we have today. There are many places where the same count of something is given twice (Kings and Chronicles, for example) and where the numbers differ, demonstrating scribal error somewhere along the way.

Second, the word translated “thousand” in the KJV has the alternate meaning of ‘family’ or ‘clan.’ This would greatly reduce the numbers if that was the

intended meaning in these passages. Another possible translation (since ancient Hebrew had no vowels) is the word for ‘commander’ or ‘professional soldier.’ If the latter, it implies that for each tribe there are two numbers—one for trained soldiers and one for untrained men who can also fight. This makes the translation of 1:21, for example, like this:

“Those that were numbered of them, even of the tribe of Reuben, were 46 soldiers and five hundred [others].”

Tribe	Soldiers	Others	Totals
Reuben	46	500	546
Simeon	59	300	359
Gad	45	650	695
Judah	74	600	674
Issachar	54	400	454
Zebulun	57	400	457
Ephraim	40	500	540
Manasseh	32	200	232
Benjamin	35	400	435
Dan	62	700	762
Asher	41	500	541
Naphtali	53	400	453
Totals	598	5,500	6,148

These numbers would indicate a total population of the camp of Israel more like 25,000-30,000, a very reasonable but still large number.

The final section of this chapter (vv. 47-54) directs the Levites not to be counted in the census because they have a separate assignment—to be in charge of

the Tabernacle, including moving it and setting it up. Israel was to pitch their tents around the Tabernacle, making it the center place of the camp, and stay together by tribe. Levi also pitched together but around the Tabernacle itself, between the structure and the rest of the camp, “that there be no wrath upon the congregation of the children of Israel” (1:53). The details of this arrangement are given in the next chapter.

Arrangement of the tribes (2:1-34)

Each of the tribes had a designated area in the camp in which to pitch their tents with a standard (leader) tribe and two accompanying tribes. On the east (nearest the entrance to the Tabernacle) was Judah with Issachar and Zebulun; on the south was Reuben with Simeon and Gad; on the west was Ephraim with Manasseh and Benjamin; and on the north was Dan with Asher and Naphtali.

The Levites' service (3:1 - 4:49)

The section on the Levites begins with a short recitation of Aaron's sons and how the oldest two, Nadab and Abihu, “died before the Lord, when they offered strange fire” (3:4).

Turning to the Levites' responsibilities, the Lord instructed Moses that they were to “keep all the instruments of the tabernacle” (3:8) and to serve in the tabernacle. The Levites were to take the place of “all the firstborn” (3:12) who would otherwise be dedicated to God for a lifetime of service. Without this change, the firstborn of each family could have been holding the priesthood and working in the temple.

The various Levite families were given a location around the Tabernacle to pitch their tents and specific assignments when it came to moving the Tabernacle. On the east side were Moses and Aaron and his sons—standing between the people and the house of the Lord. This represented both the role that Moses and Aaron played in speaking for the Lord and in mediating with the Lord for the people.

The various assignments for moving the tabernacle's holy artifacts (the ark, the altars, the menorah, etc.) were given. Aaron and his sons first wrapped everything up so no one could see or touch them,

then the sons of Kohath carried them. Other parts of the building were taken down and carried by other Levite groups.

Purifying the camp (5:1-31)

In anticipation of an upcoming Passover celebration (chapter 9), the Lord instructed Moses to purify the camp of Israel. First, three things were listed for which people had to be put out of the camp temporarily: leprosy (probably a grouping of various skin diseases, not the disease we call by that name today), someone that “hath an issue” (5:2, referring to various bodily excretions), or someone who has touched a dead body and was thus defiled. All of these made a person ritually unclean and thus required a separation from others for a time.

Next, the Lord instructed Moses concerning repentance, which began with a confession of guilt and include a recompense of the trespass plus “the fifth part thereof” (5:7) as an increased penalty. If the harmed person or his family was no longer around, then the recompense had to be given to the priest as part of the atonement process. This was the second stage of purifying the camp.

Finally, the third item outlines what to do when someone was suspected of adultery but the accuser was without certainty. The person was brought before the priest with an offering of barley meal (5:15). The priest gave her some “bitter water” (5:18) which was consecrated water mixed with dirt from the floor of the tabernacle. If she was guilty, the bitter waters would make her ill (swollen stomach and rotten or wasted away thigh), though if she was innocent, she would be fine. This trial by ordeal impacted not only the suspect woman if found guilty but the involved man, too, thus making it equitable for all parties. In other words, if a woman suspected her husband of adultery, she could accuse the other woman and the husband would also be tested.

