



NUMBERS

Survey of the Old Testament: The Torah

Fall 2004

Introduction

Background

- Name:** The Greek and English translations of this book entitle it “Numbers,” referring to the two censuses of the people found in the book. In the Hebrew bible, the book is entitled “In the Wilderness,” referring to the location in which most of the events of this book take place.
- Author:** Moses, by tradition. Jesus affirms that Moses authored the “Law,” of which Numbers is traditionally considered a part.
- Date Written:** 1406 BC.
- Audience:** A new generation of Israelites who are ready to enter the Promised Land, 40 years after their parents escaped from slavery in Egypt.

Structure:

1 st Generation Prepares for the Promised Land (1-25)					2 nd Generation Prepares for the Promised Land (26-36)	
(1-10) Preparation for the Promised Land		(11-25) Rejection of the Promised Land			(26-30)	(31-36)
(1-4) 1 st Generation Counted & Organized	(5-10) Regulations for the March	(11-15) March to the Promised Land	(16-20) Levite Leadership Reaffirmed	(21-25) Story of Balaam	2 nd Generation Counted & Organized	Organization of the Promised Land

Timeline

There are four chronological markers in the book:

- 1:1 – The Census - 2nd month, 2nd year after Exodus
- 9:1 – Instructions for Passover - 1st month, 2nd year
- 10:11 – Beginning of the March to the Promised Land – 2nd month, 20 day, 2nd year
- 33:38 – Death of Aaron – 5th month, 1st day, 40th year (his death itself takes place in chapter 20).

The book of Numbers covers 38 years spanning from the 2nd year after the Exodus, when the nation is still camped at Mt. Sinai, to the 40th year after the Exodus when the new generation is ready to enter the Promised Land. The book, however, is not strictly chronological, being structured more around the generations' preparation for the Promised Land. Furthermore, the book only details events in the 2nd year and 40th years after the Exodus, staying silent for most of the 38 years of wandering.

1526 BC	1446	1445	1444	1407	1406
Moses Born	Exodus from Egypt	10 Commandments	First Census	Israelites wander in the wilderness	Second Census
					Israel enters the Promised Land

Purpose

Moses wrote Numbers as the second generation is ready to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 33:2) in order to encourage that generation to take hold of God's Promised Land by faith.

The first section of Numbers recounts how the nation of Israel had been prepared by God to take possession of the Promised Land, but then rejected the Promised Land. As a result, the nation wandered in the wilderness for 38 more years. The second section recounts how the next generation of the nation was similarly prepared to take the land. The implicit question at the end of the book is, will this generation rise to the challenge and accept the blessings of God and take the Promised Land¹.

Numbers also demonstrates God's unconditional faithfulness to the nation. While the first generation rejects the blessings of the covenant, God is faithful to the covenant. In spite of their complaints and rebellion, He still blesses the nation (see the story of Balaam) and fulfills His promise of the land to the second generation.

Theme

God's preparation of the nation of Israel for the blessings of the Promised Land.

¹ Ronald B. Allen. "Exodus." *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan. Electronic edition, STEP file).

The 1st Generation Prepares for the Promised Land

Preparation for the Promised Land

The First Generation Counted & Organized

Census for the 12 Tribes (Chapters 1-2)

The first census provides the reader with a list of each tribe, the name of the tribal chief, the number of fighting men in each tribe. God has promised Israel the land they were about to enter, but they had to take the land by conquering it from its current inhabitants. The census is the first step in taking a group of former slaves and turning them into an army. In total the census lists 603,550 men ready for action.

Census of Israel in Numbers

Numbers 1-2, 26

Marching Order	Camp Location	Tribe	Tribal Leader	1st Census	2nd Census
1	East	Judah	Nahshon, son of Amminadab	74,600	76,500
2	East	Issachar	Nethanel, son of Zuar	54,400	64,300
3	East	Zebulun	Eliab, son of Helon	<u>57,400</u>	<u>60,500</u>
East Total				186,400	201,300
4	South	Reuben	Elizur, son of Shedeur	46,500	43,730
5	South	Simeon	Shelumiel, son of Zurishaddai	59,300	22,200
6	South	Gad	Eliasaph, son of Deuel	<u>45,650</u>	<u>40,500</u>
South Total				151,450	106,430
7	West	Ephraim	Elishama, son of Ammihud	40,500	32,500
8	West	Manasseh	Gamaliel, son of Pedahzur	32,200	52,700
9	West	Benjamin	Abidan, son of Gideoni	<u>35,400</u>	<u>45,600</u>
West Total				108,100	130,800
10	North	Dan	Ahiezer, son of Ammishaddai	62,700	64,400
11	North	Asher	Pagiel, son of Ochran	41,500	53,400
12	North	Naphtali	Ahira, son of Enan	<u>53,400</u>	<u>45,400</u>
North Total				<u>157,600</u>	<u>163,200</u>
Grand Total				603,550	601,730

