



**DAILY BIBLE
READING:
*NUMBERS***

Chuck Lowe

NUMBERS

What God said to them...

What God is saying to us...

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By means of the tabernacle, God travels with Israel, guiding and providing for them, as they wander in the wilderness for forty years, in punishment for their rebellion against him.

DAY 1

WHEN GOD DOES NOT FULFILL HIS COVENANT PROMISES

Numbers 1-36 Overview

God promised Abraham myriad descendants and a homeland, and that Israel would be a conduit of divine blessing to the nations (Genesis 12,15,17). By the time Exodus began, the first promise was fulfilled (Exodus 1). At that point, God turned his efforts to the second, vowing to deliver Israel out of Egypt into a new and fertile land (Exodus 3,6,32). They would prevail, because he would fight for them (Exodus 14:13-14; 23:20-33; 33:1-2; 34:24).

Before long, God delivers Israel out of Egypt. Oddly, though, he does not lead them into the promised land. Instead, they meander forty years in a barren wilderness. Why does he fulfill only half his promise? The book of Numbers explains the discrepancy.

What God said to them. The English name of this book comes from the ancient Greek translation (the Septuagint, or LXX), and fastens on its most conspicuous feature: two censuses (chapter 1 and 26). The original Hebrew title derives from its geographical setting, “In the wilderness” (1:1). Neither name captures the overall theme.

Thematically and geographically, the book has three parts. In chapters 1-10, God readies to make good on his promise

of a homeland, and guides Israel's preparations. The clan heads count the number of men available to fight (chapter 1). Yet they will win not because of their numbers, but because God fights for them. God's presence in the camp entails various corollaries and commitments. The groundwork takes nine chapters (chapters 2-10). During each step of preparation, "the Israelites did everything just as the Lord commanded Moses" (9:5; cf. 1:19,54; 2:33,34; 3:16,39,42,51; 4:37,49; 5:4; 8:3,20,22).

The tone darkens abruptly as the Israelites encounter a variety of obstacles on the journey to their new homeland. The entire second part of the book is a litany of rebellions against God and punishments by him. In chapters 11-25, complaints over food, personal attacks on Moses, paralyzing fear, mass rebellion, and sex-fueled idolatry lead to various judgments against them.

The final section, chapters 26-36, resumes the first. After the failure and death of the Exodus generation, God prepares the next generation to enter the new land.

Overall, the point of Numbers is that the Exodus generation failed to enter the Promised Land not because God is unfaithful to his covenant commitments, but because his people were unfaithful to theirs. God's faithfulness is evident in this: after he punishes the first generation, he renews the promise to their descendants. In this way, Numbers continues the narrative of Genesis and Exodus, and the laws of Leviticus. God's plan for the restoration of

the world continues toward fulfillment, despite obstacles thrown up by sin and a fallen world.



What God is saying to us. Already in 200 CE, Church father Origen complained,

“When the Gospels or the Apostle or the Psalms are read, [a listener] joyfully receives them... But if the book of Numbers is read to him ... he will judge that there is nothing helpful, nothing as a remedy for his weakness or a benefit for the salvation of his soul. He will constantly spit them out as heavy and burdensome food.”¹

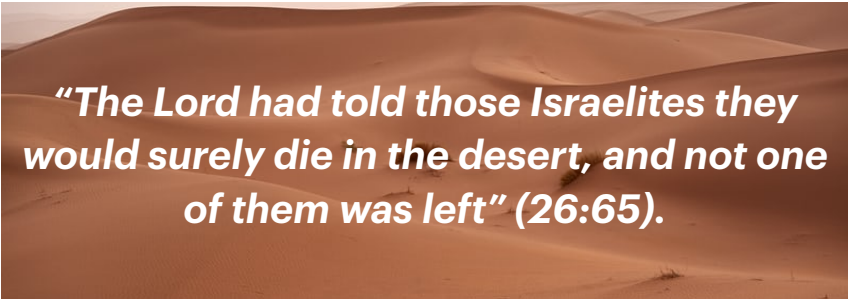
Contemporary readers share this reflex with Origen’s peers, assessing the usefulness of Scripture in terms of its application to our personal spiritual lives, and finding Numbers unhelpful.

While the original message of Numbers undoubtedly has secondary relevance for individuals, it actually speaks predominately to Israel collectively. While many passages carry implications for their private lives, the book speaks primarily to their place in the second stage of God’s mission; specifically, his promise to provide a national homeland.

¹ Cited from Olson, *Numbers* (1996), p1.

Numbers defends God's delay in fulfilling his covenant promise, while holding out hope that he would eventually do so, provided his people obey him. The events spoke, of course, to those who lived through them. The message of the book continued to be relevant to subsequent generations, as the conquest of the land proved unexpectedly slow and difficult. It spoke again when the nation went into exile. And a third time, when they returned to Canaan.

Today, Numbers still applies primarily to the collective people of God, the Church. Specifically, it applies to our engagement in the third stage of God's mission, the spread of the gospel among all peoples. The overall structure of Numbers points to our tendency to participate enthusiastically when the mission advances easily, only to rebel against God when obstacles and hardship arise, provoking his punishment, perhaps even forfeiting participation in the fulfillment of his promise. We must not respond to struggles as Israel did, lest God respond to us as he did to them.



“The Lord had told those Israelites they would surely die in the desert, and not one of them was left” (26:65).

DAY 2

WILL THE INVASION SUCCEED?

Numbers 1

The content of this chapter could not possibly be more obvious. Its point, however, is not readily apparent. Nor is its contemporary relevance.

What God said to them. In preparation for the invasion of Canaan, Moses registers all men for military draft. He and Aaron are told “to count ... all the men in Israel who are twenty years old or more and able to serve in the army” (verses 2-3). Registration requires bureaucracy, so each clan appoints commissioners (verses 4-16). Each commissioner counts his own clan (verses 17-19). The bulk of the chapter reports the detailed results:

- from the descendants of Reuben, 46,500 (1:20-21);
- from the descendants of Simeon, 59,300 (1:22-23);
- from the descendants of Gad, 45,650 (1:24-25);
- from the descendants of Judah, 74,600 (1:26-27);
- from the descendants of Issachar, 54,400 (1:28-29);
- from the descendants of Zebulun, 57,400 (1:30-31);
- from the descendants of Ephraim, 40,500 (1:32-33);
- from the descendants of Manasseh, 32,200 (1:34-35);
- from the descendants of Benjamin, 35,400 (1:36-37);
- from the descendants of Dan, 62,700 (1:38-39);
- from the descendants of Asher, 41,500 (1:40-41);
- from the descendants of Naphtali, 53,400 (1:42-43).

The total comes to over 600,000 men.²

What could possibly justify this long, (and to us) boring census report? In part, the same factor as justifies the listing of every war fatality on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.: the list is not boring to the family and descendants of those whose names appear on it. Similarly, the Numbers list memorializes those who risked their lives in service of the nation, and to the benefit of their descendants. Beyond the personal attachment, the list also defends each clan's claim to a share of the new land.

Within its own era, the census plays an additional role. As the time for invasion approaches, Israel will naturally worry: Will the invasion succeed? Pragmatically, the census offers an emphatic 'yes'; with 600,000 soldiers, they have the numbers to prevail.

Another factor is in play, with a deeper message. The clan subtotals drive home the identical message twelve times. When they were previously counted, Israel numbered only seventy males (Genesis 46:26; Exodus 1:15). Now they are a vast horde. God fulfilled his first promise to Abraham, innumerable descendants. He can now be trusted to fulfill his second promise, a national homeland.

At the same time, the final paragraph adds an important condition. Since the success of the invasion depends on

² This number seems far too large for Israel's likely size at the time; for interpretive options, see Wenham, *Numbers* (1981) pp 68-76.

God fighting for Israel, they are to dedicate an entire clan to preserving their national relationship with him, and securing his presence in their midst. In charge of the tabernacle, the Levites perform three roles: they carry the structure when in transit; they camp around it to prevent encroachment when the journey pauses; and, they care for it at all times. The soldier clans fight to save the nation from its enemies; the Levites oversee the tabernacle to maintain God's presence in their midst, and his assistance in their battles (1:47-54).



What God is saying to us. These lessons apply to us as we engage in the third purpose of God, his mission to the nations. Our task is formidable. It has already resulted in death for some, and will consume the lives of many more. Will the mission ultimately succeed? By our stage of salvation history, God has fulfilled his first two promises to Abraham, so we can be confident that he will fulfill his third. God is in our midst, as he was in theirs, to ensure that the mission succeeds.

At the same time, he calls us all to play our role. He did not allow Israel to sit back, and leave the battle to him. The census called them all to fight: every man twenty years old and above. The parameters of our participation expand further, encompassing not only men, but also women.

Finally, given the magnitude of the task, and God's involvement in it, we are to nurture our collective relationship with him. This can be expected to engage a

considerable contingent, and to require consistent attention.

We are beneficiaries of God's promise to bless the nations; we are also called to be its benefactors. All of us. We must pursue the mission without neglecting relationship with him. The census of Numbers 1 does not promise that we will succeed individually, or even that we will survive. But it does promise that the mission of God will succeed. We give our lives to it, because we can stake our lives on it.



“The men twenty years old or more were listed by name, one by one” (1:18).

DAY 3

CAMPING AROUND THE TABERNACLE

Numbers 2

Numbers 1 stipulates that the Levites are not to fight in the invasion, because their role is to look after the tabernacle. In particular, they have three responsibilities: carry it, care for it, and camp around it (1:50). These three roles – in reverse order – structure the next three chapters: camp (chapter 2), care (chapter 3), and carry (chapter 4).

What God said to them. When God said he would dwell in the midst of Israel, he meant it literally. The tabernacle is situated in the middle of the camp, surrounded by the various clans, three to a side. At the same time, while the tribes surround the tabernacle, they keep ‘some distance from it’ (verses 1-2). With this safeguard, Israel enjoys proximity to God.

While all clans are situated around the temple, their assigned locations indicate relative status. Clans descended from wives Leah (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun) and Rachel (Joseph, Benjamin) generally take precedence over those descended from servants Bilhah (Dan, Naphtali) and Zilpah (Gad, Asher).

Entrance to the tabernacle is from the east. By birth order, this prestigious location rightly belongs to the tribes of

Reuben and Simeon, eldest sons of first wife, Leah. Yet they are supplanted by Judah, along with younger siblings, Issachar and Zebulun (verses 3-9). This demotion was anticipated in Genesis 49, where their father Jacob rebukes Reuben for having sex with his father's concubine (Genesis 35:22), and rebukes Simeon for the slaughter of the Shechemites (to avenge the rape of their sister Dinah, Genesis 34).

The tribes of Reuben and Simeon are demoted to the south side of the tabernacle, alongside Gad (verses 10-16).

In the center of the list – and the center of the camp – come the Levites. In recognition of their zeal for God during the golden-calf incident, they occupy the space between the tabernacle and the other tribes, in order to guard against encroachment (verse 17 cf. Exodus 32:25-29).

The west side of the tabernacle is assigned to the descendants of Joseph and Benjamin. The space allotted for Joseph is shared between his sons Ephraim and Manasseh, in order to boost the number of patriarchs back to twelve, after Levi has been assigned distinctive duties (verses 18-24). The tribes of Dan, Asher, and Naphtali occupy the north side (verses 25-31).

While the details can be daunting, the overall point is clear. As in chapter 1, population totals again confirm the fulfillment of the first Abrahamic promise, as the nation turns to pursue the second promise (verses 32-33). In addition, the camp layout indicates that all clans have

proximity to the presence of God within the tabernacle, while keeping a respectful – and safe – distance from it. Chapter two ends just as chapter one did: “The Israelites did everything the Lord commanded Moses” (verse 34 cf. 1:54).



What God is saying to us. Here God grants his people access, though with two buffers in place as safety measures. The tabernacle provides one layer of defense; the ring of Levites, a second. This has been a consistent theme since the exclusion from Eden in Genesis 3: sinful humans must not be in direct proximity to the holy God.

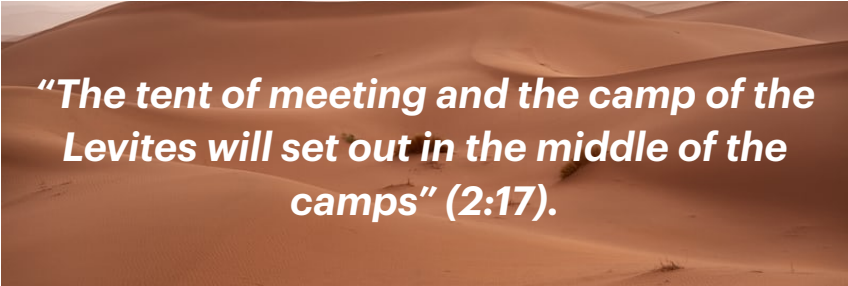
The New Testament nowhere endorses the concept of sacred buildings. On the contrary, God breaches the barriers which separate him from his people, in three ways. The most spectacular is the incarnation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling [literally: ‘tabernacled’] among us” (John 1:1,14). From an Old Testament perspective, the incarnation is astounding, that God could inhabit human flesh.

A second way in which God breaches these boundaries is by indwelling Christian community collectively. Of the church – even such a scandalous church as that in Corinth – the apostle Paul writes: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your

midst? ... God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16).

The third way in which God breaches these boundaries is by indwelling individual Christians, even such scandalous believers as those in Corinth. Paul again writes: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Numbers 2 provides safe proximity to a holy God through a double barrier of tent and Levite. Neither barrier remains today. Now, safety is available through his Jesus' atoning death for us, his heavenly intercession on our behalf, and his transforming work within us. We will have occasion to develop this theme more fully over the next couple days.



"The tent of meeting and the camp of the Levites will set out in the middle of the camps" (2:17).

DAY 4

CARING FOR THE TABERNACLE

Numbers 3

For Israel to have the tabernacle in their midst is a great blessing, as it houses the presence of God. At the same time, the benefit comes with responsibilities. Leviticus 1-10 previously appointed the priests to officiate at sacrifices. Now Numbers 1-4 assigns the Levites to oversee the tabernacle structure, furnishings, and equipment. Chapter 1 specifies three main functions: transportation, care, and protection. Chapter 2 elaborates their protective function, directing them to form a cordon around the tabernacle, in order to provide access to God while maintaining safe distance from him. Chapter 3 elaborates their duties in caring for the tabernacle. Their role is custodial, substitutionary, and specialized.

What God said to them. Essentially, the Levites assist the priests by looking after the tabernacle structure, furnishings, and equipment. Reinforcing the lethal sanctity of the sanctuary, the passage begins by recalling God's execution of Aaron's eldest two sons, Nadab and Abihu, ranking priests, for offering unauthorized sacrifice (cf. Leviticus 10). For their part, the Levites are restricted to custodial functions. If they usurp the role of priests – offering sacrifice or approaching the Most Holy Place – God will kill them (verses 1-10).

The Levites serve on behalf of all Israel, and in substitution for the firstborn. During the original Passover, God laid claim to the firstborn sons of Israel, when he preserved them from the plague that killed the eldest sons of Egyptian families (Exodus 11-13). Later, during the golden calf incident, the clan of Levi zealously answered Moses' call to avenge the honor of God. As reward, God transferred the role of the firstborn to the Levite clan (verses 11-13 cf. Exodus 32). The substitution requires numerical reconciliation. A census of males over one month old indicates that the firstborn outnumber the Levites by 273, to be compensated at the rate of five shekels each, for a total donation of 1,365 shekels (verses 14-20,39-51).³

The census also tabulates camp locations and tabernacle duties. Gershonite clans camp to the west of the tabernacle, and care for its walls and curtains (verses 21-26). Kohathite clans camp to the south, and care for the sanctuary furnishings, including ark, table, candelabra, and altars. Since they are responsible for the most sacred parts of the tabernacle, they are supervised by a ranking priest, Eleazar, son of Aaron (verses 27-32). Merarites clans camp to the north, and care for the supporting frames and posts, pegs and ropes (verses 33-37). The east side of the tabernacle, the point of entrance, is tended by the priests. Anyone else who tries to enter the sanctuary is to be killed (verse 38).