Nazarite vows (6:1-27)

The Hebrew word rendered “Nazarite” is a transliteration; the word means separation or consecration. Thus the last half of verse 2 and the start of verse 3 could be written: “When either man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of

separation, to separate themselves unto the Lord, he shall separate himself..."

While the text does not give the background of a Nazarite vow—it writes about the institution as if it already exists and is just trying to make things consistent—scriptural examples of Nazarites include Samson (Judges 13:5), Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11), and John the Baptist (Luke 1:15). Paul may have been participated in Nazarite vows (Acts 18:18).

The vow was usually temporary and for a specific period of time. The separator agreed to give up three things: anything "made of the vine" (6:4), which included wine, grapes, or any product from grapes; cutting his hair ("let the locks of the hair of his head grow," 6:5); and not touching the dead, even close relatives like father or mother. These restrictions set the person apart from others each day and made the vow visible to others.

During the time of vow, the person was to be dedicated to the service of the Lord. Thus while we may not use the name in the Church today, we have many people who act in the same capacity, setting aside worldly concerns and practices in favor of serving God for a time—or perhaps the rest of their lives. This would include missionaries and general authorities.

At the end of chapter 6 is a priestly benediction used by the high priest to bless Israel. Many ministers have used it over the years with their congregations (Rasmussen, 149). Two sixth century B.C. small silver scrolls were found in a tomb in Jerusalem. One of them included verses from this blessing (verses 24-26).

Offerings for the tabernacle (7:1-89)

All the tribes made offerings to the Lord to help with the Tabernacle, recorded here in chapter 7. The list is presented by day, one tribe making offerings each day, typical of other dedication texts of the period (Zondervan, 1:351).

Separation of the Levites (8:1-26)

In a three-step preparation for the Passover, the Lord first had Aaron light the menorah (8:3), then had Moses cleanse the Levites by sprinkling them with water, having them shave off all their hair (symbolic of a fresh start or new birth), and "wash their clothes" (8:7). Offerings were made as sin offerings for the Levites, then they were separated from the rest of Israel and committed to Tabernacle service. The Lord reiterated that the Levites service was a substitution for the firstborn of Israel, "For all the firstborn of the children of Israel are mine" (8:17) after he preserved them in Egypt.

Passover and preparations (9:1 - 10:10)

Finally, all was ready for the second Passover feast. It was one year since they had left Egypt (9:1), on the fourteenth day of the first month.

Certain men came to Moses and Aaron on the appointed day, concerned that they had needed to handle a corpse and thus were "defiled by the dead body of a man" (9:7) and would have to miss the whole Passover celebration. Moses asked the Lord for guidance and was told that the Passover celebration was so important that every person—unclean or clean, Israelite or outsider—was to keep the Passover. "Ye shall have one ordinance, both for the stranger, and for him that was born in the land" (9:14).

We are again (see also Exodus 40:34-38) instructed that the cloud and fire of the presence of the Lord was on the Tabernacle after it was consecrated. When it was there, "the children of Israel abode in their tents, and journeyed not: but when it was taken up, they journeyed" (9:22).

Finally, the Lord instructed Moses on the use of "two trumpets of silver" (10:2). The sight of the cloud moving was the warning it was time to prepare to leave; the sounding of the trumpets indicated the start of the journey, with the east and south groups of tribes leaving first. Trumpet blasts were also to be used in times of war and to indicate "the day of your gladness, and in your solemn days, and in the beginnings of your months" (10:10).

FROM SINAI TO KADESH-BARNEA (10:11 – 14:45)

INTRODUCTION

As Israel begins the journey from Sinai to the Promised Land, they immediately began to complain. Moses is overwhelmed by the burden of it all and the Lord mercifully gives him seventy to help and gives them all a marvelous spiritual experience. Meanwhile, Israel complained about the monotony of their diet of manna (called in Exodus 16:15 the 'bread from heaven' or the 'food from heaven') so the Lord gave them quail enough to make them ill and even die as they gluttonously engorged

themselves. Miriam and Aaron also rebelled, challenging Moses' authority. These incidents flow together into a single story, illustrating God's patience but also the limits of his patience and contrasting a spiritual feast with incredible blessings with a carnal feast that brings sorrow and even death. God wants us all to be filled with the Spirit but we sometimes choose to be filled with the world.