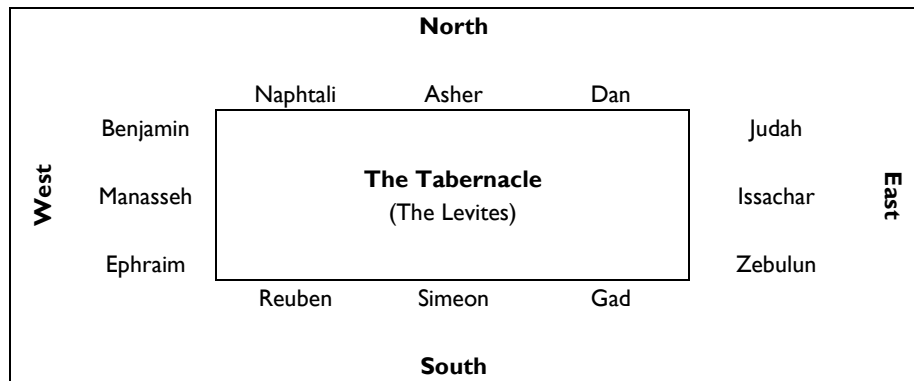
The census also provides Moses with the ability to organize the camp and their march. Israel has been encamped at the base of Mt. Sinai for two years, and as they get ready to march towards the Promised Land, they needed some organization. Chapter 2 lists the order of the tribes in their march as well as their arrangement when they stopped to camp.

It is important to note that Judah leads the nation, in fulfillment of Jacob's prophecy in Genesis 49. Matthew 1 lists Nahshon, son of Amminadab in the Messianic line, reminding us of Judah's role as the tribe from whom the Messiah will eventually come.

Census for the Levites (Chapters 3-4)

The Levites, however, are not included in the count of the fighting men. The Levites were not to be part of the army, for they had been set aside for God as the priests and workers in the tabernacle. The Levites were to have the sacred duties. Moses does count the tribe of Levi, but instead of counting all those men able to fight, he counts all the men able to serve in the tabernacle, limiting the count to those aged 30 to 50.

Israel Camped Around the Tabernacle



Moses also conducts a second census in the tribe of Levi, counting all those males from one month in age and older. From the time of the Passover, God has required that all the first born from every tribe be dedicated to Him. Now, the Levite tribe was to be dedicated to him in substitution for the first born in each tribe. Therefore all the firstborn of Israel had to be counted (22,273), as well as all the male population of Levi (22,000). The difference (273) had to be paid for in cash; five shekels per head. These 1,365 shekels demonstrate that importance of each individual in the covenant. Moses does not merely round down the total first-born, but requires that each individual be redeemed².

Census of the Levites in Numbers

Clan	Duties	Camp Location	Clan Leader	30+	Infant +
Kohath	Sacred Objects	South	Elizphan, son of Uzziel	2,750	8,600
Gershon	Curtains	West	Eliasaph, son of Leal	2,630	7,500
Merari	Frames	North	Zuriel, son of Abihail	<u>3,200</u>	<u>6,200</u>
Total Levites				8,580	22,300
					23,000

The total of the Levites clans adds to 22,300. However, the summation in verse 3:39 lists only 22,000. There are a few possibilities for this mathematical difference:

- The author rounded-down. Given the round numbers in the census of all the tribes, it is clear that the census used approximations and round numbers. However, this would be unlikely in this case, as the significance of redeeming the 273 extra first born is very exact.
- Out of the 22,300 Levites, 300 were first born, and so they were not available to redeem the other first born³.

A second problem develops with the numbers. The ratio of 22,273 first born to 603,550 fighting men seems small. That would mean only one out of every 27 adult male is a first born. While it is certain that the Israelites had large families, a family with 27 male children seems highly unlikely. Merrill argues that the first born from all the tribes only includes only those first born children born since the first Passover⁴, since all other first born had been redeemed by the Passover lamb.

² Allen.

³ Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset and David Brown. *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*. (Electronic STEP File: E-Sword Software).

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill. "Exodus." *Bible Knowledge Commentary*. (Victor Books, 1988).

The Problem of Large Numbers

Another solution however depends on how we approach the significantly large numbers of the census. On its face, the book of Numbers reveals that the nation of Israel is a very large nation. If there are 603,550 fighting men, the total population, including women, children, and men too old to fight, would be 2.5 to 3 million. This is not a small number!

This is such a large number, that it stretches the imagination to think how this large group was able to be supported in the desert. How could this much food and water be found? In addition, when we consider the crossing of the Red Sea, it seems a double miracle, for 2.5 million people cross the sea in one night. In the book of Leviticus, how could one altar support the sacrifices of this many people?