³ Some discrepancy exists in the number totals. The Levite subtotals (verses 22,28,34) come to 22,300 (not the 22,000 indicated in verse 39). For a proposed resolution, see Wenham, *Numbers* (1981) pp 80-81.

Overall, the passage underscores the lethal intensity of God's presence. Senior priests die when they violate mandated practices. Levites die if they perform priestly duties. The substitution of caregivers – Levites for the firstborn – must be reconciled exactly. Priests guard the entrance to the sanctuary; anyone else who enters is to be executed, even Levites (just like the Egyptian firstborn and the Sinai idolaters). Moses implements everything exactly as God commands (verses 16,39,42,51). There is nothing casual about the presence of God.

When Israel first encountered God, he was situated atop Mount Sinai, warning that they would die if they so much as touched the base of the mountain (Exodus 19:12-13,20-25). Now that he lives in their camp, proximity may breed a certain casualness. This would be a fatal mistake. They may enjoy proximity, but must avoid familiarity.



What God is saying to us. We are inclined toward familiarity. Our culture promotes egalitarianism (at least theoretically); as the American Declaration of Independence asserts: "All men are created equal." Architecturally, we sit – rather than kneel or stand – for worship. Our seats are even theater-quality, padded to prevent any discomfort. Theologically, we embrace an individualized interpretation of 'the priesthood of all believers', supposing that all Christians have direct access to God, negating any specialized role for a clerical class. We are casual, not awe-struck.

Though the New Testament breaches boundaries between God and his people, it does not permit informality. The Incarnate Son shares the glory of Sinai (John 1:14). The local community of believers is the temple of God and habitation of his Spirit, so those who dismember it may be dismembered by God (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Our individual bodies are members of Christ, temples of God, indwelt by his Spirit, so those who defile their bodies with sin commit sacrilege against the Trinity (1 Corinthians 6:15). Proximity does not permit nonchalance, either in the Old Testament or in the New.



Anyone else who approaches the sanctuary is to be put to death" (3:10).

DAY 5

CARRYING THE TABERNACLE

Numbers 4

The Levites' third function is to carry the tabernacle while Israel migrates, so that God continues in their midst. The details assume the same conceptual foundation as their other two functions: the presence of God is both a blessing and a risk. Each function mitigates the risk with the same three strategies: a safe zone, specialized staff, and explicit protocols. The commonality emphasizes the point through repetition. At the same time, each function offers variations on the shared theme.

What God said to them. The chapter is highly formulaic. It consists of two parts, each consisting of three subsections, corresponding to the three branches of the Levi clan. The first part counts those aged thirty to fifty within each branch of Levites, and assigns their role when the tabernacle moves (verses 1-33). The second part tabulates the results of the census (verses 34-49). Rearranging the order from chapter 3, both lists run: Kohathites, Gershonites, Merarites.

In the first part, the format consists of: (1) command to count a branch; (2) their particular responsibility; and, (3) their supervisory priest. Because they are responsible for the most sacred tabernacle furnishings, the Kohathites appear first, receive detailed instructions, and are subject to

severe penalty. They cannot even begin their duties until the priests first wrap the sacred objects in multiple layers of cloth and leather. Four times they are warned that if they directly touch the holy things, or see them uncovered, they will die. The Kohathites are under the supervision of Eleazar, elder surviving son of Aaron (verses 1-20).

The Gershonites receive briefer instructions, though in the same pattern. Their role is to carry the outer coverings and curtains of the tabernacle. They serve under the direction of Ithamar, younger surviving son of Aaron (verses 21-28).

Instructions for the Merarites are briefer still, within the same pattern. They carry the frames and related equipment, which support the tabernacle and surrounding courtyard. They, too, are under the supervision of Ithamar (verses 29-33).

The second part of the chapter tabulates the census totals. Each report is structured in chiasm, with four lines: (a) the counting; (b) numerical total; (b') confirmation of the total; (a') authorization for counting. The subtotals are: Kohathites, 2,750; Gershonites, 2,630; Merarites, 3,200; for a total of 8,580 (verses 34-49).

In short, the migration of Israel from the wilderness into the Promised Land necessitates the transportation of the tabernacle and its furnishings. Just as 'regular people' may not camp near it, or enter it, so they may not carry it. Only Levites may. Yet even they must carry the sacred things without looking directly at them, or touching them. Instead,

the priests must first wrap the sacred objects in several layers of material to hide them from view and from touch. Moses and the leaders carefully comply with all these directives (verses 37,41,45,49[2x]; cf. 3:16,39,42,51).

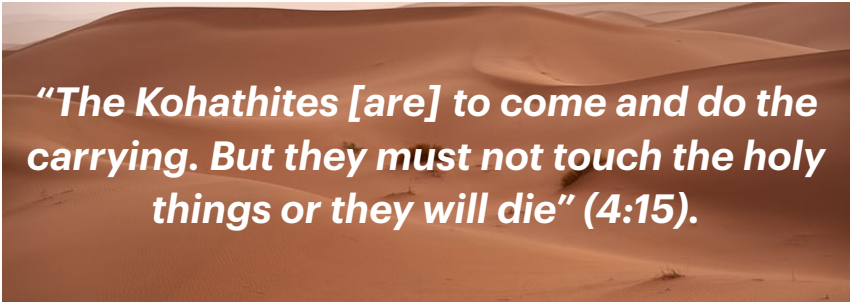


What God is saying to us. God no longer dwells in a tent, so there is no need to carry his domicile anywhere, nor any specialized personnel assigned to that task.

Even without all that, he is with his people. As Jesus commissioned his disciples for worldwide mission, he promised them his presence and assistance: “Go and make disciples of all nations... I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). He promises to be with us through his indwelling Spirit: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth... He lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:16-18). We have a degree of proximity to God unimaginable at Sinai or in the tabernacle era.

A more pervasive and intense presence of God still awaits. The elder John envisions the final state of the world, a new heaven and new earth, with the city of God descending from heaven: “God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:3). No longer will tabernacle or temple provide a buffer of safety between God and his people, for

neither buffer nor building will be needed: "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Revelation 21:22). At that time, those who look on sacred things will not face threat of execution, for all God's people will see him face-to-face (Revelation 22:4). The grandeur of tabernacle will dim beside the presence of the glorious God.



DAY 6

BEHAVIORAL HOLINESS

Numbers 5-6

Numbers 2-4 focus on institutional holiness: the tabernacle, its furnishings, and its caretakers. Numbers 5-6 broadens parameters to include all people, and shifts focus to various aspects of behavior. These chapters contain five distinct units. Each time, the phrase “The Lord said to Moses” introduces a new topic: skin disease (5:1-4), finances (5:5-10), adultery (5:11-31), religious vows (6:1-21), and a liturgical benediction (6:22-27). In the interests of time and space, this reading focuses on the unifying theme, and surveys the entire two chapters.

What God said to them. Moral and legal codes tend either to be comprehensive and exhaustive, or case-study and representative. The former provides precision, at the cost of excruciating detail (for example, the U.S. tax code). The latter limits precision for accessibility. Leviticus tends toward the former; these chapters of Numbers, the latter. So chapters 5-6 are of interest as much for their higher-level commonality, as for their individual topics.

Read within this portion of Numbers, the overall message of these two chapters is that holiness is not just institutional, that is, tabernacle and clergy (chapters 3-4,7). Holiness also requires virtue among the individuals within the community.

Chapters 5-6 survey several dimensions of holiness necessary if God is to dwell among his people.

First, recalling Leviticus 13-15, those who suffer from defiling physical conditions – such as contagious skin diseases, bodily discharges, and contact with the dead – must be excluded from the community. Otherwise, they will contaminate the camp where God dwells (5:1-4).

Secondly, anyone who commits financial wrongdoing must confess, and pay restitution of 120%. If the victim is deceased and has no close relatives, the reparations are paid to the tabernacle, for use by the priests (5:5-10).

Thirdly, if a man suspects his wife of adultery, he may not simply divorce her on suspicion. Instead, he is to submit her to a process to confirm her guilt or innocence. If she is guilty, the offending body parts will deteriorate, in order to prevent further immorality. If she is innocent, the ritual will cause her no harm (5:11-31).

Fourthly, individuals – male or female – may take a Nazirite vow, either temporary or permanent. They must abstain from all grape products, refrain from cutting their hair, and have no contact with the dead, not even with deceased parents. Inadvertent violation of these commitments requires remedy, including multiple sacrifices. The end of a temporary vow is marked by a full complement of sacrifices. These requirements impose a more stringent standard on the Nazirite than on priests, matching or exceeding the requirements on high priests (6:1-21).

Finally, God supplies a liturgical benediction for the priests to bless the holy community (6:22-27).

By way of case study, then, Numbers 5-6 extends the requirements of holiness beyond tabernacle worship, to encompass lifestyle more broadly, including bodily conditions, financial dealings, and sexual conduct. These form the minimal standard; higher levels of devotion are also welcome.



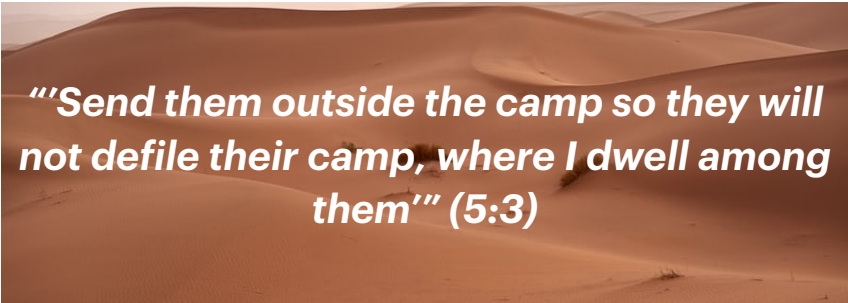
What God is saying to us. The contemporary application of these standards vary from one to the other. Regarding debilitating physical conditions, Jesus cured some, and abrogated others, so these are no longer disqualifying (cf. Mark 1:40-44; 7:14-23; Matthew 15:11).

On the other hand, the New Testament consistently requires financial integrity and sexual purity (for example, 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; Revelation 21:6-8). Ironically, influenced by our culture, Christians today are often more concerned over their physical condition than over financial and sexual morality.

Regarding special vows, the New Testament says little, perhaps because Jesus calls all of his followers – not just a self-selected few – to radical commitment (Matthew 16:24-27). The book of Acts does record occasional vows, but incidentally, as background to other events. It does not

take an explicit position on vows, beyond the necessity of fulfilling any vows made (Acts 18:18; 21:23).

Finally, regarding the ordeal required of the wife suspected of adultery, the gender imbalance is undeniable, and may embarrass Christians today. Numbers as a whole reflects a traditional culture where men fill the ranks of warriors (chapters 1-2) and priests (chapters 3-4), and women are sexually suspect (chapters 5). Yet this chauvinism should not be overstated: men and women are subject to the same requirement for fair dealing (5:5-10), and both may take Nazirite vows (6:1-2). Moreover, the adultery ordeal has a protective purpose, excluding more extreme remedies – such as divorce or execution – on suspicion alone. Finally, while we theoretically prefer an egalitarian ethic, recent media and business scandals demonstrate that our own era’s record on gender and sexuality is abysmal. Rather than disparage the ancient biblical text, we might better reflect on our own culture’s failures to embody the values that we profess.



“Send them outside the camp so they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them” (5:3)

DAY 7

CONSECRATING THE TABERNACLE AND ALTAR

Numbers 7

A time stamp opens the chapter: “When Moses finished setting up the tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it. He also anointed and consecrated the altar and all its utensils” (verse 1). This note is structurally significant in two ways.

Broadly, it indicates that Numbers 1-9 are organized thematically rather than chronologically. The events of chapters 1-6 date to the first day of the second month of the second year after the exodus from Egypt (Numbers 1:1). The events of chapters 7-9 date to the first day of the first month (cf. Exodus 40:2). Thematically, they combine to bridge the final section of Exodus and the initial section of Numbers, from the construction of the tabernacle and the ministry of the priests (Exodus 25-40), to the consecration of the tabernacle and the ministry of the Levites (Numbers 1-9). An additional effect is to link the events of chapters 7-9 – the consecration of the tabernacle and the Levites, and the celebration of Passover – with Israel setting out for the Promised Land.

Narrowly, the first verse of chapter 7 outlines the chapter. The consecration of the tabernacle (verse 1a) covers verses

2-9. The consecration of the altar (verse 1b) covers verses 10-88.

What God said to them. Chapter 7 identifies the offerings that the tribes make at both dedications. It goes to extraordinary detail to document that each clan makes precisely the same offerings.

At the consecration of the tabernacle, the clan leaders collectively donate six carts with twelve oxen, for the Levites to use in transporting the tabernacle on the journey into the new land. The Gershonites receive two carts and four bulls, for carrying the tabernacle tents and curtains. The Merarites receive four carts with eight bulls, for moving the tabernacle frame and posts. Since the Kohathites are to carry the sacred furnishings on their shoulders, they receive no cart or bulls (verses 2-9).

At the consecration of the altar, the clan leaders take turns to make offerings, one clan per day (verses 10-11). The clans follow the same order as their arrangement in the camp and on the march: Judah (verses 12-17), Issachar (verses 18-23), Zebulun (verses 24-29), Reuben (verses 30-35), Simeon (verses 36-41), Gad (verses 42-47), Ephraim (verses 48-53), Manasseh (verses 54-59), Benjamin (verses 60-65), Dan (verses 66-71), Asher (verses 72-77), and Naphtali (verses 78-83). Most notable about these accounts is their detailed, word-for-word correspondence, twelve times in a row. A conclusion provides a thirteenth iteration, totaling the various items by number, weight, and value (verses 84-88). The extensive repetition underscores that all clans

contribute generously and equally to the dedication of the tabernacle and its altar.

This chapter is more than a random historical record. It makes a point that would prove important throughout Israel's future. Later, when the temple is built within Judah's territory, this account sets a clear precedent to the other clans to share equally the cost of construction. It also sends a strong message to Judah, that all clans have equal claim to the temple. When the nation splits into northern and southern factions, this history sends a strong message to the north that there is only one legitimate temple, the one located in Judah; and a message to the south, to allow ready access to that temple. When the impoverished remnants of Israel return from exile, earlier history sets this precedent for full support from the entire community in the reconstruction of the temple, even in the midst of perilous economic conditions.

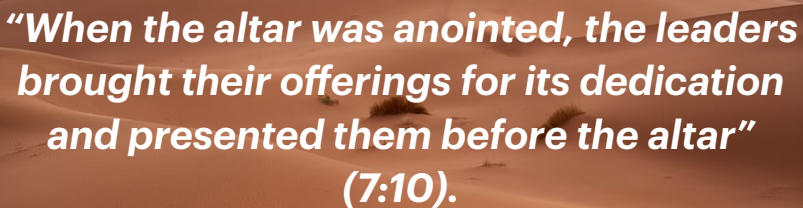
The closing verse stamps God's approval on their collective devotion: he speaks to Moses from between the cherubim, on the cover of the ark, within the Most Holy Place. This fulfills the promise he made when he first commissioned the construction of the tabernacle (verse 89 cf. Exodus 25:22).



What God is saying to us. The New Testament does not endorse the concept of sacred buildings. Jesus' stance on the temple argues against the idea (Matthew 24:1-2). The

apostle Paul portrays the Christian community as successor to the temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Consequently, this passage does not legitimately apply today to the construction of church buildings. Besides, contemporary construction projects are generally internal to a single congregation and for its own benefit, rather than shared across a larger network for the common good.

Instead, this passage could be a model for churches or Christian organizations working together in the cause of God. The business model has crossed into Christian ministry: competition is rife, and the temptation is strong for each organization to focus exclusively on its own well-being. It is when we bridge organizational boundaries to work together in cross-network outreach, poverty relief, immigrant welfare, or world missions, that we demonstrate a shared commitment to the work of God.