COMMENTARY

The march (10:11-36)

On the 20th day of the second month, about 11 months after their arrival at Sinai, the cloud of the Lord's presence lifted from the Tabernacle, indicating it was time to leave. The chapter describes how each camp left and who the leaders were. Their destination was "the wilderness of Paran" (10:12), the location of which is not certain today, though it somewhere in the Sinai Peninsula, on either side of the eastern arm of the Red Sea that is alongside Midian. The Levites carried the structure of the Tabernacle first, followed by the items that go in it, with the thought that by the time the latter groups arrived, the first group would have it set up and ready (JPS, 305).

Moses wanted his brother-in-law, Hobab (the son of Raguel which is a variant spelling of Reuel, another name for Jethro; Exodus 2:18), to act as their guide as they traveled. At first, Hobab said no, but with some persuasion from Moses promising an equal inheritance, he agreed. He and his family did inherit land (Judges 1:16; 4:11) and are cited for their integrity (Jeremiah 35). "The present-day Druze tribes in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel claim to be descendants of them" (Rasmussen, 151).

The group only traveled three days, being guided by the cloud and the ark of the covenant (out of its normal position in the center of the camp for this one trip), before trouble began.

Murmuring and rebellion (11:1-35)

First, some of the people complained about the journey. The text records that "the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp" (11:1). Moses has to pray to have the fires quenched, and he named the place "Taberah" ('burning').

Next, some cried out for "flesh to eat." They complained that they missed the variety of things they ate in Egypt (how well could they really eat as slaves?), but now they have nothing to eat but this 'what the heck?' stuff (manna, called by the Lord "the bread from heaven" in Exodus 16:15 but called by the Israelites 'what is it?'). The link to John 6:30-35 is obvious, where Jesus taught that God gave the people "bread from heaven" to eat, and now the Father was giving them "the true bread from heaven" in the form of his Son. Just as the people of Moses' day rejected the bread from heaven, so did the people of Jesus' day.

Hearing all these complaints, Moses complained to the Lord, "Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me?" (11:11). He asked if these people were his children or if he had raised them? Where was he supposed to get meat for them? He said he could no longer bear the burden of this people alone and said if the Lord was not going to solve the problem, he should just kill Moses right then.

But the Lord had a plan to relieve Moses' burden, and told him to "Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel" (11:16). These seventy would receive a portion "of the spirit which is upon thee" and help "bear the burden of the people" (11:17).

To solve the meat issue, the Lord promised them "a whole month" of meat (11:20). You can almost hear sarcasm in the retort that they would have so much meat that "it come out at your nostrils" (11:20). Moses' first reaction was a lack of faith (or perhaps still one of anger at the people), wondering how the Lord would provide a month's worth of meat. It would take killing every animal they had with them. The Lord chastised him and said Moses would see it happen.

So Moses told this to the people, gathered the seventy, and set them around the Tabernacle. The cloud came over them and the seventy "prophesied, and did not cease" (11:25). Two men of the seventy but who did not join the seventy around the Tabernacle but remained in the camp also prophesied, and someone ran to tell Moses. One of the seventy, Joshua (later the leader of the whole camp) told Moses to "forbid them" (11:28). But Moses gave his now famous answer: "would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!" (11:29).

Then came the meat in the form of quails that fell out of the sky all around the camp, three feet thick. The people gathered and gathered and everyone ate meat. But even as they ate, "a very great plague" (11:33) hit the camp, probably caused by over-eating. Though the text doesn't specifically state it, several must have died, because Moses named the place "Kibroth-hattaavah" (11:34), meaning 'graves of lust' which could also mean 'coveting' or 'craving.'

Miriam and Aaron complain (12:1-16)

Moses' sister and brother apparently felt like they ought to be able to speak to the people on behalf of the Lord as well as Moses. They rightly said, "hath he not spoken also by us?" (12:2), but their conclusion that they should thus have the same authority as Moses was wrong. To justify their position, they used his marriage to "the Ethiopian woman" against him. Josephus, a Jewish historian at the time of Christ, records such a marriage in his account,

contracted during a supposed military campaign of Moses to Ethiopia (Student Manual, 201). At least two explanations are possible. The actual word in the text is *kušî't*, meaning someone from "Cush." This land can be either Cush in Africa (Ethiopia) or Kushu in Arabia, associated with Midian, where Zipporah was from (JPS, 308; Jackson, 189). Either answer would be a concern to Moses' family if they were focused on ethnic purity (Zondervan, 357).