Furthermore, when we look at the conquest of the Promised Land, archeologists tell us that the total population of the Canaanites would have been significantly smaller than the invading army. Yet the scripture makes it clear that the defeat of the inhabitants of the land was a miracle from God because Israel was “the fewest of the peoples” (Deuteronomy 7:7). In addition, archeologists can not find cities or settlements of sufficient size from this time period to support a population of 2.5 million. Furthermore, by the end of the book of Joshua, we learn that Israel had trouble filling the land because of its vast size in comparison to their population.

All this leads us to question the sheer size of the population suggested by the book of Numbers. There are at least three distinct ways to reconcile these realities with the census:

- The numbers should be accepted at face-value. The difficulties in moving and supporting such a population can be explained through the miraculous provision and protection of God. Furthermore, archeology is not an exact science, and basing our interpretation of the bible on what archeologists have *not* found is problematic. However, this still leaves the question of why the conquest of Canaan was considered a miracle.
- The Hebrew word for thousands (אלף eleph) can and should also be translated as troop or company. Because the census is clearly dealing with an army, we can interpret this to mean that there were 603 companies of troops. However, this does not explain the remaining 550 men. Moses' arithmetic is quite good, and he carries his hundreds over into the thousands column appropriately, suggesting that this is meant to be understood as a true arithmetic thousand and not just a troop.
- The Hebrew word for thousands (eleph) is similar to the Hebrew word for chief or commander (allup), so there were 603 commanders in the army. Again, however, this doesn't reconcile with the arithmetic of the census.

Ronald Allen suggests that the numbers in the census are purposely multiplied by a factor of ten. Instead of 603,550 fighting men, there were only 60,355, and instead of a total national population of 2.5 million, there were only 250,000. His contention is not based on a different understanding of the Hebrew word, believing that indeed Moses purposely intended for his reader to understand the word as thousand, and therefore also avoiding the arithmetic problems of other solutions. Likewise, an army of 60 thousand would be sufficiently small to make the conquest of Canaan a true miracle of God rather than just a route by overwhelming numbers. To further support Allen's contention, a first born-population of 22,000 would represent a ratio of first born to the total male population of 2.7:1, a much more reasonable number.

The difficulty with this approach is its lack of explicit support in the text itself. The reader is just assumed to know that there is a ten-fold overstatement without any clear clue from the passage. One would not normally arrive at this interpretation with a plain approach to the passage.

However, this approach does not imply that Moses was purposely deceitful in the numbers. Rather, the exaggerated numbers are used by Moses as a look to the future fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. For Allen, the book of Numbers is all about the numbers, and the numbers themselves speak to the faithfulness of God and Moses' faith in God's unconditional blessing to the nation of Israel.

*The deliberate exaggeration was not for misrepresentation nor for simple bombast. This rhetorical use of numbers was a mark of faith in the Lord who had provided great increase to a family of seventy persons and who one day would make his people as the stars in number. One day they would truly be innumerable—except to him, who counts them all and knows their names! These “embarrassing numbers” are not embarrassing at all. These numbers celebrate Yahweh. They are numbers of worship!*⁵

Regulations for the March

Nazarite Vow (Chapter 6)

The Nazarite Vow was a special, strict, and serious vow. The word “Nazarite” means “consecrated one.” It means that a person was “separating” himself/herself unto the Lord and the Lord alone. These were the rules of the Nazarite:

1. They were not to eat or drink from the fruit of the vine (grapes).
2. They were not to cut their hair.
3. They were not to go near or touch a dead person.

A person who took the Nazarite Vow did so completely voluntarily and for a specified period of time. This could be a few months or a person's lifetime. Provision was made for the accidental breaking of the vow and reinstatement. As long as a person was under the vow they were considered holy by God and were to be respected as such by the people.

Samson (Judges 13-16) and John the Baptist (the Gospels) are the two best-known men to take the Nazarite Vow. Samson is an illustration of its misuse and John the Baptist is an illustration of its intended use.⁶

Following the blessing of those taking the Nazarite vow, Aaron give a blessing to all the people, known as the barucha. This revealed that God's blessing was not dependent upon such a vow, but was obtained through God's grace⁷. The blessing focused on having the favor of Yahweh, seeing Him smile upon His people, and having His people known by His name, the name of Yahweh.

Dedication Ceremony (Chapters 7-9)

The nation of Israel had camped at the base of Mt. Sinai for two years receiving the law from the God, and building the tabernacle. With the completion of the tabernacle, the Israelites had a dedication ceremony prior to departing for the Promised Land.

The ceremony begins in chapter 7 with a detailed and lengthy description of the offering brought by leaders of each of the tribes to the tabernacle. The offerings were practical, to be used in the service of the tabernacle. In particular, the giving of ox carts would become very important as the tabernacle would need to be transported as they moved towards the Promised Land.