“When the altar was anointed, the leaders brought their offerings for its dedication and presented them before the altar” (7:10).

DAY 8

CONSECRATING THE TABERNACLE SUPPORT STAFF

Numbers 8

Narrative generally makes its point implicitly, rather than explicitly. One technique is the juxtaposition of events that shed light on each other. When two seemingly disconnected narratives appear together, it is worth a second look, to assess whether thematic links exist. Today's passage illustrates this principle.

What God said to them. Structurally, chapter 8 consists of two units. Each begins with an standard introductory formula: "The Lord said to Moses" (verses 1,5). In the first, God tells Moses to have Aaron position the tabernacle lampstand so that its lamps shine forward, illumining the Holy Place, with its table of bread loaves and incense altar. Aaron complies. The passage concludes by reminding the reader about the composition and construction of the lampstand, which conform exactly to God's directions (verses 1-4; cf. Exodus 25:31-40; 40:4,24-25). Yet if we focus on the lampstand as the point of verses 1-4, its relevance is unclear: How is the positioning of the lamps germane to the tabernacle donations in chapter 7, or to the anointing of tabernacle staff in chapter 8?

Another element in verses 1-4 appears more cohesive within this context. In 7:89, Moses enters the tabernacle to speak

(Hebrew: *dbr*) with the Lord, who spoke (*dbr*) to him from between the cherubim on the atonement cover of the ark (as promised in Exodus 25:22). In this way, 7:89 repeats, the Lord spoke (*dbr*) to Moses. Then in 8:1-2, God speaks (*dbr*) to Moses, telling him to speak (*dbr*) to Aaron, directing him to mount the lamps facing forward on the lampstand (as stipulated earlier; cf. Exodus 25:27). Aaron does just as the Lord commanded Moses. Additionally, 8:4 notes that the lampstand was produced of the materials and in the pattern that God had shown Moses. Thus, God speaks to Moses (six times), who, in turn, speaks to Aaron, who obeys (three times).

How is this relevant to the context? The remainder of chapter 8 reports the anointing of the Levites for their role in assisting Aaron, who directs them (verses 19,22). That the Levites assist the priests, and serve at the priests' direction, is the consistent emphasis of the early chapters of Numbers (e.g., 3:32; 4:19,27-28,33). This chapter now emphasizes that any authority that Aaron exercises is not inherent; it is delegated to him by God via Moses (verses 5-8,9,10,12,14, 15-18,23-26; cf. 3:5-9). From the positioning of the lampstand to the service of tabernacle staff, Aaron manages day-to-day operations and staff, but he serves under the aegis of Moses, who in turn serves under the aegis of God. (This distinction plays a central role in Numbers 12.)

Apart from establishing the (derivative) authority of Aaron and the Levites, the chapter reports the consecration of the latter. So far, they have been counted, and assigned responsibility for the tabernacle (chapters 2-4). As

previously with the priests (Leviticus 1-7,8-9), once their duties are identified, they are consecrated for ministry.

The ordination ceremony differentiates the Levites from other Israelites. They are cleansed physically through washing and shaving. They are cleansed spiritually through sin, burnt, and grain sacrifices. Laying of hands occurs twice, transferring ministry responsibility from Israel as a whole to the Levites, and transferring sin from the Levites to the animal sacrifices (verses 5-14).

Once consecrated, the Levites begin work: they assist the priests in tabernacle ministry, in lieu of the first-born Israelite males, who belong to God by virtue of the original Passover deliverance (verses 15-19 cf. chapters 3-4).

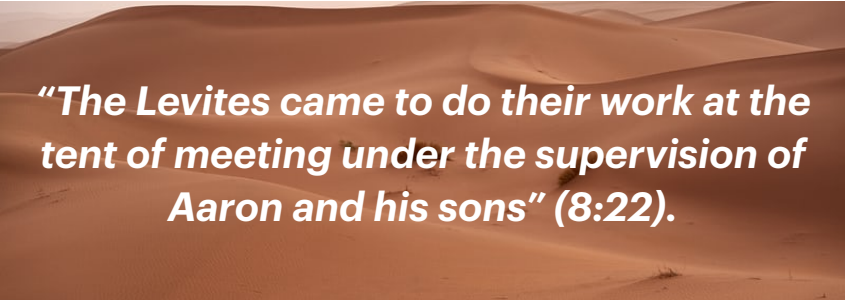
Moses and Israel do all this, just as the Lord commanded. The Levites wash. The people sacrifice. Then the Levites assist the priests in the tabernacle. All, just as the Lord commanded (verses 20-22).

A postscript restricts Levites to serving between the ages of twenty-five to fifty. After that age, they may assist, but they may no longer perform the duties (verses 23-26).

The consecration of the Levites is far simpler than the ritual for priests, reflecting their lower status and lesser access to the holiest portion of the tabernacle. Yet even though their role is more administrative and custodial, than authoritative and spiritual, it is still sacred.



What God is saying to us. Since the New Testament discontinues both sacrifice and sacred buildings, it offers no direct parallel or application to either priests or Levites. Analogically, however, it does reflect a similar dual leadership structure: elders and deacons. Once again, the former role is more authoritative and spiritual; the other, subordinate and administrative (as near as we can ascertain from the limited data). The commonality with Numbers 8 includes this point: despite their more modest authority and functions, the role of deacon is sacred, and the qualifications are robust (1 Timothy 3 cf. Acts 6:1-6).

A photograph of rolling sand dunes in a desert, with a warm, orange-brown color palette. The dunes are smooth and undulating, creating a sense of vastness and tranquility.

“The Levites came to do their work at the tent of meeting under the supervision of Aaron and his sons” (8:22).

DAY 9

CELEBRATING THE SECOND PASSOVER

Numbers 9:1-14

The first Passover occurred on the night before the exodus from Egypt. The second, recounted here, occurs a year later. The timing is transparently significant: the God who delivered Israel from Egypt will empower them to invade Canaan. The occasion also provides guidelines for celebrating Passover under atypical circumstances.

What God said to them. The development of the passage is straightforward. It has three parts: the mandated celebration of Passover (verses 1-5); permitted exceptions (verses 6-12); and, disallowed exemptions (verses 13-14).

The first paragraph introduces the issue as the timing of the Passover celebration. In a common narrative technique, repetition highlights the point: God twice tells Israel to celebrate 'at the appointed time' – specified as the fourteenth day of the first month of the year – and twice confirms that they did so. In another common narrative technique, timing represents a broader category, implying observance of all Passover regulations (verses 1-5).

The timing specification provokes a question: What happens to those who are ceremonially unclean at the regularly scheduled time? For instance, Numbers requires

that those who come into contact with a dead body must leave the camp for seven days (5:2; 19:11-12). If their exclusion overlaps with the timing of Passover, must they skip the celebration and wait until the next year? After consulting with God, Moses offers a backup date: they may celebrate a month later, on the fourteenth day of the second month, adhering to the same protocols (verses 6-12).

Alongside this permissible delay, two categories of people are not allowed exemption. All who are ceremonially clean and in town are to celebrate; anyone who fails to do so will come under community censure and divine judgment (verse 13). Resident foreigners are also to celebrate alongside Jews, following the same regulations (verse 14).



What God is saying to us. One obvious and familiar update is that Passover has been replaced by the Lord's Supper. At the Last Supper, Jesus invited his disciples to eat the bread and drink the wine "in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:23-25 cf. Luke 22:19). This is to be the new memorial, commemorating the new redemption, the deliverance provided in Christ.

Similar to the way that skipping Passover brings judgment, so does abusing communion: "Those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are

weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep” (i.e., died) (1 Corinthians 11:29-30).

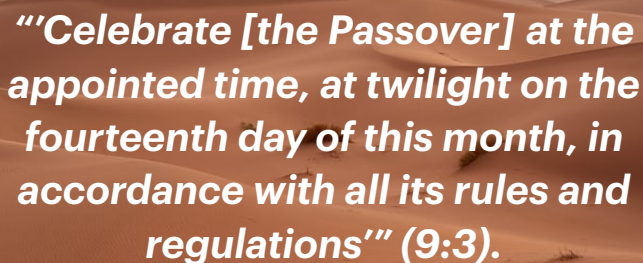
The offense in view in this warning is commonly misconstrued, as though God threatens those who take communion as a formality, or as a routine event. The actual problem is something else altogether.

In the early Church, as at original Lord’s Supper which Jesus celebrated with his disciples, communion was eaten as part of a shared meal (similar to a modern ‘church potluck’). The Corinthians’ offense was for on-time arrivals (typically, the financially secure) to eat and drink their fill before latecomers (generally, day laborers or slaves) could get free from work. The former ended up drunk; the latter went hungry. Given that the contemporary church has widely reduced communion to a small piece of tasteless wafer, and a tiny cup of grape juice, this particular problem is unlikely to recur today.

Still, both Numbers 9 and 1 Corinthians 11 remain relevant. The main takeaways include the importance and sanctity of the regular observance of Passover/communion. Both rituals celebrate God’s extraordinary grace and mighty deliverance, whether from slavery in Egypt or from bondage to sin and Satan. Both further serve as a promissory note for full and final deliverance. We celebrate not as some meaningless routine, but as a means of grace, a physical enactment of the Word of promise, through which we commemorate God’s power and kindness, and through which we are reassured of his love and intervention.

Biblically conceived, communion remains a priority, in conjunction with baptism, and alongside preaching.

While we may not be subject to all the regulations of Numbers, we rightly treat communion as important, as this passage urges Israel to treat Passover. For we are beneficiaries of even greater assurances. The God who delivered from Egypt would empower them to take the new land; the God who has delivered us from judgment will empower us to reach heaven. Additionally, while Passover was open to non-Jews who resided within Israel, communion is now open to believers of all ethnicities and nationalities, wherever they live. Compared to ancient Israel, we have even more to commemorate and celebrate, and so less justification for disinterest or neglect.



“Celebrate [the Passover] at the appointed time, at twilight on the fourteenth day of this month, in accordance with all its rules and regulations” (9:3).

DAY 10

GOD USES MEANS

Numbers 9:15-10:36

Given the continuous nature of narrative, sometimes one passage transitions seamlessly into the next, so the boundaries can be hard to delimit precisely. Here, an argument could be made for limiting the passage to 9:15-10:10, conjoining two forms of travel guidance in a paradox: the cloud of God's presence (9:15-23), and the trumpets of the priests (10:1-10). In that case, the departure from Sinai in 10:11-36 could either transition to the next large section, chapters 11-25, or be the first episode in that section. On the other hand, 10:11-36 reflects the same optimism as chapters 1-9, and includes the guidance theme of 9:15-10:10. So today's reading covers the entire passage. At the same time, it is right to acknowledge that narrative is often a fluid medium, resistant to delimiting precise boundaries between distinct passages.

What God said to them. Chronologically and thematically, the first paragraph in this section takes us back to Exodus 40. On the first day of the first month of the second year after the Exodus, the tabernacle was set up, the cloud of glory filled the tent, and in all Israel's travels, the cloud guided them by day, and fire, by night. Now, this section fills in the details. In their wilderness journeys, Israel was guided by a paradoxical convergence of four features: the cloud and fire (9:15-23), priests blowing trumpets (10:1-10),

divinely mandated administrative procedures (10:11-28), and a Midianite nomad (10:29-32).

The cloud and fire comes first, and is highly repetitive: both features that convey emphasis. The degree of repetition is extraordinary. The variations do not warrant careful analysis, because they serve simply to make the same point, in two parts, seven times: God guided Israel through the wilderness via the pillar of cloud and fire, and Israel followed his lead (9:15-23).

In addition to guiding Israel through the pillar of cloud and fire, God commands the use of silver trumpets. The priests will blow these for two main purposes: to gather the community for public assembly, and to signal the continuation of the march toward the new land. Later, when they reside in the land, the trumpet will summon God to join battle against any enemies (10:1-10).

Once the back-up Passover is complete, Israel departs Sinai on the first leg of the journey toward the Promised Land. The system works as designed. The cloud rises from the tabernacle to lead the way. The clans march in the order specified previously, with the Levites carrying the tabernacle (10:11-28 cf. chapters 2,4).

So far, this passage has conjoined three forms of guidance for Israel as they travel: God's presence in the pillar of cloud and fire, priests blowing silver trumpets, and fixed administrative procedures. Now it adds a fourth: Hobab, son of Reuel (a.k.a. Jethro), father-in-law of Moses (cf. Exodus

2:16-3:1). The first three sources are Jewish; the fourth is Midianite. Hobab's usefulness derives from his familiarity with the wilderness and suitable campsites (10:29-32). (Hobab also foreshadows the fulfillment of the third promise to Abraham: that through his descendants, God would bless the nations.)

The closing paragraph reinforces this convergence of complementary influences. Just after commending Hobab for his familiarity with wilderness camp sites, the ark of the covenant finds them 'a place to rest,' and the cloud of the Lord oversees them as they 'set out from the camp' and continue their journey. A final song praises God for leading Israel in their travels, and residing among them in the camp (10:33-36).

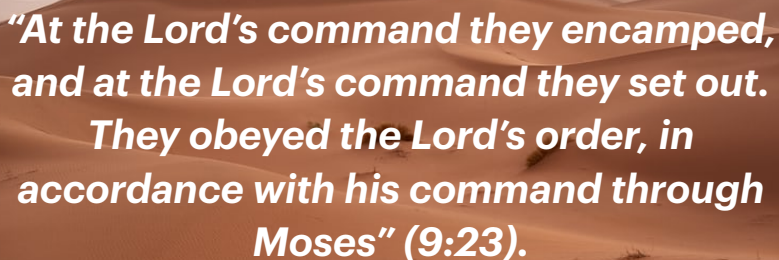


What God is saying to us. The collocation of guiding influences is suggestive: the presence of God, trumpeting priests, administrative regulations, and a nomadic outsider. It would be easy to suppose that where God is present and directing, he provides all that is needed. And that where our role is essential, God is somewhat less engaged. Here we see God working both directly and through means, simultaneously and complementarily.

The New Testament reflects the same perspective. As he prepares to ascend, Jesus commissions his disciples to carry on his mission in his absence. They will not be alone, however, as he will give them his Spirit to empower them

(Acts 1:8). The apostle Paul extends this role to all believers. Many gifts exist, but one Spirit works through them all, giving each a ministry essential to the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

God works through means. Even where he promises to be present and to assist us, we need each other. Even when we play a decisive role, that is possible only because God is working through us.



***“At the Lord’s command they encamped,
and at the Lord’s command they set out.
They obeyed the Lord’s order, in
accordance with his command through
Moses” (9:23).***

DAY 11

THE COMPLAINTS BEGIN

Numbers 11

Numbers 1-10 direct Israel's preparation for the invasion of Canaan. God's presence in their midst ensures success, but comes with certain requirements, including the ministry of the Levites, holiness among the people, a consecrated tabernacle, and honoring God's previous intervention. Numbers 11-25 tracks Israel's progress – and, more often, its regress – toward the borders of the new land. Despite God's presence – or, ironically, because of his presence – this generation will fail to enter the land.

Why does the presence that ensures success actually cause failure? Because Israel fails to fulfill its obligations. In chapters 1-10, the recurring refrain is that Israel did, “just as the Lord commanded” (1:19,54; 2:33,34; 3:16,39,42,51; 4:37,41,45,49[2x]; 8:3,20,22; 9:5,18[2x],20[2x],23[3x]; 10:13). Chapters 11-25 are a litany of rebellion from all directions: the people (repeatedly), Miriam and Aaron, the Levites, even Moses. Their enemies cannot defeat them, but their rebellion provokes God to punish them.

What God said to them. A constellation of activities surrounded the exodus from Egypt. Israel celebrated Passover. God spared – and laid claim to – Israel's firstborn sons. A pillar of cloud (by day) and fire (by night) led them through the wilderness. God delivered them and destroyed

their enemies at the Red Sea. Israel traveled three days through the wilderness before rebelling over the lack of potable water. They also rebelled over lack of food and meat. Moses' father-in-law returned his wife and children to him, before departing for home. After all this, they reached Mount Sinai (Exodus 12-19).