Their criticisms were immediately noticed by the Lord, who called the three of them into the Tabernacle. Calling Miriam and Aaron forward, he instructed them that you could tell a true prophet because the Lord would speak to him in visions and dreams. But Moses was more than that because God spoke to him "mouth to mouth" (12:8), "clearly and not in riddles" (NIV). Then the Lord's presence left and Miriam was suddenly quite leprous (struck with some kind of skin disease).

Why Miriam and not Aaron also? Jewish scholars attribute this to her, based on the feminine singular form of the verb "spake" in verse 1—in other words, Miriam was doing the complaining but Aaron was complicitous (JPS, 308-309). But Aaron accepted her punishment as his own: "lay not the sin upon *us*" (12:11, italics added). So Moses prayed for her and the Lord healed her, though until after the mandatory seven-day time out of the camp for someone with her condition.

The spies (13:1-33)

The Lord told Moses to send one leader from each tribe to go ahead of the camp and spy out the land of Canaan. Their names are given in 13:4-15. Note that "Oshea" in verse 8 is the same man known elsewhere as Joshua. He is also spoken of in verse 16 where Moses appears to have changed his name. "Oshea" means 'salvation'—the same as Hosea the prophet. "Jehoshua" means 'YHWH is salvation.' Jesus Christ's birth name was probably the Aramaic form of this name, Yeshua.

The spies journeyed north to Hebron then to Rehob near Hamath (perhaps at the northern end of Canaan, what is today Lebanon). They brought back fruit—grapes, pomegranates, and figs. But ten came back and told the people that conquest was not possible: "the people be strong that dwell in the

land, and the cities are walled, and very great” (13:28) and “we be not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we” (13:31). But Caleb (and later Joshua, in 14:6-9) spoke out, calling for faith in the Lord’s promises, “for we are well able to overcome it” (13:30).

Murmuring and rebellions II (14:1-45)

Hearing the negative report from the ten spies, the people cried all night and “murmured against Moses and against Aaron” (14:2), preferring to die in Egypt or the wilderness than to suffer death in an impossible battle. They proposed rejected Moses’ leadership and going back to Egypt! Joshua and Caleb boldly spoke out and called on the people to trust God to keep his word: “he will bring us into this land, and give it us...fear them not” (14:8-9). But the people rejected their words and even moved to stone the two men.

The Lord’s anger was complete, and he again told Moses he would wipe them all out and start over with just Moses to make a mighty nation. This time Moses pleads with God, reasoning that if the Lord destroyed the people, the Egyptians and others would hear and mock the Lord for bringing them out of Egypt and then killing them in the desert. Moses

plead for forgiveness for the people and the Lord granted it: “I have pardoned according to thy word” (14:20). Looking to a distant future, the Lord promised Moses that one day “all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord” (14:21).

In the meantime, though, he had to deal with these rebellious people. He decreed that all those who were counted in Numbers 1 would die in the wilderness except Caleb and Joshua. But their children would “know the land which ye have despised” (14:31). They would wander in the wilderness the same number of years that the spies took in days to look over the land, “even forty days, each day for a year” (14:34).

The ten spies died right away from some kind of plague, but Caleb and Joshua were fine. Then in a humbled but still self-centered mood, a group determined to take the Lord as his previous word and go up against the people of the land in battle. Moses told them, “Go not up, for the Lord is not among you” (14:42), but they went anyway and were “discomfited” (meaning ‘crushed to pieces,’ 14:45) by the Amalekites and Canaanites.

FROM KADESH-BARNEA TO MOAB (15:1 – 21:35)

INTRODUCTION

The wandering was nearing an end but the murmuring still lingered on. As Israel concluded its time in the desert, it still had important lessons to

learn about faith, trust in God, repentance, and strict obedience.

COMMENTARY

Ordinances and rules (15:1-41)

The first 31 verses of this chapter reiterate many of the same things discussed in Leviticus 1-7.