Following the offerings, the Lord instructed Moses in chapter 8 to dedicate the Levites to His service. The dedication involved ritualistic cleaning and sacrifices. This is distinct from the dedication of the priests in Leviticus 8-9, for this involved the entire tribe of Levi. The Levites would serve God from the age of 25 to 50⁸.

In chapter 9, the nation celebrated Passover. The dedication of the Levites at the time of Passover was very appropriate, for the Levites were the substitution for the first born, whom God had required in the first Passover. Additional provisions for celebrating the Passover are given, allowing for the

⁵ Allen.

⁶ Rick Taylor, from a lecture given at the Grace Institute.

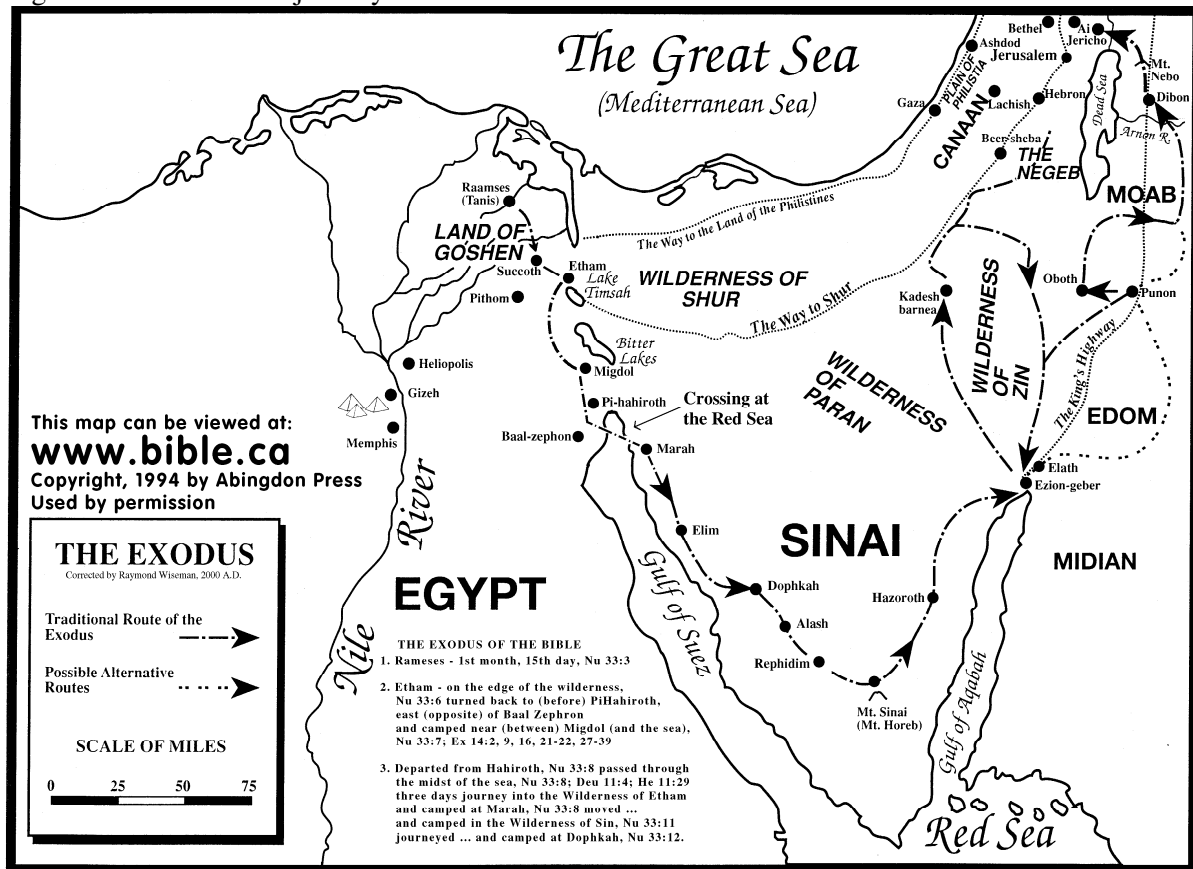
⁷ Nelson Study Bible.

⁸ The minimum age of 25 seems to contradict the minimum age of 30 in Numbers 4. There may have been a 5 year apprenticeship which did not make them immediately available for the enumeration in chapter 4.

celebration a month later for the ceremonially unclean and those who are out of the country during the Passover. However, this is accompanied by strict rules requiring that everyone celebrate this feast.

Trumpets Blown (Chapter 10)

Chapter 10 begins with the regulations for the use of trumpets to announce messages to the nation. Trumpets are to be used to gather the people to the tabernacle, to sound alarms, and to direct the nation to set out on their march. And so the trumpets are thus put to use in 10:11, when on the 20th of the second month in the second year after the Exodus the cloud lifts from the tabernacle and begins the nation on it's journey to the Promised Land.