A similar constellation of activities recurs as Israel prepares to leave Sinai for the Promised Land. They exchanged the Levites for the firstborn (chapter 3). They celebrated Passover (chapter 9a). Now the cloud and fire will guide them through the wilderness (chapter 9b). Moses pleads with another in-law not to leave (chapter 10c). Their first journey will last three days, and will end in complaints about hardships, provoking divine judgment (chapter 11). So it is not just the events and storyline of Exodus that continue, but also its sinful rebellions. It would appear that neither meeting God at Sinai, nor receiving the Law, has made a qualitative difference in Israel.

Chapter 11 consists of two incidents of rebellion. The first is brief and preliminary. The people complain. In anger, God sends threatening brushfire into the outskirts of the camp. They cry out to Moses to intervene. In response to his intercessory prayer, the fire dies down, without record of any fatalities (verses 1-3).

The second incident interweaves two complaints: the people against Moses, and Moses against the Lord. God rejects the former as illegitimate, while he accepts and resolves the latter. The incident develops in two parts: the

complaints and God’s proposed solution; and, the solution implemented. Both parts employ parallelism: antithetical (‘chiastic’) in the former (abb’a’), and synonymous in the latter (b’’b’’a’’a’’).

Verses 4-23 record the complaints and God’s proposed solutions:

a	vv4-9	the people complain about manna, the lack of meat and fish;
b	vv10-15	Moses complains to God about the burdens of leadership;
b’	vv16-17	God will anoint seventy elders to assist Moses;
a’	vv18-23	God will provide manna for the people.

Verses 24-34 recount the implementation of the solutions:

b’’	vv24-25	<i>God equips seventy elders with the Spirit;</i>
b’’’	vv26-30	<i>two additional elders receive the Spirit;</i>
a’’	vv31-32	<i>God supplies quail for the people;</i>
a’’’	vv33-34	<i>God sends a plague to punish them.</i>

Verse 35 closes the account with a travel note.

While some of the subsections are substantial enough to draw additional lessons, the overall point contrasts the two

complaints. The people are out of line for faulting God's miraculous provision as inadequate. Moses is reasonable in complaining about the burden of solo leadership over such a large and contentious crowd.



What God is saying to us. Given the presence of two topics within this passage, application could focus on either independently of the other: criticizing God's provision, and complaining about the pressures of solo leadership. Yet it would be truer to the passage, and its interweaving of these two themes, to reflect on what makes the first complaint a capital offense, while the second is remediable. The three-fold reference to Egypt is an obvious pointer: "We remember the [variety of food] we ate in Egypt at no cost" (11:5); "We were better off in Egypt!" (11:18); "Why did we ever leave Egypt?" (11:20). Deprivation prompts the people to turn against God; crisis prompts Moses to cry out to God. It does not require much effort to uncover contemporary parallels for each reaction within our churches or our individual lives.

A photograph of a desert landscape with rolling sand dunes under a clear sky. The text is overlaid on the lower portion of the image.

"You have rejected the Lord, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"" (11:20).

DAY 12

REBELLION IN THE INNER CIRCLE

Numbers 12

In form, this account of rebellion largely parallels the preceding two: people complain (11:1,4; 12:1); God/Moses 'hears' (11:1,10; 12:2); the anger of the Lord 'burns' (11:1,10,33; 12:9); and, he executes judgment (11:1,33; 12:10). The first and third accounts continue similarly: victims plead with Moses (11:2; 12:11); Moses intercedes (11:2 cf. 12:13); and, the judgment ends (11:2; 12:14).

In content, however, this episode is more serious. Now it is not the masses who rebel, but the top echelon of leadership, Miriam and Aaron. They are Moses' siblings. In addition, Miriam is a prophet, and a leader among the women (Exodus 15:20-21). Aaron has assisted Moses from the beginning of his mission, and is high priest, the chief religious leader (Exodus 4:14-17; 28:1-3). This is a severe crisis.

What God said to them. While the NIV ascribes the rebellion equally to Miriam and Aaron, the word order and Hebrew grammar both imply that Miriam is the primary instigator. Superficially, the ground of the complaint is the ethnicity of Moses' wife: she is a Cushite (perhaps Ethiopian). The details are uncertain. Perhaps this is a second wife. Or perhaps it refers to Zipporah, since 'Midianite' and 'Cushite'

are overlapping categories (Habakkuk 3:7). In any event, the detail is non-essential, as the real issue revolves around authority and rank: “‘Has the Lord spoken only through Moses, or has he not also spoken through us?’” (verse 2).

Both the narrator and the Lord jump to Moses’ defense. From a character standpoint, Moses is not power-hungry; instead, he is uniquely humble. From a spiritual vantage point, he has a unique relationship with God. With all other prophets – Miriam and Aaron included – God speaks through visions; with Moses, face to face. God angrily leaves the two complainants (verses 3-9).

As her judgment, Miriam suffers a defiling skin condition, rendering her unable to join the community in worship or in habitation. Aaron concedes Moses’ superiority: instead of appealing directly to God for forgiveness, he addresses Moses as his superior, confesses both sin and foolishness, and begs him to intercede. In response, God requires that Miriam submit to the usual seven-day cleansing process (verses 10-15 cf. Leviticus 13:4-5; 14:1-32). When she rejoins the camp, the journey continues (verse 16).

Whatever the social standing or spiritual experience of other Israelites, Moses outranks them all, even his own siblings, even though they, too, were divinely appointed to leadership roles. Moses has a qualitatively superior relationship with God. This is not a status that he claims for himself, or jealously guards. It is a unique intimacy that God initiates with him, and vigorously defends for him.

While this is the point of the text, it is inadequate to stop here. The relative authority between Moses, on the one hand, and Miriam, Aaron, and the elders, on the other, was crucial in its own day. But the details were recorded because they remained relevant for subsequent generations. Moses was the conduit of Torah; Aaron, the first of the chief priests; Miriam, a prophet, and leader of women. So their relative relationship and authority set precedent for subsequent generations. God would lead Israel through Torah, priests, prophets, and elders. Among them all, Torah takes precedence, and regulates priest and prophets, who, in turn, guide the elders, who direct the community. In authority and intimacy with God, no one rivals Moses or Torah.



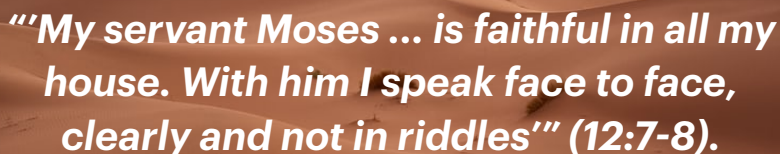
What God is saying to us. In authority and intimacy with God, no one rivals Moses or Torah. No one, that is, until Christ.

God describes Moses as, “My servant ... faithful in all my house” (verse 7). The book of Hebrews contrasts him with Jesus: “Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house’ ... But Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house” (Hebrews 3:5).

Of Moses, God said, “With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord.” Even then, however, he could not see the face of Lord, but only his back, after he passed: “You cannot see my face, for no one

may see me and live... You will see my back; but my face must not be seen” (Exodus 33:20,23).

Of Jesus, the apostle John writes, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son” (John 1:18); and, “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father” (John 6:46). Jesus takes it a quantum leap forward: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Moses’ superiority among his generation points to one who is even more authoritative and intimate with God.



“My servant Moses ... is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles” (12:7-8).

DAY 13

TURNING BACK

Numbers 13-14

The fourth rebellion is the worst yet, with the most severe consequences. The first complaint focused on general hardship, and God threatened the camp with fire, until Moses interceded (11:1-2). The second complaint objected to the monotony of a manna-based diet; God provided quail, and sent a plague that killed many (11:3-35). The third was qualitatively more serious, as Moses' co-leaders, Miriam and Aaron, challenged his unique role; God afflicted her with a defiling skin disease, until Moses interceded (12:1-16). In today's passage, the people are consumed with fear, and turn from both God and the Promised Land.

What God said to them. God calls for scouts, one from each tribe, to explore the land and its defenses. They are gone for forty days. Upon their return, they offer a mixed report: the land is fertile, but the defenses are formidable. Caleb interrupts the negativity to urge invasion. But ten of the scouts advise otherwise (13:1-33).

The people side with the majority opinion. They grumble against Moses and Aaron, against the invasion, and ultimately against God:

If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the

sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?

Horrified, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb plead with the people: the land is fertile, and with God's help, they can conquer the defenders. Their plea fails: the assembly moves to kill them. At this point, God intervenes. Offended by their contempt and lack of faith despite all the signs he performed in Egypt, he determines to kill the rebels and to start over (14:1-12).

Moses pleads with God. If he destroys his people, his reputation will suffer among the nations. Instead, Moses proposes, the Lord may better reveal his character as one who is quick to forgive, and slow to punish. Not so fast, God responds: he will forgive, but he will also punish. In keeping with their slander, this generation of adults will die in the wilderness. Only Caleb – and Joshua, we later learn – will enter the Promised Land. As initial fulfillment of this sentence, the ten guilty spies die immediately (14:12-38).

In a final act of pseudo-repentance, the people have a change of heart. They march toward the Promised Land, even though Moses warns that God will not accompany them. They are defeated, and retreat (14:39-45).

This passage explains why, after the stupendous escape from Egypt, Israel failed to possess the Promised Land on its first attempt. The God who defeated the might of Egypt was not too weak to conquer Canaan. Instead, the failure lay with his people. Despite his previous mighty interventions,

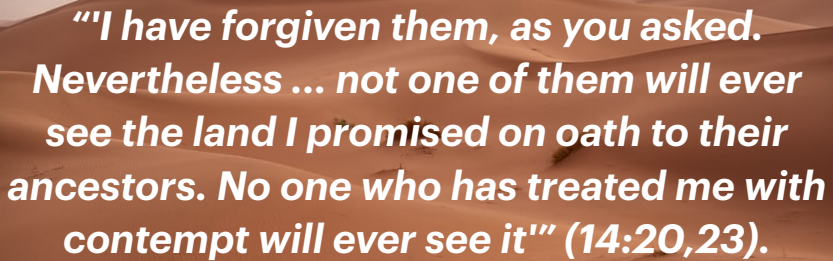
they did not trust him to empower them to conquer Canaan. Instead, they turned their back on his ancient promises to Abraham, and sought to return to slavery. Stung by their contempt, God fulfilled their fearful predictions: he sentenced them to die in the wilderness. Mercy prevails, however, and the children they feared would be captured in war would instead survive to enter the Promised Land.

The passage explains more than the generational delay in entering the Promised Land. It sets a precedent for other apparent failures in the promises of God: delays and defeats in conquering the land, eventual conquest and exile from the land, struggles in post-exilic resettlement. This incident indicates that whenever the promises of God remain unfulfilled, instead of grumbling against him as unfaithful, Israel should look to their own lack of faith in the presence and power of God.



What God is saying to us. Within the New Testament, the apostle Paul alludes to this incident, warning the Corinthians not to ‘grumble’, as the wilderness generation did, lest they be killed as their forefathers were (1 Corinthians 10:10). In Numbers, grumbling against Moses was tantamount to grumbling against God, a capital offense. Breathtakingly, Paul claims that same status: for the Corinthians to complain against him is to complain against God.

Contemporary pastors must not claim this precedent lightly, for we are not apostles, and our performance may sometimes warrant complaint. At the very least, whether pastor or parishioner, we are right to be wary of grumbling against God when he fails to deliver something we want. He who did not spare his own Son can be trusted to give us all good things in his good time (Romans 8:32). We who have benefited from his Son's death have grounds only for gratitude, even if he never gives us anything else.



"I have forgiven them, as you asked. Nevertheless ... not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it" (14:20,23).

DAY 14

DESTRUCTION OF ONE GENERATION; HOPE FOR THE NEXT

Numbers 15

This chapter appears to take a sharp turn, before returning to the subject at hand. Chapters 11-14 recount four rebellions by various groups. Chapter 16 reports a fifth. In between, this chapter presents various regulations governing sacrifice. Is it anything more than a digression, a lapse in concentration by the narrator?

That proposal reflects a misunderstanding of the role of digressions in various ancient literatures, including both Old and New Testaments. As we saw in chapters 5-6, and in 8:1-4, one characteristic of this book is to break up extended narratives with a change of topic that, upon closer consideration, proves relevant to the development of the theme. So, too, here.

What God said to them. Ostensibly, the chapter covers two main topics: supplementary offerings (verses 1-21), and sin offerings (verses 22-31). Two shorter units close the chapter: the execution of a Sabbath-breaker (verses 32-36), and a regulation governing clothing (verses 37-41). On further consideration, all four sections reflect on the rebellions that precede and follow.

Leviticus 1-6 already covered the details of the various offerings: burnt offering, grain offering, fellowship offering, sin offering, and guilt offering. Numbers 15 adds a further guideline: any animal sacrifice should be accompanied by an offering of grain, oil and wine (representative of a full meal for an honored guest).

Now we learn that the size of the supplemental offerings correlates with the size of the animal: lamb, ram, or bull (verses 1-12). This stipulation, and all other regulations about sacrifice, apply to both Israelite and resident foreigner (stated four times). The regulation also applies to all subsequent generations (stated twice) (verses 13-16). Another added note calls for the Israelites, 'when they enter the land', to offer the first-fruits not only of grain, but also from the first prepared food made from the new harvest (verses 17-21).

The second part of the chapter briefly reviews requirements for sin offerings from Leviticus 4-5, with particular emphases. As before, the offerings atone for unintentional sin: for collective sin, the community must offer a bull and a goat, along with the just-mandated grain and drink offering; for individual sin, the offering is reduced to a goat. Numbers adds that these guidelines apply to all generations, and to both Israelites and resident foreigners. Sins of defiance, on the other hand, are to be punished by execution (verses 22-31).

A case study of deliberate sin follows. A man is found gathering wood on the Sabbath, which is a Sabbath violation and capital offense. After consultation with Moses and God, the violator is executed by stoning (verses 32-36, cf. Exodus 35:3).

Given the penalties for sin, the final paragraph commands the Israelites to sew tassels on the corners of their garments, as a constant visual reminder to obey the Lord and the Law (verses 37-41).

This is the content of the chapter; what is its point? The sins of chapters 11-14 are rebellious and defiant, provoking God to kill the entire generation. But the plan and purpose of God will not die with them. This chapter assures Israel that God will still honor his promises to Abraham. Many generations will arise (verses 14,15,18,21,23,38). They will inhabit a fertile land (verses 2,4-10,19). Foreigners will join them on equal terms (verses 14,15,16,26,29,30). Not even sin will thwart God's blessing. Instead, sacrifice will atone for them, with 'an aroma pleasing to the Lord' (verses 3,7,10,13,14,24), provided they are not defiant and rebellious (verses 25,26,28). Which all goes to say that, despite the death sentence passed on the wilderness generation, and the impending execution of fifteen thousand, Yahweh will remain "the Lord [their] God" (15:41[3x]).

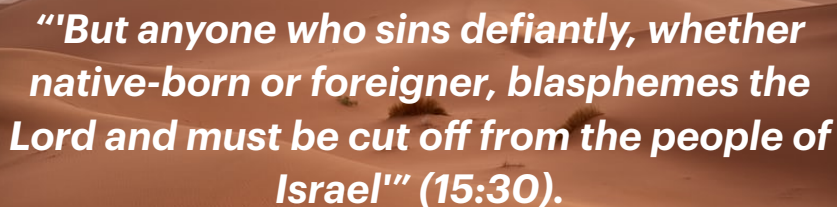
The pronouncement of divine judgment on the wilderness generation appears to threaten the Abrahamic promises. If God kills the entire generation, has he forsaken Israel? Are his covenant promises null and void? Before moving on to

yet another incident of judgment, the narrative pauses to break up the depressing litany and reassure the reader that, despite the death of an entire generation, the Abrahamic promises persist. God will kill a generation, but he will not terminate his people.