Separately, a man went out and “gathered sticks upon the sabbath day” (15:32). He was brought to Moses and Aaron for judgment. They held him for a while, waiting for the Lord’s word. When it came, it

was to stone the man, according to the Law (Exodus 31:14; 35:1-3). Though it might seem harsh, given the rebellions that had just happened, absolute obedience at this time was increasingly important. Not only was the work he was doing in violation of the Law, but his purpose for gathering sticks was surely to make a fire, which was particularly called out in Exodus 35:1-3. The man knew the Law but chose for his own reasons to disobey, and received

the full punishment in the Law he had agreed to follow.

The command in the last few verses (37-41) had to do with putting fringes (tassels) and blue ribbon or cord on their clothing. This was to remind them of their covenants and to put the Lord first. Blue was selected because it was symbolic of heaven and therefore spirituality (Student Manual, 206).

Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rebel (16:1-50)

Korah was of the leading Levite tribe that was responsible for the sacred furnishings of the Tabernacle. His contention was that he had every right to lead as much as Aaron and Moses. He got two other leaders to follow him, Dathan and Abiram, along with 250 other “princes” or leaders from the various tribes. Challenging Moses directly, Korah said to him, “Ye take too much upon you” (16:3). But Moses said the Lord who show who should be in charge and cautioned the men with the same words, “ye take too much upon you, ye sons of Levi” (16:7). Moses reminded them that it was already an honor to hold the position they held as Levites, helping to care for and transport the Tabernacle, then asked, “seek ye the priesthood also?” In one of only two changes in Numbers, the JST changes this to “the **high** priesthood.” They already were ordained to the priesthood. Some interpret Moses’ words that they wanted Aaron’s office because he was a high priest (e.g., Keil, 1:724). The JST change provides some support for this idea. But the Prophet Joseph Smith had learned much about the office of high priest and the Melchizedek Priesthood through his translation work. By the time he got to Numbers, he had done the entire New Testament and all of the Old Testament up to this point. It seems likely that this change instead refers to a desire for authority beyond that held by Aaron—Korah and his friends wanted the authority of Moses. “Moses was very wroth” (16:15) but ultimately left the judgment up to the Lord, and the rebels were all destroyed.

The test was provided by everyone bringing a censor (a long stick with a bowl on the end, often held by a carved or cast hand) holding hot coals and incense. They were to offer this to the Lord and whoever was accepted by the Lord would be known. The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying basically, ‘Move away,’ which they did. They gave a warning to the

people also to move away but many stayed. Then poetically, just as they had opened their mouths against Moses and Aaron, “the earth opened her mouth, and swallow them up” (16:30). Those near the Tabernacle were consumed by “a fire from the Lord” (16:35). When the rebels were all destroyed, Moses had Eleazar take the censers these men had been holding before they were destroyed and pound them out to add them to the burnt offering altar.

Next, a plague began to spread among the people who had supported Korah. Moses and Aaron had to quickly intervene to stop it, with Aaron literally standing “between the dead and the living” (16:48).

Aaron proved (17:1-13)

If the deaths of the rebel leaders and their followers were not enough proof, the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron to do one more thing. Aaron and leaders from each of the tribes were to bring their rods (staff or standard) to the Tabernacle with their names written on them. Moses pronounced that the chosen priesthood leader of the Lord would see his dead stick blossom with new buds. The next day, Aaron’s rod alone was not only blossoming but even had almonds. Each man came and claimed his rod but Aaron’s rod was shown to the people then included in the Tabernacle as a witness. The people overreacted a bit, fearing some punishment of death as the previous rebels had experienced (Rasmussen, 156).

Levites called to minister (18:1-32)

In two rare cases where the Lord spoke directly to Aaron without Moses being included, chapter 18 enlarges on the themes in Numbers 3, instructing the priests and Levites in greater detail about their responsibilities in the Tabernacle. The Lord then spoke to Moses confirming some of the details and adding more.

Red Heifer and cleansing (19:1-22)

The sacrifice of a red (symbolic of blood) heifer (young cow, symbolic of life potential) was designed to help those who were defiled after touching the dead. Other elements were also red—the cedar wood used, crimson wool, and hyssop. The young cow was burned outside the camp—not on the altar

in the Tabernacle. Then the priest washed and put on clean clothes (for doing this made him unclean until evening). Another man was to carry the ashes from the fire, also making him unclean until evening.

The ashes were mixed with water, creating “a water of separation” (19:9). Someone who was defiled by touching a dead body could then use this water to make sure they were clean again after the required seven days. Those who did not go through this ritual remained unclean and could even be “cut off from among the people” (19:20).