Rejection of the Promised Land

The Spies and the Promised Land (Chapter 13-14)

Before the nation can enter the Promised Land, Moses sends twelve spies into the Promised Land. This is to be a military conquest, and so the reconnaissance of these spies will become important as they enter the land. The spies report that the land is prosperous and flows with milk and honey. But the people are strong and can't be defeated.

The people refuse to go and take the Promised Land. They would prefer to go back into slavery or die in the wilderness to death in war. Only two spies, Joshua, Moses' heir-apparent, and Caleb of the tribe of Judah, believe that God will deliver the land into their hands.

*"If the LORD is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us--a land which flows with milk and honey."
(Numbers 14:8)*

But the people reject Joshua and Caleb's faith, and are ready to stone them for their dissenting viewpoint. Only when God's presence descends on the tabernacle are Joshua and Caleb spared death.

God is understandably angry at the Israelites. After all the miracles and provision he has demonstrated, he is aghast that they will not trust Him for this. God is ready to destroy the entire nation and to start over with Moses. But Moses pleads with God to spare them, appealing again to Yahweh's reputation with Egypt and Canaan and to his loving kindness.

God decides to forgive Israel for its lack of faith, and does not destroy them. Nonetheless, they will reap the consequences of their lack of faith. This generation will not see the Promised Land. It will be their children 38 years hence that will be the ones to take the Promised Land. Joshua and Caleb will be the only ones older than 20 who will enter the land.

When Moses announces this discipline, the people grieve and change their minds. They decide to go up after all. They put together an invasion army and start the invasion. But it was too late. God's punishment was final, he would not go with them, and their campaign ended in failure. They had been forgiven, but the consequences of their sin would remain.

The Complaints of the People

The delayed entrance leaves this generation with no purpose. They are left to wander the wilderness until they all die off. In the context of this pointless wandering, there is little left to do but complain.

The Quail (Chapter 11)

Since their rescue from Egypt, Israel has been well fed by God through the manna. But they grew tired of manna, and demanded meat. God responds with great irony, telling the nation that they will get their meat; but there will be so much of it that it will be "coming out of their nostrils."

Moses questions God's response. How is he supposed to come up with all this meat? Even if he were to slaughter all their flocks, even if were to catch all the fish in the sea, there wouldn't be enough to satisfy the people. God's response is powerful, and an important reminder whenever we doubt God ability to provide:

*The LORD answered Moses, "Is the LORD's arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you."
(Numbers 11:23)*

God had quail fly close to the ground so they could easily capture them. Each person gathered at least 500 gallons of quail. But God remained angry with the complainers and caused a plague. They had doubted God's ability to provide, so God did provide, but with such great abundance that they literally grew sick from it.

The Serpents (Chapter 21)

Later, as the people are traveling around Edom on the way to Canaan, the people became impatient wandering in the desert. The lack of food and water had worn them down, and they grew tired of the journey. So God sent serpents to the camp, killing many people.

The people repented of their complaints. But God did not take away the snakes. Instead, he provided a way to be healed from the snake bites. Moses made a bronze serpent and lifted it up so all of Israel could see it. Those who looked upon it would be healed from their snake bite. Even today, the symbol for medicine is a bronze snake on a pole.

Later, this bronze serpent would play a role in the history of Israel. Seven centuries after the Exodus, King Hezekiah would destroy Moses' bronze serpent because it had become an idol to the Israelites (2 Kings 18:4). The tool which God had used to heal the people became an object of



worship itself. This is a fundamental habit of humans, who often end up worshipping the objects of God's mercy rather than the God of mercy.

The serpent, also, however, served as a symbol of the salvation which Jesus Christ would bring. In John 3:14, Jesus said, "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Just as Israel was healed from their snake bites by looking upon the snake, so all humanity could be healed by looking to Jesus Christ.

The Rebellion Against Leadership

The Prophecies of Eldad and Medad (Chapter 11)

During the quail incident, Moses brought the elders to the tabernacle, and God's Spirit came on the elders. Two of the elders who were not in the tabernacle at that time, Eldad and Medad, also received the Spirit and began to prophesy in the camp. Joshua sought to stop them from prophesying, fearing that Moses' leadership would be threatened. But Moses recognized this as God's appointed leadership, and declared that he wished everyone would prophecy and that the Lord would put his Spirit on everyone.

This incident demonstrates the humility of Moses. Moses was not jealous for power, and was willing to share responsibility and power, as long as that authority came from God. But when people rebelled, not against him, but against the God, Moses would not rely on his own authority, but on God's authority.

Jesus faced a similar circumstance, where one who was not his disciple was casting out demons using his name (Mark 9:38-40). Jesus rebuked his disciples for trying to stop him, telling his disciples "he who is not against us is for us."