What God is saying to us. The apostle Paul addresses much the same question, in a parallel context. In his day, most Israelites rejected the gospel, and stood under divine judgment. Gentiles, on the other hand, flooded into the Church. Does Israel's rebellion mean that God has rejected his people?

Paul goes even further than Numbers in assuring his readers that God has not rejected Israel despite its rebellion. Instead, once the influx of gentiles is complete, God will again show mercy to Israel, and deliver them from their rebellion (Romans 11).

A photograph of a vast desert landscape with rolling sand dunes under a hazy, orange-tinted sky. The dunes are smooth and undulating, with a few small, dark shrubs scattered across the sand. The overall mood is serene and expansive.

“But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel” (15:30).

DAY 15

PLAYING SECOND FIDDLE

Numbers 16:1-40

After contrasting the consequences of unintentional sins versus defiant rebellion, the narrative resumes the litany of rebellions. Previous incidents included the people complaining about the monotonous diet (chapter 11), Miriam and Aaron challenging Moses' supremacy (chapter 12), and the spies instigating resistance against the invasion of Canaan (chapters 13-14). Now, a Levite and several Reubenites lead an insurrection of tribal leaders against the primacy of Moses and Aaron.

What God said to them. Korah is a leader from the tribe of Levi and the clan of Kohath, responsible for the care and transportation of the most holy fixtures in the tabernacle. Dathan, Abiram, and On are leaders of the tribe of Reuben. Yet, dissatisfied with their status, they rise up against Moses. Another 250 leaders join the rebellion.

Repeated vocabulary and structural parallelism focus the complaint. Moses and Aaron are going 'too far'. All members of the community are 'holy'. God is 'with them' all. So Moses and Aaron should not 'set themselves' above the assembly 'of God' (verses 1-3 cf. Exodus 19:6).

In retort, Moses designs an ordeal through which God will show who is 'his', who is 'holy', whom he chooses to come 'near him', and who it is that has gone 'too far'. Recalling the execution of Aaron's sons for improperly offering incense (cf. Leviticus 10:1-3), Moses invites Korah and his supporters to take censers and offer incense at worship the next day (verses 4-7).

Before proceeding to the ordeal, Moses rebukes the two groups of insurrectionists separately. He challenges the Levites' ambition: 'Isn't it enough' that God has set them apart from the remainder of the Israelites, having them come 'near him' to serve in the tabernacle; now they clamor for priestly prerogatives, as well. This rebellion is not against Aaron, their supervisor, but against God, their director (verses 8-11).

Moses then summons the Reubenite leaders. Insolent, they refuse to come! Instead, they send back a mocking rebuke, twice repeated (in synonymous parallelism): 'Isn't it enough' that he dragged them out of Egypt, a land flowing with milk and honey, / into the wilderness to kill them / and now seeks to lord over them; // he did not bring them into the promised land flowing with milk and honey, / nor give them either field or vineyard / but instead brutalizes them. They repeat their refusal to appear before him. Moses, usually an intercessor for Israel, calls on God to destroy these rebels (verses 12-15).

The ordeal is set for the following day. Both Aaron and the rebels gather at the tent of meeting to offer incense to the

Lord. Affronted by the presumption, God threatens to kill the entire assembly (verses 16-21).

Alarmed, Moses appeals for God to limit judgment to the ring leaders. At his directive, Moses separates the assembly from the rebels and their families (verses 22-27).

A sinkhole swallows the primary leaders along with their households. Then fire from the Lord kills the remaining 250 confederates (verses 28-35).

As a reminder to future generations not to usurp the role of priests, God directs Eleazar, son of Aaron, to flatten the censers and overlay the altar with them (verses 36-40).



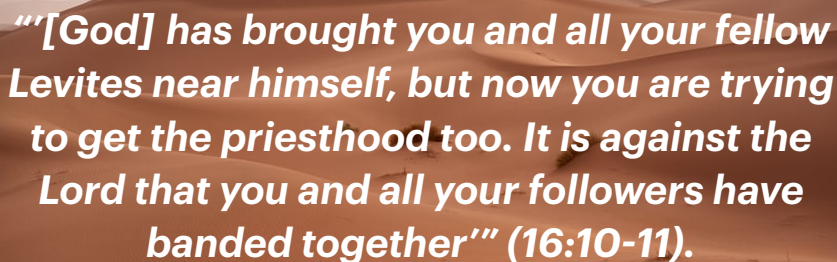
What God is saying to us. This passage legitimizes distinctions of spiritual authority among priests, Levites, clan leaders, and the populace as a whole. Such distinctions would remain relevant – and problematic – throughout the rest of biblical history.

While the particular distinctions of this passage may not remain valid today, wherever any distinctions exist in status or function, jealousy and rivalry can fester, even within the church. Generally, as here, resentment is cloaked in theological veneer. Ironically, many today invoke the same rationalization against the concept of ordained clergy: ‘All the people of God are holy, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Exodus 19:6 cf. 1 Peter 2:9). The parallel reasoning

should prompt second thoughts among advocates of spiritual and ecclesiastical egalitarianism.

The role and authority of clergy has decisively changed in the wake of the definitive and final priesthood of Christ. For all that, the New Testament still affirms spiritual authority and ecclesiastical office. Democratic and egalitarian impulses owe more to contemporary Western political and social culture, than to biblical teaching, theological insight, or spiritual maturity.

In no way does this passage condone dictatorial or unilateral impulses in church leaders. Safeguards are necessary and appropriate to prevent the abuse of spiritual authority. Discussion of appropriate protections are best left to other biblical texts which discuss those themes. This passage limits itself to defending the authority of Aaron and the priesthood, and thus, the authority of duly called and appointed church leaders.



“[God] has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. It is against the Lord that you and all your followers have banded together” (16:10-11).

DAY 16

THE AUTHORITY OF AARON (AND THE PRIESTHOOD)

Numbers 16:41-17:13

This reading covers the second and third in a series of challenges to the authority of Moses and Aaron. In yesterday's passage, some Levites sought priestly prerogatives, and some Reubenites resented oversight: 250 of them died for it (16:1-40). In this second incident, the wider community blames Moses and Aaron for the executions, and God kills nearly 15,000 more (16:41-50). The obvious affinities between these two passages warrant treating them together. At the same time, length and content justify combining the second incident with the third, which responds to the preceding challenges by legitimizing Aaron's special authority (17:1-13).

What God said to them. The community fails to learn from the deaths of those who grumbled against Aaron. Now the entire community grumbles against Moses and Aaron, blaming them for the deaths (16:41). What could they suppose would happen?

God calls Moses and Aaron to step aside so that he can kill the crowd. Demonstrating the falsity of the charge against them, Moses and Aaron instead intercede to save their accusers. In a link with the previous episode, as a plague begins, Moses calls Aaron to take his censer into the

tabernacle to burn incense on behalf of the crowd. The plague ends, but not before 14,700 die (16:42-50).

To recap, in the first incident in this series, Korah challenged Aaron's role as chief intercessor, authorized to offer incense for the forgiveness of the nation (16:1-40). This second incident validates Aaron's role, with a case study of him offering incense for the forgiveness of the nation (16:41-50). Now, the third incident confirms his role through symbolic action.

To settle such challenges once for all, God directs Moses to collect a staff from the head of each tribe. He then places the staffs in the holiest area of the tabernacle, in front of the ark of the covenant. A day later, Aaron's staff – and his alone – has gone through an entire season of growth: it has sprouted, budded, blossomed, and produced almonds. Moses presents the miracle before the people. From then on, it will remain in front of the ark, as validation of Aaron's authority, and as a precaution against future rebellions and executions. The symbolic action has the desired effect, at least initially: the people fear that they will die if they intrude on priestly duties (17:1-13).

The point is emphasized through an unusual amount of repetition. God intends Aaron's staff as a sign to the rebellious not to grumble, 'so that they will not die'. Five times in rapid succession, the people fear execution: "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all going to die?"

Spiritual authority and hierarchy have received considerable attention in Numbers. The Levites are authorized and anointed (chapters 2-4,8). Moses' unique authority is challenged by Miriam and Aaron, and vindicated by God (chapter 12). Moses and Aaron are challenged by the crowd (chapters 14). Aaron and the priests are challenged by Levites (chapters 16a). Now Aaron's authority is twice confirmed by God (chapters 16b,17).

This theme would not receive so much attention were it merely of historical interest. Subsequent biblical texts indicate that controversies over spiritual authority and hierarchy persist throughout Israel's history. These passages serve not merely to record past challenges against authority, but also to preempt and adjudicate future disputes. The vindication of Aaron serves particularly to validate the authority of the priesthood in anticipation of future resistance.



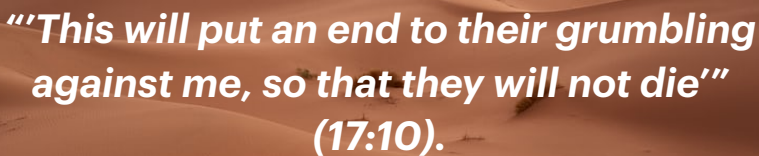
What God is saying to us. This passage supports and reinforces the message of the preceding incident. Rather than repeat the preceding application – the legitimacy of spiritual authority – we reflect instead on the repetition of the prompting occasion; that is, the pervasiveness of spiritual insubordination, and the severity of its consequences.

Insubordination against spiritual leadership is no less common and persistent today. What is less common today

is for God to execute those who rebel against legitimate authority, appropriately exercised.

These caveats are crucial: legitimate authority, appropriately exercised. Both self-appointment and authoritarianism are widespread today. But these improprieties are not the focus of this passage.

Instead, here we are warned not to rebel against legitimate spiritual leadership, appropriately exercised. Today, God generally does not strike down 15,000 mutineers at one time. But the same could be said of the biblical era. Scripture records this one occurrence as a warning for all subsequent generations. It seeks to put an end to grumbling against God and his appointed leaders, so that we might not come under judgment, whether immediately in this life, or eventually in the next.



“This will put an end to their grumbling against me, so that they will not die” (17:10).

DAY 17

VOCATIONAL RELIGIOUS WORKERS: RESPONSIBILITIES AND COMPENSATION

Numbers 18

As noted previously, Numbers alternates between case study and law, likely for two reasons: to maintain interest, and to intertwine application with principle. Earlier, Numbers 11-14 recounted three episodes of rebellion and judgment, then chapter 15 warned that sacrifice does not atone for defiant sin. More recently, Numbers 16-17 recorded three episodes challenging the authority of Aaron and the priesthood. Now, this chapter defends the special status of the priests and Levites, with respect to both ministry (verses 1-7) and compensation (verses 8-32).

What God said to them. In a change from usual practice, God speaks directly to Aaron (verses 1,8,20), except for the one instance when Aaron might otherwise be accused of conflict of interest (verse 25).

Verse 1-7 distinguish the duties of the priests and Levites (cf. Numbers 3-4,8). Verse 1 states the thesis: the priests and the Levites share responsibility for the tabernacle, though certain functions are the sole prerogative of priests. Overseen by priests, the Levites perform all duties related to the tent structure. They must, however, avoid its

furnishings, including the altar, or else they and the priests will both die as divine judgment (verses 2-4). The priests have sole jurisdiction over the care of the sanctuary and its furnishings. Anyone else who enters the sanctuary – even Levites – must be executed (verses 5-7).

Verses 8-32 cover the financial remuneration of priests and Levites. Thirteen times in these few verses, God authorizes both priests and Levites to live off the offerings that the people present to him (verses 8,9,11,12,13,14,18,19,21,24,26, 28,31). This emphasis anticipates – and precludes – resentment over the priests and Levites supporting themselves from offerings to God.

Beyond that, these verses rank the holiness of the various offerings, and allocate them accordingly. Priests alone may consume the most holy offerings: grain, sin, and guilt sacrifices. The wave, firstfruit, and firstborn offerings, they may share with family members. Offerings are allocated to the priests because they do not receive a share of the land (verses 8-20).

The Levites derive support from the tithes of produce that the people offer to God. This provision is similarly necessary because they too do not receive a share in the land (verses 21-24). The Levites, in turn, are to tithe the produce, giving the best part to the priests. Otherwise, they will be guilty of defiling the offerings, a capital offense (verses 25-32).

Overall, two features are especially prominent in the chapter. For one, it is God who assigns the functions and

compensation of priests and Levites. Anyone who would dispute either is opposing not just the clergy, but God. Consequently, both worship and donation are matters of life and death. Random people cannot serve as priests or Levites, or they will die. Levites cannot serve as priests, or they will die. Priests must not allow others to perform their duties, or both will die. Levites must tithe the best of their income to the priests, or they will die. Worship and giving are, literally, deadly serious.

Secondly, it is God, not the people, who pays the priests and Levites. The people donate the required sacrifices to God in worship. Then God designates most of his share for the support of the clergy. The distinction is carefully and repeatedly made, so it clearly intentional and significant.

The people do not hire and pay tabernacle staff. They are not bosses over the priests and Levites. Instead, it is God who appoints, directs, and compensates ministry and tabernacle staff.



What God is saying to us. The apostle Paul references this passage – as well as the teaching of Jesus – to defend the financial support of vocational pastors: “Don’t you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.” He insists that financial

support is the prerogative of all vocational gospel workers (1 Corinthians 9:3-18 cf. Matthew 10:10).

The tone and length of both Numbers 18 and 1 Corinthians 9 indicate that the appointment and financial support of clergy were controversial in both Old and New Testament eras. These issues are also fraught with tension today. At a minimum, we can say this much with clarity: pastors and ministry staff are not employees of a church, its leadership, or its members. Ultimately, it is God who appoints, directs, and compensates them, even if he does so via member donations to the church.



***“I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the tent of meeting”
(18:21).***

DAY 18

REMOVING DEATH'S DEFILEMENT

Numbers 19

At first glance, this passage seems another case of random placement. Further reflection suggests two connections to the preceding context.

The beginning of Numbers focused on the sacred role of the Levites (chapters 2-4), followed by reflection on sin and holiness among the laity, including the revered Nazirite vow (chapters 5-6). That is to say, while Numbers endorses the special status of vocational ministers, it also provides opportunity for the laity to participate in sacred calling. The same progression recurs here: after defending the special status of priest and Levites (chapters 16-18), the text assigns laity a role in sacred rites. Clergy hold a special status, but the laity also play a crucial role.

The second connection between chapter 19 and its preceding context comes in the shared focus on death. Chapter 16 records three incidents resulting in the death of nearly 15,000 Israelites. Proximity to the dead was one of the most virulent causes of defilement. This chapter explains the process for cleansing from defilement contracted through contact with the dead.

What God said to them. The explanation of the process for removing defilement has two parts. Verses 1-13 outlines the process from beginning to end. Verses 14-22 applies the ritual process to representative situations.

The process has three steps. First, the priest oversees the slaughter of a reddish-brown heifer. Unlike most sacrifices, the cow is burnt in its entirety, including its blood, along with other reddish materials symbolizing blood. Both the priest who sacrifices the cow, and the assistant who burns it, are temporarily defiled, until they wash their clothes and bodies, and evening comes (verses 1-8).

The second step entails the collection and storage of the ashes for later use. Any ceremonially clean man may play this role, though it defiles him, necessitating his cleansing (verses 9-10). The third step occurs when anyone comes into contact with a dead human body: they are sprinkled with water containing a small amount of these ashes, three and seven days after contact. Those sprinkled are cleansed. Those who refuse remain unclean; they are excluded from the community, in order to preserve the purity of the tabernacle (verses 11-13).

Verses 14-22 take a second pass over much the same material. They omit the production of the ashes, but elaborate various sorts of contact with the dead that defile (verses 14-16), and also add details to the ritual process (verses 17-19). The threat recurs, virtually verbatim, against those who refuse the ritual (verse 20). As before, the ritual

defiles those who assist, so they too must wash and wait until nightfall (verses 21-22).