“Much vital symbolism can be found in this ordinance. One who defiles himself with sin undergoes a spiritual death whereby he is cut off from God’s presence through the loss of the Holy Spirit. Recovery from spiritual death is obtained by faith in Christ’s atonement (symbolized by the death of the red heifer), repentance from sin, baptism in water, receiving the Holy Ghost, and obedience to God’s commandments. All who thereafter commit certain serious sins and refuse to repent are likewise ‘cut off from among the congregation,’ that is, excommunicated” (Student Manual, 208).

Moses smites the rock (20:1-13)

This chapter opens with the camp moved to the “desert of Zin” near a location called Kadesh. There are two Kadeshes in the Bible: this one in the northern Negev desert and the other in near Petra, both mentioned in Numbers (the western one in this chapter and the eastern one in chapter 33). What is not clear from the opening verse is that the bulk of the 40 years of wandering is now past—their arrival at Kadeah (usually called Kadesh-barnea to distinguish it from the other) is at least the second time (the first was Numbers 13). Israel was now poised to move from wandering in the wilderness to entering the Promised Land.

The first thing noted is that here Miriam died. Moses’ older sister and prophetess finally passed away and was buried at this location (today typically identified with ‘Ain el-Qudeirat, about 50 miles southwest of Beersheba; Zondervan, 1:359-360).

Unfortunately, forty years of wandering had not yet worked out all the rebellion in the camp. When they arrived and found no water (a repeat of an incident

early in their travels, in Exodus 17), the people complained long and loud to Moses. The older generation had all but died off, so this was a new generation with the same attitude problem. Moses and Aaron “fell upon their faces” (20:6) and the Lord told Moses to “speak ye unto the rock.” But perhaps out of frustration or remembering what happened before, Moses instead struck the rock with this staff. Water gushed out, as the Lord had promised, but the Lord immediately chastised Moses. Moses had both not believed (or obeyed) the Lord in using his staff but had also given no credit to the Lord for the miracle, instead asking the people, “must we fetch you water out of this rock?” (20:10). The punishment he and Aaron both received was to lose the privilege of entering the Promised Land themselves: “he shall not bring this congregation into the land” (20:12).

Edom refuses passage (20:14-22)

From Kadesh-barnea, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom to the east, asking him (as a distant cousin, as it were) to allow Israel safe passage through his land. Moses promised they would not take food or trample crops, drink their water, or vary from their course until they were passed through (about two days’ journey). Moses was asking to use what is known as the King’s Highway, a route that went through the highlands on the edge of the Arabian desert in what is today Jordan. Edom refused. Moses tried to negotiate but the refusal remained. The camp had gathered on the Edomite border, perhaps expecting a successful outcome.

Aaron’s death and successor (20:23-29)

While they were on the border of Edom, the Lord warned both Moses and Aaron in a revelation that Aaron was going to die soon. Moses was able to take the high priestly garments from Aaron and give them to his remaining oldest son, Eleazar. This happened at the top of Mount Hor and Aaron died there shortly after the ceremony. Thus at the beginning of chapter 20, Moses lost his sister, and at the end, his brother.

Serpent lifted up (21:1-18)

While mourning the death of Aaron for a month (20:29), Arad, a Canaanite king, attacked Israel and

took many prisoners. With the blessing of the Lord, Israel attacked his cities and “utterly destroyed them” (21:3). Because they did this with a vow of devotion to the Lord, they named the place “Hormah” (21:3), meaning ‘devotion.’

Honoring the Edomite refusal to let them pass through their lands, the camp had to go further east on the very edge of the desert where water was scarce and the conditions challenging. Once again, the company complained. Their punishment this time was “fiery serpents” (21:6) that went among the people and bit them, killing many. Struggling with this challenge, the people repented and Moses prayed for them. In response, the Lord instructed him to make a brass serpent on a pole and promised that “everyone that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live” (21:8). This proved to be the case. We

learn from the Book of Mormon that not everyone looked “because of the simpleness of the way” (1 Nephi 17:41) but they clearly understood it was a symbol of Christ (Alma 33:18-20). Jesus used this incident during his lifetime in teaching about his own crucifixion (John 3:13-15).