In both of these incidents, there is an important leadership principle. A godly leader does not jealously prevent others from exercising their god-given leadership skills. So long as the work of God is being promoted, a godly leader rejoices. Godly leadership is more focused on seeing the work of God accomplished than on holding onto power for themselves.

Paul also maintains this attitude. He warns us that there will be those who preach the gospel with wrong motives, seeking some selfish gain in the process. Paul does not condemn or try to stop those who are preaching out of ambition or envy, but instead rejoices that Christ is being proclaimed:

What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice. (Philippians 1:18)

Criticism by Aaron and Miriam (Chapter 12)

While Moses did not hold onto his leadership position, whenever people rebelled against him, God would intervene, reaffirming that Moses was his agent to the nation.

In chapter 12 we learn that Moses had married a Cushite. Cush was a son of Ham, and Moses had married outside the nation. This Cushite was not Zipporah, Moses first wife, for she was a Midianite (Midian being the fourth son of Abraham). We don't know what has happened to Zipporah, only that Aaron and Miriam criticize Moses for his selection of a wife.

At first we might wonder why Aaron and Miriam are disciplined by God, for indeed, marrying a foreigner would have been looked down upon by God. Would not this have been a sin for which Moses needed confrontation? But Aaron and Miriam are not disciplined for confronting Moses of his sin, but for their selfish desire to take power from Moses. They said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?"

Moses does not defend himself. Instead, God intervenes, reminding them that He chose Moses, and that rebellion against God's appointed is the same as rebellion against God. God disciplines Miriam by giving her leprosy.

Moses is said in this passage to be the most humble man on the earth. This phrase is very likely an addition to the text after Moses had completed writing Numbers, for such a proclamation by Moses himself would be a self-contradictory statement. But Moses does indeed demonstrate tremendous humility in this passage, asking God to show his mercy on Miriam by taking away her leprosy.

Rebellion of Korah (Chapter 16)

The selfish ambition of Aaron and Miriam is repeated by Korah in chapter 16. Korah, a Levite, along with others, believes that his relationship with God is at least equal with that of Moses. As such Moses doesn't have a monopoly on authority. The Lord lives amongst all of Israel, so why should Moses be any different than they (16:3)?

Korah already had a position of authority. As a son of Kohath, he had responsibility to care for and transport the sacred objects of the temple. But Korah was not satisfied with this, and felt that he deserved more authority.

Again, Moses does not defend himself, but leaves his defense to God. He invites Korah to a contest where they both would go before the Lord and let God choose who should lead. God's initial response is to consume the entire congregation for their rebellion, but again Moses intervenes and asks God to only destroy the leaders of the rebellion, which God does by having the earth swallow them, their family, and their tents.

Godly leadership is satisfied with the roles provided by God, and never seeks to promote itself as Korah, Aaron and Miriam do. Likewise, like Moses, godly leaders never selfishly try to hang on to their power. Instead, godly leaders trust in God's ability to promote or demote their leadership. Godly leadership is more concerned with the promotion of God's purposes than their own power.

Reaffirmation of Levite Leadership (Chapter 17)

After the incident with Korah, God re-affirms to the congregation his chose of Aaron and Moses. He does this in chapter 17 by having each tribe bring a rod to the tabernacle. The rods are left over night, and the tribe whose rod would sprout would be the tribe set aside for the work of God. Sure enough, Aaron's rod buds the next morning, reaffirming the Levites authority as priests. This is followed in chapter 18 with a further defining of the rights and responsibilities of the Levites

The Sin of Moses & Death of Aaron (Chapter 20)

Even though God has thoroughly established Moses and Aaron as his administrators for this time, that does not mean they were perfect. Indeed, Moses and Aaron fail to such an extent that God withdraws their participation in his covenantal blessings.

In chapter 20, as Israel nears the end of its 40 years of desert wanderings, once again the people complain over the lack of water. As is their normal practice, Moses and Aaron go to the presence of the Lord and put the burden back on God. This incident sounds like so many others in the Torah. In Exodus 17 the people had complained about water. In Numbers 11, the people complain about the lack of food and drink. But this time, the pattern is broken. In both of those incidents, God displays his wrath against the people and Moses must talk God out of destroying the people. This time, God doesn't respond with wrath, but merely gives Moses instructions to speak to the rock to bring forth water.

In the absence of God's anger, Moses expresses his anger and his frustration with the people. He condemns the people as rebels and in His anger he strikes the rock with his staff rather than speaking to it. Why is Moses so angry this time? This incident takes place with the new generation. In the previous incidents, it was the prior generation who complained for lack of food and water. Now Moses is seeing the pattern repeated in the next generation. Nothing had changed. His forty years of warnings and teachings to the sons of Israel had accomplished nothing. This generation was as faithless as their fathers. So Moses lashes out in anger for their rebellion.