A notable feature of this ritual is the participation of laity. Perhaps the reason is expediency: given the frequency of contact with the dead, it would be a heavy burden on the priests and Levites to conduct all the cleansing ceremonies, and the defilement incurred would interfere with their service in the tabernacle. Whatever the rationale, it is notable that the laity play a crucial role in the ritual that remedies the severest form of defilement. They do not perform the roles of priests and Levites, or enjoy their status, but laity still exercise an important spiritual role.



What God is saying to us. Application of this passage moves in two directions. Within the New Testament, the book of Hebrews combines this sacrifice of a heifer with other types of animal sacrifice to proclaim the superiority of Christ. The regular repetition of these sacrifices indicated “that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.” But Christ’s once-for-all offer of his own blood in sacrifice for the sins of mankind achieves an actual and effective cleansing from sin and death:

The ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ ... cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to

death, so that we may serve the living God (Hebrews 9:9,13-14).

By his death, Christ accomplishes what the heifer sacrifice symbolized, cleansing from guilt and shame.

Application of this passage can also develop the role of non-clergy in dealing with the guilt and shame of sin. All Christians – not only ordained clergy – have a legitimate role in proclaiming forgiveness, and in helping one another overcome sin. The apostle James writes, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other” (James 5:16). Similarly, Paul counsels, “If someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted” (Galatians 6:1-2).



“The ashes of the heifer ... are to be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing” (19:9).

DAY 19

LEADERSHIP FAILURE AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS

Numbers 20

The limits of this passage are signaled by a double inclusion. Miriam dies at the beginning of the chapter; Aaron at its end. Additionally, Aaron's death in verses 22-29 is punishment for his (and Moses') sin in verses 2-13.

Between Aaron's sin and his judgment, Israel encounters a hostile Edom, and is forced to travel a circuitous route. The compilation couples the two ramifications resulting from the disobedience of Aaron and Moses: individually, they die before reaching the Promised Land; collectively, Israel loses their top leadership on the verge of invading Canaan.

What God said to them. The chapter consists of three episodes. The first recalls the water-from-the-rock incident in Exodus 17. The two accounts share several features: each occurs in the wilderness (Sin and Zin, respectively); the people blame Moses for the lack of water; the malcontents idealize prior conditions in Egypt; Moses provides water by striking a rock with a staff; each account memorializes the incident by naming the location 'Meribah' ('quarreling').

The numerous similarities highlight the one significant difference: in Exodus, Moses is commanded to strike the

rock and does so; in Numbers, he is commanded to speak to the rock, but instead strikes it.

God responds fiercely. He accuses Moses and Aaron of rebellion (the same term Moses uses to describe his complaining countrymen). As punishment, the two leaders will die before reaching the Promised Land. The text makes a play on words to justify what may seem to be a draconian penalty: Moses and Aaron do not honor God as 'holy', so he executes them in order to demonstrate that he is 'holy'. In this context, 'holy' entails two related senses: to be respected fully and obeyed exactly. Committing the same sin as the wilderness generation, Moses and Aaron suffer the same penalty (verses 1-13).

Before the verdict is carried out, one incident intervenes. As Israel settles the Promised Land, its opponents fall into two camps: distant relatives (Edom, Moab), and sworn enemies (Canaanites). Here they encounter the former. In the standard format for formal letters, Moses requests safe passage. As motivation, he appeals to their ancient relationship, evokes sympathy with a recitation of Israel's recent sufferings, invokes the angel of God as their defender, and twice promises not to plunder supplies. Nonetheless, Edom threatens attack. To avoid confrontation, Israel detours (verses 14-21).

Four months later, Aaron dies (cf. 33:38-39). God gives timely warning, and calls for Aaron's son Eleazar to succeed him as high priest. Moses, Aaron, and Eleazar ascend Mount Hor. Once they transfer the sacred garments from father to

son, Aaron dies. The nation mourns for thirty days, instead of the customary seven (verses 22-29).

These incidents are notable individually and collectively. Individually, Moses and Aaron fail in the same way, and suffer the same punishment, as the rest of the exodus generation: they rebel against God, and die in the wilderness. The disobedience of Moses and Aaron seems less egregious than the repeated rebellions of the wilderness generation, so their comparable punishment indicates that God holds leaders to a higher standard.

Collectively, these events spell danger to the entire nation. Israel's preeminent leaders die just as the nation faces their greatest challenge. Without their anointed leaders, will Israel survive a prolonged military campaign against the Canaanites? The next passage addresses this question.



What God is saying to us. For today, we focus on the personal ramification of Moses' and Aaron's rebellion and punishment.

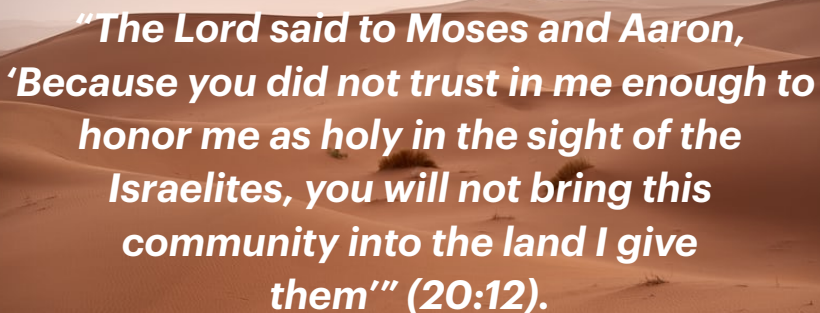
Often leadership brings with it a sense of entitlement, and national or international fame promotes an air of invincibility. This passage demonstrates that God holds leaders to a higher standard, and that he punishes misconduct, even when doing so may threaten his purposes or his people.

The steady stream of Christian leaders suffering public exposure makes this passage intensely relevant today.

If even Moses, the great liberator, and Aaron, the founding high priest, are not beyond committing grievous sin, how should we pray for our leaders, and what supports can we provide them?

If God is willing to risk his plans for Israel in order to uphold his holiness, what leader today can expect God to let sin pass unpunished, no matter what the collateral damage to his broader goals?

Given that God exposes the sins of Moses and Aaron to public view for all time, so that subsequent generations learn to respect his holiness, what does he think of our tendency to protect our organizations' reputations by covering up the sins of our leaders?



“The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them’” (20:12).

DAY 20

STABILITY IN UNSTABLE TIMES

Numbers 21

The events of chapter 20 pose an urgent question: With the deaths of Aaron and Moses, will Israel survive the invasion of Canaan? Chapter 21 calms the anxiety, presenting four case studies to reassure Israel that they will survive the deaths of their divinely-appointed leaders, because God himself is with them.

What God said to them. The chapter consists of four episodes, in thematic chiasm (battle-provisions-provisions-battle):

a	vv1-3	Israel defeats a Canaanite city.
b	vv4-9	God punishes Israel for complaining about food and water.
b'	vv10-20	Israel celebrates God's provision of water.
a'	vv21-35	Israel defeats two Amorite cities.

Together, the incidents resolve the crisis of chapter 20, reassuring Israel that even with the deaths of Aaron and Moses, and the invasion of Canaan, the nation will prosper because God guides their fight and provides for them.

The initial encounter with Canaanites goes poorly. As Israel travels toward Moab, they are attacked, and some are captured. In response, Israel commits itself to *herem*, war of

annihilation.⁴ God powers them to victory. Consequently, the location is named Hormah, meaning, 'Destruction' (21:13). Notably, Hormah is the same location where Israel earlier suffered defeat, when they first refused to invade Canaan at divine command, and then attempted to invade against his directive (14:39-45). With this deliverance, God rehabilitates the place name: 'Hormah' no longer represents the destruction of Israel; it now references the destruction of their enemies.

In the second episode, Israel complains about the lack of bread and water, and the monotony of manna. In response, God sends venomous snakes into their midst, killing many. They repent, and plead with Moses to intercede. God directs him to make a bronze snake and lift it on a pole, so that anyone who has been bitten can look at the snake and be healed (verses 4-9). The snake was a widespread ancient symbol of spiritual power, at times, good; at other times, bad. Here the effect is clear: Moses intercedes for deliverance from the plague, and God provides a corresponding symbol of deliverance. (Centuries later, subsequent generations will use the bronze serpent as an idol, provoking King Hezekiah to destroy it, 2 Kings 18:4.)

On the surface, the third episode is a travelogue, taken from an otherwise unknown ancient chronicle called, The Book of the Wars of the Lord. On further consideration, it balances the previous incident. The snake infestation was divine judgment for complaining against God over food and water.

⁴ On the ethics of *herem*, see the daily readings covering Deuteronomy 7-9.

The itinerary here not only lists locations where Israel camped, but also reports that God provided wells en route. He does not merely punish the grumblers; he continues supplying their needs (verses 10-20 cf. Deuteronomy 2-3).

The final episode – a couple of local wars – contrasts with the first episode, and also with Edom’s intimidation in chapter 20. When Israel sought to pass through Edom, they were rebuffed. That raised an urgent question: how will they invade a fortified land? Now they seek to pass through Amorite territory, again pledging not to take provisions or harm inhabitants. Sihon, the local ruler, attacks. Israel defeats his forces and takes possession of land that he had previously captured from Moab. Israel also defeats Og, ruler of Bashan, and captures his land (verses 21-35; cf. Deuteronomy 2-3).

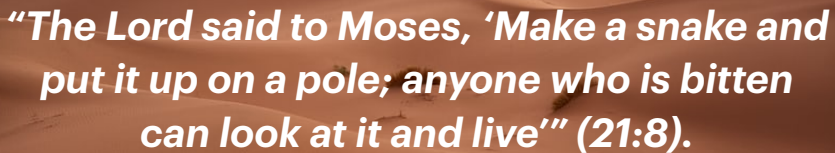
All four episodes resolve the anxieties of Numbers 20, and hold out hope for coming challenges. God will provide them water as they dig wells, and will empower them in battle. What he has done through Moses, he will continue to do. The death of the first-generation leadership does not doom the invasion of Canaan, because God remains with Israel.



What God is saying to us. In the Gospel of John, Jesus reimagines the second episode as a type of his crucifixion-resurrection-ascension complex. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be

lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him” (John 3:14-15). Turning toward the lifted serpent provided escape from physical death; turning toward the crucified and exalted Jesus brings eternal life.

The current passage applies in a second way, as well. Later in this Gospel, Jesus speaks to an analogous situation. He is about to die, but his disciples need not be anxious about themselves or his mission. It is to their advantage that he goes, Jesus reassures them, because he will send a successor, the Holy Spirit, to guide and empower them (John 14:16-17,26; 15:26-27; 16:7-11,12-15). Consequently, leadership transitions are considerably less anxious and disruptive today: the outward face may change, but the underlying leadership remains the same.



“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live’” (21:8).

DAY 21

SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Numbers 22-24

This lengthy episode is fascinating in its own right: black magic, a shaman, a talking donkey. These attention-grabbing features should not distract us from the role of this incident in the larger narrative. This incident continues to address the leadership transition. Aaron has just died, and Moses' death is imminent. Can Israel survive in the absence of its high priest and preeminent prophet?

What God is said to them. Three contrasts combine to form the point of this passage: the shaman Balaam versus Aaron and Moses, as priest and prophet; Balaam and the Moabite ruler Balak versus God, cursing and blessing; and, Balaam and Balak versus God, controlling Israel's fate. Together, these contrasts affirm that even in the absence of its long-standing spiritual leaders and intermediaries with God, Israel is not vulnerable to Canaanite gods and their spirit-mediums.

Moses takes center stage in every chapter of Numbers except these three, where he makes no appearance. Instead, a new character – a spirit-medium named Balaam – occupies center stage. Israel's victory over the Amorites brings them within striking distance of Moab and Midian. Recognizing that their forces are overmatched, the Moabite ruler Balak devises a different strategy: he summons

Balaam, whose reputation has spread over four hundred miles. Significantly, Balak's invitation references all three Abrahamic promises: the vast number of Israelites, their territorial conquests, and the ironic characterization that 'those whom Balaam blesses are blessed, and those whom he curses are cursed' (22:1-7a cf. Genesis 12:3).

This is a war between God and Canaanite gods. Balak supposes that as a powerful spirit-medium, Balaam can direct the spirits to bless or curse. To his credit, Balaam denies that he crassly manipulates spirits; instead, the spirits direct him. The narrator adds his own take on Balaam as a medium: in this instance, God intervenes so that Balaam hears not from his usual spirits, but from the divine Spirit (22:7b-8).

In their first encounter, God forbids Balaam to accept Balak's invitation (22:9-13). In their second encounter, he permits Balaam to go, but insists that he must speak only what God authorizes, not what Balak wants (22:14-20). The third encounter is especially ironic: Balaam, the purported skilful spirit guide has less preternatural perception than his own donkey. He is again commanded to speak only what God says (22:21-35).

His three encounters with God prepare Balaam for three encounters with Balak. A prologue sets parameters: Balaam can speak only what God tells him (22:36-40). Each of the three encounters follows the same pattern: Balak and Balaam stop at a high place; they offer seven double sacrifices; Balaam consults God privately; rather than

cursing Israel, he announces God's blessing; Balak objects; Balaam insists that he can speak only as God directs (22:41-23:12; 23:13-26; 23:27-24:14). The third encounter is especially significant: for the first time, Balaam does not resort to divination; instead, as with Israel's prophets, the Spirit of God comes on him, and he prophesies.

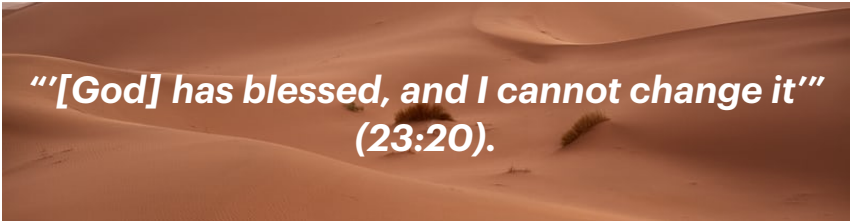
In an epilogue, Balaam offers an additional four unsolicited, genuine prophesies, all to the same effect: God will raise up a mighty king for Israel – a star, with scepter – who will crush all their enemies (24:15-25).

The singular message of these three chapters, repeated often: even in the absence of their spiritual intermediaries, God will bless Israel and curse her enemies. Already one of the Abrahamic promises has been fulfilled: "Moab was terrified because there were so many [Israelites]" (22:2). Balaam prophesies the fulfillment of the second and third Abrahamic promises: Israel will conquer Canaan; and those nations which cooperate will share God's blessings, while those who oppose will suffer his curses. God will accomplish all this, even in the absence of preeminent prophet Moses and chief priest Aaron. God will accomplish all this, even if he has no better conduit as prophet and priest than a pagan shaman. God will fulfill his promises to Israel, despite all opponents, military or spiritistic.



What God is saying to us. In our day, skepticism dismisses spiritism, yet most of the world – ancient and modern –

affirms the reality of spiritual powers, as well as the ability of mediums to influence them toward desired ends. The New Testament affirms that our battle is even fiercer, for our enemy is not the ruler of some earthly power who appeals to a spirit medium for help against us. Instead, “our struggle is ... against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Yet on our side is the great and mighty God, who fights for his Church and his purposes, ensuring final victory (Revelation 19-22).



DAY 22

DESTROYED FROM WITHIN

Numbers 25

The previous episode rang with hope. From a human perspective, the deaths of Moses and Aaron would seem to cripple Israel's future. Nonetheless, God remains determined to bless them, even, if necessary, through disreputable agents, such as a mortal enemy and a pagan shaman. Just as the future looks hopeful, Israel manages to turn it bleak again.

This pattern – highlight followed by lowlight – is familiar by now. The exodus from Egypt led to complaints about food and water (Exodus 14-16). At the same time as God was revealing the Ten Commandments and the sanctuary design, Israel worshipped the golden calf (Exodus 20-33). As they prepared to invade Canaan, they rebelled over the risks (Numbers 1-11). Now, just after God demonstrated that his blessing would survive the death of Moses and Aaron, Israel engages in sexual immorality and idolatry with enemy women, and 24,000 die in punishment.