To the plains of Moab (21:19 – 21:35)

As with the king of Moab, the king of the Amorites, Sihon, was offered a chance to let the Israelites pass through his lands peacefully, and he, too, refused. But unlike Moab, Israel didn’t go around him, but attacked and were victorious. They also fought “Og the king of Bashan” (21:33) and were victorious as well. This gave Israel a foot hold into the land with possessions on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

BALAK AND BALAAM (22:1 – 24:25)

INTRODUCTION

Those the Biblical record recounts the story of Israel, it also demonstrates that there were other believers in Jehovah out there, such as Jethro in Midian and now Balaam in Pethor. The location of Pethor is not known with certainty, but it may be north near Haran where Abraham lived (Rasmussen, 160). Thus

Balaam could have received the gospel through Abraham or his family. In any case, he clearly worshipped Jehovah and Balak thought he could use that to his own advantage in freeing himself from the threat Israel posed as they journeyed through the lands.

COMMENTARY

Balak was the Moabite king—perhaps the same one who had refused passage to Israel earlier. Seeing them conquer his neighbors, he was concerned. Somehow he learned of a prophet of Jehovah living north in Pethor named Balaam (meaning, ‘not of the people’), so sent messengers to get him to come and curse his fellow Jehovah worshippers. Balaam asked the Lord what to do and was told, “Thou shalt not with them; thou shalt not curse the people” (22:12). But the king was undeterred and sent more important messengers, promising honor and wealth. Balaam asked the Lord again and the Lord told him to go in the KJV. In the JST, in the second and last change in the book of Numbers, it says, “If the men come to call thee, rise up, **and if thou wilt** go with them; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, ~~that~~ shalt thou ~~de~~ **speak**” (22:20). In other words,

the Lord gave him freedom to choose (even though he already knew what he should do from previous revelation) but cautioned him about only saying what the Lord instructed him. Surely Joseph Smith must have seen a parallel to his own experience with the 116 lost pages as he made these subtle but significant changes!

The text records the Lord’s anger at Balaam’s poor choice, and an angel was sent to block his way. His donkey could see it but he couldn’t, so when the animal turned away from the angel, Balaam whipped her. But the angel kept blocking the way, so the poor donkey got whipped again and again to avoid the angel with a sword drawn. Finally after the third time being beaten, the Lord allowed the ass to speak, and she said to Balaam, “What have I done unto thee,

that thou hast smitten me these three times?” (22:28). This probably caused Balaam to fall off his ass but he quickly recovered and had a conversation. Balaam expressed his anger toward the beast and said he would kill her there if he had a sword, but the animal simply asked if she had ever done anything to hurt Balaam? Then the Lord let Balaam see the angel, who chastised him for his anger toward the ass. The angel repeated the message—he could go with the men but should only speak the words the Lord commands him.

Finally meeting with the king, Balaam said he can only say what the Lord desires. The king gave Balaam three chances to curse Israel, but each time Balaam instead blessed them (23:7-10; 23:18-24; 24:3-9). He gave Balak a final warning about Israel conquering everything, thus making four blessings/speeches altogether. But Balaam apparently also gave some counsel to the king about how he might weaken Israel (31:16).

PREPARING TO ENTER CANAAN (25:1 – 36:13)

INTRODUCTION

As the children of Israel sat on the east side of the Jordan near Jericho, they made final preparations to inherit the land before them. The tribes of Gad, Reuben, and part of Manasseh chose to remain on the eastern side, which Moses supported if they continued to help with the conquest. Since Moses would not be crossing the river, Joshua was called and set apart as the new leader. The camp was again

purified, counted, and sacrifices made. They waged war on the Midianites that had sent women in to bring wickedness among them and discussed how to divide up the land once they possessed it, appointing leaders in each tribe to oversee the process.

All was ready for the next step, setting the story up for Moses’ great sermons in Deuteronomy and the conquest in Joshua.

COMMENTARY

Sinners confronted (25:1-18)

Many men began to bring Midianite and Edomite women into camp to commit acts of morality with them. With that came the worship of their gods, including the first mention of Baal in the Bible in verse 3. One man even flaunted his immorality, parading his Midianite woman in front of Moses. Incensed, Phinehas the grandson of Aaron through Eleazar, took a javelin and went to the man’s tent and killed both of them. This is said to have stopped a curse spreading through the camp—probably the immorality itself. As a result, Phinehas was blessed with “the covenant of an everlasting priesthood” (25:13).