God punishes Moses for striking the rock, for such an action is a demonstration of a lack of faith in God. But Moses lack of faith is not just in the striking of the rock, but why Moses struck the rock. Moses appears to be disappointed that God did not respond to the complaints of the people with his anger as he had always done in the past. God had not defended Moses' leadership with the zeal as he did in the past⁹. Moses, in some way felt it necessary to defend his own authority, not merely by striking the rock, but by expressing his own anger in the place of God.

As a result of this incident, Moses and Aaron will not enter the Promised Land. God will still be faithful to the covenant, for it is an unconditional covenant. But Moses and Aaron will not experience the blessing of the covenant. The chapter ends with the death of Aaron and the installation of his son Eleazar as the high priest.

The Story of Balaam (Chapters 22-24)

Israel is now marching from the wilderness northward towards the Promised Land. They had to bypass Edom, for, even though Moses appealed to them as a "relative" (for the Edomites are the descendents of Esau), they resisted having the Israelites travel through their nation. After bypassing Edom they came to the land of the Amorites, who also refused to give passage. This time, however, Israel defeated the King of the Amorites and took all his land. From there, Israel camped in the plains of Moab just across from the Promised Land.

Balak, the King of Moab, is understandably concerned about having this foreign invader camped in his territory. He has seen them defeat the Amorites, who had previously conquered the Moabites. He fears that they will destroy him and take his land as well. So Balak calls upon Balaam, the famous prophet from that region.

The Fame of Balaam

Balaam is a prophet of some renown in that region. He is an interesting character, however, for Yahweh speaks to Balaam both through divination and directly. Yet, Numbers 31:16 indicates that he was also a promoter of the worship of Baal, for he is the one who enticed the Israelites to worship Baal in Numbers 25. Balaam seems to be a sort of freelance prophet and soothsayer who has a reputation for being able to discern the will of the gods and effectively bless and curse people.

In 1967 archeologists discovered a home located in the ancient land of Moab in which there was a plaster inscription of a prophecy of Balaam of Peor. This home was dated to 700 BC, some 7 centuries following the book of Numbers¹⁰. The words of the prophecy, although written in Aramaic, have a great deal of similarity to the Balaam of Numbers 22-24. Balaam must have been a prophet of some influence given that his prophecies are still quoted centuries after his death.

The Blessing of Balaam

Knowing of Balaam's influence, Balak of Moab and his Midianite allies approach Balaam with money for a divination fee and ask him to curse the nation of Israel. Balaam then inquires of Yahweh, the God of Israel on what to do. Yahweh speaks to Balaam and warns him not to curse Israel, for they are His people.

Balaam decides to go back to the Moabite emissaries anyway, which angers God. So God sends His angel to stop Balaam. Balaam's donkey sees the angel and refuses to go forward. Balaam beats his donkey to get him to move ahead, when the most amazing thing happens: God opens the mouth of the donkey and it begins to talk to Balaam, warning him of the angel and of cursing Israel.

Balaam finally gets the message, and after having Balak build seven alters, Yahweh puts the words into Balaam's mouth, and he blesses Israel rather than curse them. This is repeated several

⁹ Allen.

¹⁰ David Noel Freedman and Bruce E. Wiloughby. "Biblical Archeology," *Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2004*. (Accessed on-line, November 16, 2004).
http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761554970/Biblical_Archaeology.html).

times, until finally Balaam no longer has to use divination to conjure up the word of Yahweh. Instead, the Spirit of God descends upon him and he gives a poetic prophecy telling of the future destruction of the nations at the hand of Israel, including a reference to Jacob's Messianic prophecy in Genesis 49.

Point of the Balaam story:

Balaam was a prophet and promoter of Baal and other gods. Yet the one true God, Yahweh, chose to use this false prophet to bring his message to Balak and to bless his people, Israel. Indeed, Balaam, this false prophet, received the Spirit of God. God can choose to use whomever he wishes, even unbelievers, to accomplish his purposes. God uses whomever He wills for His purposes. Indeed, God not only used the pagan Balaam, but God even used a donkey to communicate his will!

If God can use a money-loving greedy false prophet and a donkey, then God can use you and me. Our usefulness to God is not dependent upon our righteousness and our great skill, but is dependent on God's will alone. That is not to say that we should not strive for righteousness, for there is blessings for those who follow God's law and discipline for those who don't. But if He so chooses, God has the ability to use whomever He wants, whenever He wants.

Balaam's prophecy is a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Indeed, Balaam quotes from the covenant, saying, "Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you." Even though Israel had rebelled against God and refused to take possession of the Promised Land, God still was keeping his part of the Abrahamic covenant. Balaam recognized this about Yahweh, and stood amazed at what God would do through these people.