What God said to them. This incident involves the same main characters as the preceding episode. Previously, Midianites and Moabites joined forces in recruiting Balaam to curse the Israelites. After that strategy failed, Moabite and Midianite women entice Israelite men to participate in sexual immorality, feasting, and idol worship. A later

chapter indicates that this, too, was a Balaam-devised strategy to corrupt Israel (Numbers 31:16). The connection between the two episodes is instructive: what their enemy could not do to them by force, Israel did to themselves out of lust.

In the ancient world, feasts commonly involved sacrifice to the gods, and often included sexual entertainment. So the Israelite men engage in two sins: sexual immorality and idol worship. From God's perspective, offerings to other deities are not a harmless social formality, but a capital offense (verses 1-3).

Judgment is immediate, multifaceted, and severe. God directs Moses to execute the leaders among the offenders, and leave their bodies exposed to the elements, as a warning to the rank and file. Moses calls judges to execute those from their clans who worshipped Baal. At the same time, God instigates a plague that kills 24,000 (verses 4-9).

In the midst of these punishments, an Israelite man brings a Midianite woman into his tent, within view of the crowd. Inflamed by the impudence, Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, drives his spear through the two of them, while they are engaged in the sex act. His devotion to God makes atonement for the Israelite's sin, saves the remaining populace, and secures a perpetual priesthood for his descendants (verses 6-13). Additionally, because of this incident, God calls for Israel to exterminate the Midianites (verses 14-18).

In short, God protected Israel from the previous Moabite and Midianite effort to curse the nation (chapters 22-24). God does not, however, protect his people from themselves, and they suffer the consequences of their egregious sin (chapter 25). On the one hand, this episode confirms the justness of God's decision to wipe out the entire generation. On the other hand, it raises doubt about the new generation's commitment to live for God so that they can survive.




What God is saying to us. The apostle Paul references this passage in 1 Corinthians 10, in response to Christians who join their non-Christian neighbors for feasts, even though the host would first offer the food in honor of household deities. Because of the association with idols, Paul characterizes the meal as idolatrous, even if the Christian does not actively participate in the offering. Numbers 25 also reinforces his warnings against sexual immorality, rebuked earlier in the same letter.

Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-

three thousand of them died (10:7-8).⁵

Participating in idol feasts and engaging in sexual immorality remain capital sins in the New Testament era, and thus, in our own day.

Participation in idol feasts is not a widespread problem in the northern or western hemispheres (though it is a pressing issue in much of the southern and eastern hemispheres). Sexual immorality is a pervasive problem among Christians in all places. Oddly, the warning of Numbers 25 and 1 Corinthians 10 is widely disregarded. When tempted either to join idol feasts or to engage in sexual immorality, Christians should ask themselves: Is this worth falling under divine judgment?



“Those who died in the plague numbered 24,000” (25:9).

⁵ Numbers 25 counts 24,000 casualties, whereas Paul numbers 23,000. Likely he intends his readers to discern a combined allusion to both occasions when God punished Israel for idolatry during the wilderness wanderings, amalgamating the 3,000 casualties of the golden calf episode (Exodus 32:28), with the 24,000 here.

DAY 23

A SECOND CENSUS

Numbers 26

This chapter may look and sound familiar, because it is. In form and substance, it largely repeats Numbers 1. Largely, but not entirely.

Largely: it is a lengthy census. Which is odd in itself. After all, one census in a document would seem to suffice. Let alone two.

But not entirely: this census registers the next generation. Moreover, despite the superficial similarity, the second census makes a much different point than its predecessor.

What God said to them. The second census, like the first, counts all the male Israelites, twenty years old and above, listed by clan, in the same order (with one minor exception, the reversal of the two sons of Joseph: Manasseh and Ephraim). The second census uses the same phraseology and structure, followed by a recount of the Levites. Despite these formal similarities, the second census differs notably at three points.

For one, this new census names a second generation. The transition begins in 26:1, with God speaking not to Moses and Aaron, but, for the first time, to Moses and Eleazar, son of Aaron. Each clan identification in the census includes not

only the founding patriarch, but also his children and the clans which descend from them. Apart from the founding patriarchs, no person appears on both lists. The conclusion explains why not: “Not one of them was among those counted by Moses and Aaron the priest... For the Lord had told those Israelites they would surely die in the desert, and not one of them was left” (26:64). The wilderness generation has perished under divine judgment. At the same time, the purpose of God continues, passing on through the next generation.

A second feature of the list is actually less a difference than an unexpected similarity: despite the death of an entire generation, the clan totals are comparable. Reuben began with 46,500, and now has 43,730; Gad, with 45,650, and now, 40,500; Judah increases from 74,600 to 76,500. The one exception is a precipitous fall in numbers for the clan of Simeon: from 59,300 to 22,200. This decline reflects the first point above: in the preceding chapter, it was a man from the clan of Simeon who flouted his sexual relationship with a Midianite and was speared by Phinehas, with God’s approval (25:6-9). So the purpose of God continues, even when some people of God forfeit their place in it.

The third feature of this list – and another difference from the first – is its purpose. The first census registered men for the military draft: fourteen times it repeats the refrain, “who are able to serve in the army” (chapter 1). The second census registers families for land distribution once they secure Canaan: “The land is to be allotted to them as an

inheritance based on the number of names” (26:53 cf. 26:52-56).

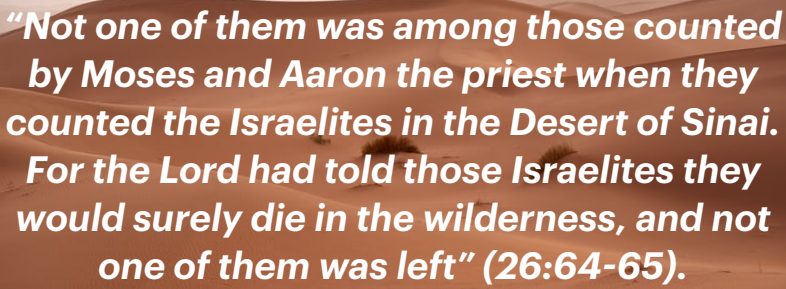
Israel is headed into war for the land of Canaan. The first census addressed the question: “Will we all die, and the purposes of God fail?” The implicit answer of that census is: “You are the fulfillment of the first Abrahamic promise: innumerable descendants. So you can trust the second promise of God: a homeland!” The second census carries a much different – even opposite – message. It is not enemies and war that they should fear, but their God who judges the rebellious. At the same time, even when one generation dies under judgment, his purpose continues: even while the text records the death of one generation, threatening the first promise, it apportions land to the next generation, sustaining the first promise and fulfilling the second.



What God is saying to us. Many Christians today hope that God no longer judges his people for egregious sin, supposing that we escape accountability by appeal to the death of Jesus. But Paul explicitly applies the judgments of Numbers to Christians in his own day. Recalling the wilderness incidents, he warns, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So ... be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:11-12).

Here Paul makes the same points as Numbers 26. The purpose of God is being fulfilled: in Christ, the culmination

of the ages has arrived with the blessing of the gentiles, fulfilling the third Abrahamic promise. Nonetheless, egregious sin forfeits participation in his blessing. Therefore, he warns, we must avoid the wilderness sins of sexual immorality, idolatry, rebellion against God, and criticism of appointed leaders (1 Corinthians 10:7-10).



“Not one of them was among those counted by Moses and Aaron the priest when they counted the Israelites in the Desert of Sinai. For the Lord had told those Israelites they would surely die in the wilderness, and not one of them was left” (26:64-65).

DAY 24

THE ECONOMIC RIGHTS OF SINGLE WOMEN

Numbers 27:1-11; 36:1-13

The first part of Numbers 27 is another example of a text which initially appears randomly situated, but, on further consideration, is connected to its context.

What God said to them. Numbers 27:1-11 discusses the land rights of five named sisters. Their father, Zelophehad, died in the wilderness, but of natural cause, not in punishment for sin (which could have forfeited his right to land). Typically, his share of the Promised Land would be divided among surviving sons, but he had none. This jeopardizes his family's title to his allotment in the Promised Land, and threatens his daughters' economic well-being. This episode provides a case study in the application of the laws regarding family inheritance.

The connection of this passage to its context is not immediately apparent. A close reading, however, reveals strong links to what precedes and follows. The census of chapter 26 provided the data necessary for land distribution once Israel conquers Canaan. In order to arrange a proportionate distribution, the census listed the original patriarchs and one generation of their male children, and the clans that descended from those children, including numerical totals. With one exception: the lineage of the

patriarch Joseph was traced through five generations, in order to reach the five daughters of the son-less Zelophehad. Thus, among other functions, the census of chapter 26 sets up the case study of chapter 27a, and the case study addresses a gap in the census.

A connection also exists with what follows, signaling the cohesion of Numbers 27-36. After the allocation of land to Zelophehad's daughters, they disappear from view, but only temporarily. The final chapter of Numbers, chapter 36, returns to these woman and their allocated share of the land. What will happen to their land if they marry outside the clan? In that case, land allocated to the clan of Manasseh would end up in the hands of some other clan, in violation of God's original allotment. The solution is that these daughters must choose husbands from within their clan.

So the land rights of Zelophehad's daughters forms an inclusion around the entire third section of Numbers, not only connecting the two episodes, but also providing thematic cohesion to the entirety of Numbers 26-36. Subsequent readings will identify additional connections. For today, it suffices to focus on the link between these two separate units.

Both episodes suppose that possession of land is God-ordained. Land is essential both to economic well-being and to clan cohesion. In this instance, the two functions are in tension. In chapter 27a, the financial survival of Zelophehad's daughters requires that they retain ownership

of the land, so that it does not pass from their lineage to other members of the clan. In chapter 36, the clan acts to prevent exogenous marriage, so that the ownership of the land does not transfer with any daughters who marry outside the clan.

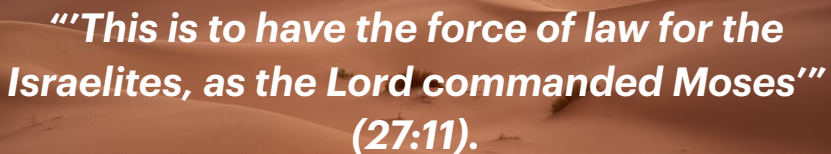
Such law makes perfect sense within a traditional agrarian society, where land ownership is central to financial survival, and passes predominately to male heirs. God allocates the Promised Land, so his boundaries must be respected. With the land central both to economic well-being and to clan identity, the two functions are ranked in order of relative priority. This passage prioritizes the rights of economically dependent women over wealth accumulation by other members of the clan. But once the daughters' financial well-being is secured through marriage, the claims of the clan take priority.



What God is saying to us. The equitable distribution of land remains a crucial issue in agrarian societies today. In such contexts, this passage – along with others in the Old Testament – speaks against the permanent accumulation of vast tracts of arable land in the hands of a few elite, and the subjugation of the masses in tenant farming. Since many traditional societies practice inheritance through the male line, this passage establishes an important precedent for land distribution in the absence of male descendants. It is not entirely egalitarian – where they exist, sons still have priority over daughters in claims to inheritance – but it does

at least provide for the well-being of women who lack a 'male protector'.

For urbanized societies, land distribution is a rather distant expression of a continuing issue: economic well-being and wealth accumulation. Unfortunately, Christian positions on social issues typically correlate more closely with economic class and culture of origin than with Scripture. This passage, and others in the Hebrew Bible, still speak today against the accumulation of perpetual wealth in the hands of a small ownership class, and the entrenched poverty of the working poor. Opposing such abuse is neither socialism nor communism; it is God's Word.



***“This is to have the force of law for the Israelites, as the Lord commanded Moses”
(27:11).***

DAY 25

LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

Numbers 27:12-23

With the journey resuming toward the new land, the third section of Numbers revisits and elaborates earlier themes. So far, we have seen a recount of the population (Numbers 26 cf. chapter 1), and new details regarding the distribution of land (Numbers 27a cf. chapter 14). Now the text returns to the imminent death of Moses, and the void that his departure will create (cf. chapter 20).

What God said to them. This passage proceeds in four steps. God invites Moses to ascend a mountain in order to see the Promised Land, prior to his death in judgment for disobedience in the Desert of Zin (verses 12-14 cf. Numbers 20:1-13). Concerned about the void his death will create, Moses urges God to appoint a successor (verses 15-17). God directs Moses to anoint Joshua publicly (verses 18-21). Moses does so (verses 22-23).

The passage makes two points about Joshua's status. On the one hand, he is the authorized successor to Moses: God identifies him; Moses lays hands on him; the appointment ceremony occurs during sacred assembly; his commission is to direct the entire community. The closing section records the exact implementation of these instructions. Between the command and its fulfillment, the passage affirms the status of Joshua as successor to Moses a

remarkable eight times. There can be no doubt about Joshua's authority.

At the same time, Joshua never attains the full measure of Moses' status or intimacy with God. He receives 'some' of Moses authority (verse 20). Similarly, while God spoke with Moses face to face, he will speak with Joshua through the high priest Eleazar, and the Urim and Thummim (an ancient form of guidance, the details of which are no longer known) (verse 21).

Given the frequency and fury of the rebellions against Moses, God and the biblical text take extraordinary effort to validate Joshua as successor. At the same time, God intends Joshua to be only half the leader that Moses was. Thus, this passage both affirms and limits Joshua's status. In partnership with Eleazar the priest, he has authority over all Israel, though Moses remains incomparable.

Exodus and Numbers have long prepared for the commissioning of Joshua, documenting his closeness to Moses, his character, his experience, and his leadership skill. He led an early attack against the Amalekites (Exodus 17:9-15), joined Moses atop Mount Sinai (Exodus 24), witnessed the people's shameful idolatry (Exodus 32:17-35), and was present for divine revelations at the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 33:7-11). With Caleb, he was one of only two spies who trusted God for the invasion of Canaan (Numbers 13-14). God will confirm him again, at the Tent of Meeting, just prior to Moses' death (Deuteronomy 31:14-23).

Then, when Moses dies, Joshua will be filled with the Spirit that empowered Moses (Deuteronomy 34:9).

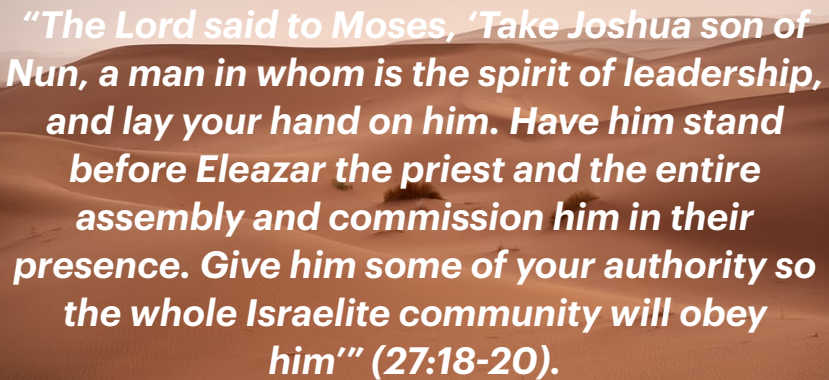
This record reflects the sensitivity of the transition from founder to second-generation leadership. Though Joshua never attains to Moses' status or intimacy with God, he is nonetheless divinely called and commissioned to lead Israel. His role will be strategic, at a time of national crisis, so the people need – and receive – assurance that he has the character, experience, and authority to fulfill this demanding role.



What God is saying to us. Given that 'Joshua' is the Hebrew version of the Greek name, 'Jesus' (both meaning 'God saves'), it is a natural to suppose that Joshua anticipates Jesus. Yet the New Testament never explicitly correlates them. Likely this is because it portrays Jesus as greater than Moses, while Numbers portrays Joshua as less than Moses.

A more fruitful avenue of contemporary application is prompted by the expression 'like sheep without a shepherd'. Considering his impending death, Moses pleads for a successor "so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (verse 17). In his own ministry, Jesus sees crowds, "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." In response, Jesus urges his disciples to pray for more workers, then sends them out on mission, as the answer to that prayer (Matthew 9:36-10:42).