The second census (26:1-27:11)

At the end of their wanderings, the Lord again instructed Moses and now Eleazar to take a census

of the fighting force among them, those “twenty years old and upward” (26:2). The tally is given in the rest of 26 and the first part of 27. The key message is that this count did not differ dramatically from the one forty years earlier, so waiting all that time did not increase their numbers and make them stronger in that sense but did give them time to try and increase their faith and weed out those who would not trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Joshua’s call (27:12-23)

The Lord warned Moses that like his brother, Aaron, his end was also near. Moses suggested a successor would be important and the Lord instructed him to call “Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit” (27:18). Moses ordained him and Eleazar and the congregation witnessed the charge Joshua received from Moses.

Sacrifices and vows (28:1 – 30:16)

Most of this section is a repeat of Leviticus 1-7, 23, and other chapters where the feasts and sacrifices are discussed. Some new things include a drink offering to go with other offerings already being done (28:7, 10, 14-15, 24, 31); and Rosh Hashanah ('head of the year'; today's name, not that of the Bible) on the first day of the seventh month, a time of judgment and repentance. Chapter 30 includes more details about vows.

Destruction of the Midianites (31:1-54)

Continuing their conquest of the area, the Lord instructed Moses to destroy the Midianites. Because this name represents a large group of people, it doesn't mean Moses went after his own in-laws. They apparently conquered five cities because five kings are listed (31:8). Balaam, the prophet from chapters 22-24, was evidently still among the people and was also killed.

When the army returned, they had killed all the men but brought back all the women and children. Moses was incensed; though the instruction is not clearly given in the text, they were obviously told only to bring back unmarried girls and women, so he had the army kill all the adult women and male children.

The army, of course, had to stay outside of the camp for seven days because they had killed and had to use the red heifer waters of purification to cleanse themselves on the third and seventh day before returning into the camp. The army also gave half of the plunder to the camp and Moses divided it among the people and the Levites, then the army gave an additional offering from their half to the temple.

Tribes east of the Jordan (32:1-42)

Two and a half of the tribes (Gad, Reuben, and half of Manasseh, though the latter is not mentioned until 32:33) approached Moses about having their inheritances on the east of the Jordan because they saw it was "a land for cattle" (32:4). Moses raised the point that if they settled here, it would mean not going on with the rest of the company across the Jordan, and that would be discouraging to everyone, just as the report of the ten spies had been.

After considering it, they came back to Moses and proposed that they be given a little time to build places for their animals and homes for their families, but then the men would continue with the host across the Jordan and would fight with them "until the children of Israel have inherited every man his inheritance" (32:18). Moses agreed with this proposal, and thus granted unto these people their inheritance on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

Review of the journey so far (33:1-49)

Though the earlier text basically skipped the entire 40 years of wandering, Numbers 33 makes up for it. Starting with their departure from Egypt, this detailed list of their travels and stops covers the journey in detail. Unfortunately, most of the locations are today unknown, but it shows that the records kept were far more detailed than the summary we currently have in Numbers.

Israel's charge (33:50-56)

The Lord commanded Israel that as they moved across the Jordan River into the Promised Land to conquer it, they were to "dispossess the inhabitants of the land" (33:53) and drive them out completely. They were to destroy all pagan forms of worship—images, idols, and shrines. If they do not do this completely, those that remain will become "pricks in your eyes, and thorns in your sides" (33:55). This proved to be exactly what happened.

Tribal boundaries (34:1 – 36:13)

Numbers 34:1-15 outlines the ideal division of the land. Some of these lands were not conquered until the time of David and others were captured early but soon lost (Rasmussen, 165).

Since Moses wouldn't be there, the Lord set up a system whereby leaders from each tribe, under the direction of Joshua and Eleazar, would oversee the actual division of the land, as recorded in 34:16-29.

Because the Levites were not inheriting a land but were to serve the people everywhere, the Lord directed in 35:1-8 that 48 cities be given to them, including six designated as "cities of refuge" for those needing a temporary place of sanctuary according to the Law. More details about these cities

of refuge and how they would be used complete chapter 35.

Some of the people raised the issue about inter-tribal marriages complicating inheritance, so Moses

gave his opinion (unlike so many other passages, this does not say the Lord spoke to him on this topic) that women should marry men in their own tribes, but “Let them marry to whom they think best” (36:6).

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