The Death of Balaam

While Balaam was used for a short time by Yahweh, he quickly returned to his own land and continued to promote the worship of other gods. In chapter 25, as Israel is camped in Moab, the men of Israel begin to intermarry with the Moabite women. Soon, this leads to the worship of the Moabites' gods, and in particular Baal of Peor. This results in the anger of God and the zealous slaying of a man and his Midianite wife by Phinehas, the son of Eleazar (25:7-8). In all, 24,000 Israelites are killed in a plague by the Lord.

Moses gives responsibility for this leading into idolatry to Balaam (31:16). This would be consistent with the prophecy of Balaam found recently in Jordan. In this plaster inscription, Balaam warns the people of coming plagues and judgment. However, unlike the prophets of Yahweh, who would use coming judgment as a call to righteous living, Balaam called upon his audience to appease the coming wrath of the gods by engaging in ritualistic sexual acts with the temple prostitutes. As was part of the Baal fertility cult, these sexual acts were considered an act of worship. As such, the "marriages" in chapter 25 are more closely related to temple harlotry, leading Israel away from the worship of the true God¹¹.

As a result of his deceit, when Israel defeats Midian, they also kill Balaam (31:8).

¹¹ Eliezer Segal. "Balaam the Prophet" First published in the Jewish Free Press, July 5, 1995, 10. Reprinted On-line at http://www.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/950705_Balaam.html (Accessed November 13, 2004).

The 2nd Generation's Prepares for the Promised Land

The Second Generation Counted & Organized

The Second Census (Chapter 26)

In chapter 26, we see a fresh start. The first generation has all but passed away. God will be faithful to his covenant, as is evidenced by his restraint in the complaints of the people in Numbers 20, and in his blessing of the people by Balaam. But before this generation can take possession of the Promised Land, there are some preparations which must be made.

First, just as the prior generation was counted, this generation must take a census as well. This generation must also be prepared for battle and turned into an army. So the fighting men are counted so the size of the army can be established. This time there are 601,730 fighting men available.

However, the census serves a second purpose this time as well. Now the census will also be used to apportion the land in accordance with each tribes population (26:54).

Leadership Succession (Chapter 27)

Following the census, God outlines the rules of land inheritance. This is in response to a situation where the daughters of Zelophehad come to Moses and express their concern that since their father did not have a son before he died, that they would not receive any land in the apportionment. God affirms the daughters right to the land, and from this laws of inheritance are established so that the land would remain in the family.

The concern of Zelophehad's daughters are not the only inheritance questions. Moses is also concerned about his successor (27:15-17), and prays to God that the new leader be appointed. God names Joshua as Moses' replacement, and Moses then installs him in his office before all the people (27:22-23).

This is an important transition passage. The book of Numbers ends with the people about to enter the Promised Land. In a few short days Joshua will be called upon to lead the people into the land. The legitimacy of his leadership is critical to his success, and this incident is central to the authority as leader.

The Promised Land Organized (Chapters 31-36)

At the nation gathers in the plains of Moab just east of the Jordan river, Moses appeals to this new generation to take possession of God's Promised Land, and to not repeat the mistake of their parents. This appeal seems to be precipitated by the tribes of Reuben and Gad who ask to settle in the land on the east side of the Jordan (chapter 32), the land of the Amorites whom they had just defeated. Moses becomes very angry, for he fears that these two tribes are heading the same direction as their fathers, being unwilling to take possession of the Promised Land and settling for second best. It turns out that Reuben and Gad are willing to go with the nation and help conquer Canaan, and then will return to settle in this land.

Nonetheless, Moses is still concerned that this generation would fail like their parents. So, in chapter 33, he shares his travel diary, reminding them of the discipline of the Lord: the forty years of wandering. The chapter concludes with an admonition from the Lord to cross over the Jordan and drive out the inhabitants, destroy their idols, and take possession of the land.

In chapter 34 the Lord, through Moses, defines the boundaries of the Promised Land. This will be the land which Joshua and Eleazar the priest will divide up amongst the tribes.

In chapter 35, the Lord does not intend to give the Levites any land of their own. Instead, they will dwell in 48 cities spread throughout the land. Each of these cities will also have pasture land attached to it. This is reflective of the Levites special place as the priests for the nation.

From these cities, six are to be set aside as cities of refuge. If someone accidentally kills another, that killer can flee to the city of refuge to find sanctuary from the vengeful family of his victim. If the elders of the town find it to have been premeditated murder, he is to be handed over for execution. Otherwise, as long as the manslayer remains inside the city of refuge he is protected from capital punishment.

The book concludes with a further clarification regarding the laws of inheritance in chapter 36. The fundamental principal is that the land allocated to the tribes are to remain with those tribes.

Israel is now almost ready to take possession of the Promised Land. They are camped in the plains of Moab, just across the Jordan river from Jericho. All that is left is for Moses to give his farewell address to the people, and they are ready to grab hold of the covenant promised so long ago to their father Abraham.

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