So likely it is not Jesus who is the new Joshua. He is the new and greater Moses. If anyone, it is Christian evangelists, missionaries, and pastors – and especially higher echelon pioneering leaders – who are the new Joshua(s). With this equivalence, he serves as a paradigm for the character, experience, and calling to be sought in identifying whom God is appointing to leadership within the Church today.



“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him’” (27:18-20).

DAY 26

THE SCHEDULE OF REQUIRED SACRIFICES

Numbers 28-29

Sacrifices were the focus of three previous passages (Leviticus 1-7, Leviticus 22-23, Numbers 15). Each time, the discussion is partial, rather than comprehensive, treating some aspect of sacrifice relevant within that particular context. The same is true of this passage.

What God said to them. Chapters 26-27 developed against the backdrop of life in the Promised Land: the distribution of land (chapter 26-27a), and the appointment of new leadership (chapter 27b). Now, Numbers lays out the timing of the various sacrifices in the land, in order of frequency.

The offering of food and drink to deities is a common feature of many religions. The interpretation of the offerings varies from one religion to another, and even among various groups within a religion. Given that sacrifices comprise full-course meals – meat, grain, and drink – a common interpretation is that gods need feeding. Precluding that interpretation, this passage repeatedly describes sacrifice as ‘an aroma pleasing to the Lord’ (28:2,6,8,13,24,27; 29:2,6,8,13,36).

As to the specifics, this passage is organized by ‘the appointed time’ for the various offerings (28:2). Twice a day,

morning and evening, Israel is to present a burnt offering consisting of a lamb, grain with oil, and drink offerings (28:3-8). On the Sabbath, they are to present an additional burnt offering, along with grain and drink offerings (28:9-10).

The first of the lunar month – the new moon – requires an additional burnt offering consisting of two bulls, one ram, and seven lambs. More expensive animals require correspondingly larger grain and drink offerings. A sin offering of one goat is also required (28:11-15).

In addition to daily, weekly, and monthly offerings, the calendar year is marked by annual festivals. Immediately after Passover, beginning the fifteenth day of the first month (March/April), the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread commemorates the exodus from Egypt. Each day, the people are to offer the equivalent of the new-moon offering: two bulls, one ram, and seven lambs, along with the complementary grain and drink offerings (28:16-25 cf. Exodus 23:14-15; Leviticus 23:4-8).

Fifty days later comes the Feast of Weeks (or 'Firstfruits', a.k.a. 'Pentecost'), celebrating the early grain harvest. The same sacrifices are required as on the first of the month, and on each of the days of Unleavened Bread (28:26-31 cf. Exodus 23:16; Leviticus 23:15-21).

The seventh month of the year is the busiest for festivals, with eighteen days devoted to religious celebrations. In addition to the usual daily and new-moon offerings, the

month begins with the Feast of Trumpets. The sacrifice is modest, with only one bull (rather than two), along with the usual ram and seven lambs, as well as proportionate offerings of grain and oil; drink offerings are not mentioned, but are likely assumed (29:1-6 cf. Leviticus 23:23-25). The Feast of Trumpets begins an extended period of reflection and repentance, leading to the Day of Atonement on the tenth of the month. The sacrifices offered are the same as for the Feast of Trumpets (29:7-11 cf. Leviticus 16; 23:23-32).

Beginning the fifteenth of the month, the Feast of Tabernacles (or 'Booths') celebrates the end of the harvest season. Copious sacrifices extend over eight days. Sacrifices of bulls reduce successively from thirteen per day to seven. In addition, ram sacrifices hold consistent at two, and lambs at fourteen, each accompanied by the typical grain and drink. All this is in addition to the usual daily burnt, grain, drink, and sin offerings. The festival ends on the eighth day, with a more modest burnt offering of a single bull, a ram, and seven lambs, along with grain, drink, and sin offerings (29:12-38 cf. Leviticus 23:33-36).

The final two verses anticipate the optional vows and freewill offerings that follow in the next chapter (29:39-40).

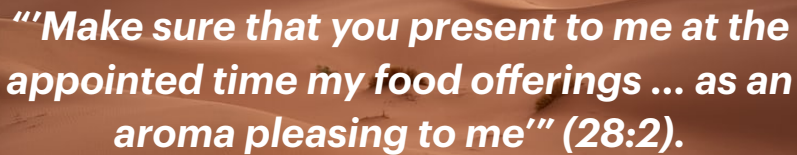


What God is saying to us. Old Testament scholar Gordon Wenham collates all these offerings, reaching an annual

total of 113 bulls, 32 rams, 1086 lambs, more than a ton of flour, and a thousand bottles of oil and wine.⁶

It is hard for us to track the details of a sacrifice-based relationship with God. Gratefully, we need not. For us, the complexity highlights the simplicity and finality of salvation in Christ. From these two chapters, we can see why the author of Hebrews characterizes the sacrifices as “repeated endlessly year after year.” Instead, “we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:1,10). With his death, Jesus has achieved what innumerable animal sacrifices could not.

The sacrificial system also reminds us that today, our sacrifice is to offer ourselves to God, living, holy, and pleasing to him (Romans 12:1).



“Make sure that you present to me at the appointed time my food offerings ... as an aroma pleasing to me” (28:2).

⁶ Wenham, *Numbers* (1981) p 220.

DAY 27

WOMEN'S RITES

Numbers 30

In the Old Testament, devotion to God was obligatory at designated times. Devotion may also be expressed spontaneously, whether in gratitude over some particular benefit, or in plea during crisis. Chapters 28-29 surveyed the required occasions and sacrifices; this chapter addresses voluntary vows.

Verses 1-2 begin with vows by men, setting up a contrast with the rest of the chapter: vows by women. The conclusion captures the focus of the entire chapter: vows by women are a specific expression of a broader dynamic, "relationships between a man and his wife, and between a father and his young daughter still living in his house" (verse 16).

In particular, the chapter affirms that men are spiritually independent: they are obligated to fulfill any vow they make (verses 1-2). Women are spiritually dependent on a family male: their vows are binding only after review by father or husband, as the case may be (verses 3-15). Today's reading will survey the content of the chapter, and then reflect on the contemporary application of patriarchal spirituality within cultures which aspire to be egalitarian.

What God said to them. The general topic is evident through repetition: twelve times the passage references ‘vows and pledges’. While it never explicitly differentiates the two terms, ‘vow’ was used earlier for the Nazirite commitment (Numbers 6:1-21 cf. Leviticus 27). So where the two can be distinguished, ‘vow’ may reference a commitment of life, while ‘pledge’ promises an offering if a prayer is answered (e.g., Genesis 28:20-22; Numbers 21:1-3). Either way, such commitments are neither required nor calendrical, so they do not fit within chapters 28-29. Yet while taking a vow or making a pledge is voluntary, its fulfillment is mandatory (Leviticus 5:4-13; Deuteronomy 23:21-23; cf. Judges 11:30-39; 1 Samuel 1:11-28).

Or, rather, vows and pledges made by men must be fulfilled (verse 2). Those made by women are binding only after review by a familial male. Accordingly, the chapter develops in terms of the women’s marital status. If a young woman still lives in her family household, her father can overrule her vow, provided he does so as soon as he learns of it. If he says nothing, then the vow is confirmed and binding. If he forbids it, then she is released from obligation (verses 3-5).

If a young woman makes a vow, and gets married thereafter, her new husband has the same option, under the same conditions. Provided he acts when he first learns of her vow, he can annul it (verses 6-8).

A widow or divorcée, on the other hand, is independent spiritually, and is bound by any vow she makes (verse 9).

If a woman is already married when she takes a vow or makes a pledge, then her husband can overrule it, provided he does so immediately. If he learns of it but says nothing, or if he confirms it, then the vow is binding. If he waits until sometime later to nullify it, then he – not she – is guilty of the violation (verses 10-15). Under such circumstances, Leviticus previously stipulated that the guilty party is to make a sin offering, to atone for the commitment not honored (Leviticus 5:4-13).

In short, of the four categories, only widows and divorcées are obliged to fulfill their vows without confirmation by a familial male. Which is to say, no other woman is an independent spiritual actor, on a par with an adult male.

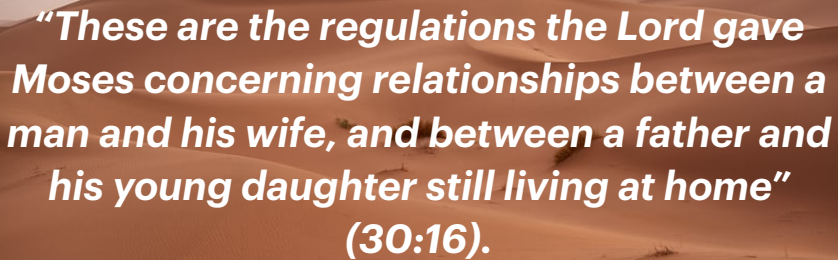


What God is saying to us. Regarding vows in general, we note both Jesus' cautions and the continued practice of vows among the earliest Christians (Matthew 5:33-37; 15:3-9; cf. Acts 18:18; 21:20-24). Vows and pledges do not feature prominently in contemporary Western Christianity, and nothing in this passage – or in Scripture more broadly – requires that to change.

The one common exception to cultural trends is that commitments are frequently made to consider vocational ministry or cross-cultural missions. Does this passage mean that a man is bound by any commitments made at a missions recruitment conference, but that a woman who makes such a commitment must have it validated by her

father, husband, or fiancé, before it becomes binding? Are women prohibited from engaging with God with the same degree of self-determination as men?

This passage clearly assumes a patriarchal culture, in which women tended to be restricted and protected. In contemporary patriarchal cultures, it is arguable that vows taken by women are still subject to review by a familial male. But nothing in Numbers requires that we return to a patriarchal culture. In support of egalitarian adaptation, it is worth noting that Jesus' teaching on vows is gender-neutral.



“These are the regulations the Lord gave Moses concerning relationships between a man and his wife, and between a father and his young daughter still living at home” (30:16).

DAY 28

RETRIBUTION AGAINST THE MIDIANITES

Numbers 31

Numbers 31 looks backward and forward. It looks backward to the Moabite and Midianite plot against Israel, ending with God's command to "treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them because they treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the affair of Peor" (Numbers 22-25). It looks forward to the invasion of Canaan, providing a trial run for the battles to come. Moses' last military initiative is simultaneously the first military action for the new generation.

What God said to them. The action – and the chapter – divides naturally into seven parts.

The call to battle explains its purpose and identifies the participants. The battle takes vengeance against the Midianites, for their opposition toward both Israel and God. The clans are to participate equally, each providing 1,000 men for battle. For added power, Phinehas, son of the high priest Eleazar, brings sacred objects to the battle (verses 1-6).

The battle itself receives little attention. Israel kills every man, including the five rulers who initiated the earlier conflict, and Balaam, the shaman who previously devised

the strategy to destroy Israel. The Israelites take the rest of the women, children, animals, and goods as plunder, and raze the towns (verses 7-12).

Given that the women were culpable in seducing Israel into pagan worship, Moses faults the warriors for allowing them to survive. He demands the execution of every boy and sexually mature woman. Only the prepubescent girls may live (verses 13-18).

Then all the fighters and plunder must be purified before entering camp. In keep with previous guidelines, the process requires seven days. Everything that can withstand fire must be burned. Anything else is to be cleansed with water (verses 19-24).

The spoils are then divided, with half shared among the fighters, and half distributed among the community. The soldiers are to give tribute to the Lord for the priests. The rest of the community gives a share for the maintenance of the tabernacle, and the support of the Levites (verses 25-31).

The volume of plunder seems excessive, like the numbers in the censuses of chapters 1 and 26. Scholars propose similar solutions in both instances, with no certain conclusion to either (verses 32-47).

Finally, the commanders count their losses, and find that they suffered no fatalities. Ironically, their forefathers feared that an invasion would annihilate the nation. Instead, the

first battle brings total victory without any lives lost. In gratitude, the battle commanders collect all the gold objects they plundered and offer them to the Lord as a memorial (verses 48-54).

In all respects, this first battle is ideal. The people obey the Lord and Moses at every point. They kill all the enemy and take vast plunder. They share the spoils liberally with non-combatants, and with God and the tabernacle staff. All without loss of a single life. The remainder of the battles may not proceed so smoothly or turn out so well, but this is, at least, an encouraging start.



What God is saying to us. Militarily, the first battle was an unqualified success. Morally, it was atrocious. Or so it seems to us: murderous revenge, massacre, slavery, plunder, razing. All at the direction of God? What sort of God – what sort of religion – is this?

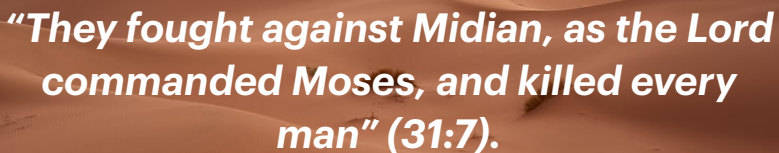
Nothing will make this entirely palatable by contemporary standards, but some considerations may mitigate the worst aspects of it. For one, we should be honest about our own era. Such brutality is part of the history of our own country, and is currently occurring around the world today. War is brutal and brutalizing, and civilians, women, and children are consistently among its victims.

Secondly, the invasion of Canaan was a crucial time in the survival of Israel not only as a nation, but also as the people

of God. The Midianites repeatedly attacked Israel, and finally succeeded in seducing them into betraying their God, threatening their own destruction. The annihilation of the Midianites is more retributive than vengeful.

Thirdly, this is not genocide. God does not victimize any one people, ethnicity or race. Numbers repeatedly documents that he kills thousands of his own people in judgment for sin. A little later, he threatens to destroy the entire nation if they commit the same sins as the Midianites (33:55-56). This God is holier and fiercer than may be comfortable for us, but he is consistent in his judgments, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Ultimately, the New Testament reaffirms the basic contours of judgment, though it includes a breathtaking caveat. Sin and idolatry still make people enemies of God. Yet he now deflects their judgment onto his own Son in the effort to reconcile his enemies to himself.



“They fought against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses, and killed every man” (31:7).

DAY 29

DÉJA VUE ALL OVER AGAIN?

Numbers 32

With the victories of Numbers 21 and 31, Israel seized control of territory east of the Jordan ('the Transjordan'), and thus, outside the Promised Land. Additionally, the recent victory over the Midianites secured a great amount of booty, including large numbers of herd animals. Leaders from two clans – the Reubenites and the Gadites – decide that with all this, they need not travel any further. They have all they need for a comfortable life right there. They approach Moses with their proposal. Detecting parallels to the previous generation's refusal to invade Canaan (cf. Numbers 13-14), Moses explodes in anger. The chapter traces their negotiations and final settlement.

What God said to them. The language of this chapter is formal, and its development is structured, both attributes of an official negotiation and settlement. It is covenantal in character, with conditions and stipulations, blessing and curse, sworn before God.

The narrative introduction sets both the scene and the tone. The leaders of the clans of Reuben and Gad find themselves with large herds and flocks, in land suitable for grazing, and draw the obvious conclusion: "Let's just settle here." Using the deferential language of a covenant subordinate ('your servants'), they present a formal proposal to the community

leadership: Moses, Eleazar the high priest, and the assembly of clan leaders (verses 1-5).

Moses sees parallels to the first generation's refusal to enter the land. (The narrator draws attention to the thematic similarity with many verbal parallels between the two accounts). He is incensed at the suggestion that these two clans live in safety while their countrymen go to war. He is infuriated that this desertion could jeopardize the entire invasion. They are repeating the sin of their fathers, endangering the entire community with another generation of wandering in the wilderness, or perhaps even total destruction (verses 6-15).

The Gadites and Reubenites take his rebuke to heart, but do not want to give up on their initial proposal. So they offer a solution to satisfy both parties. They will pause briefly to build the structures necessary to protect their livestock and dependents. Then they will lead the invasion of the new land. They will not return to their homes until the Promised Land is substantially conquered, and they will renounce any claim to the land of Canaan (verses 16-19).

Moses formally accepts their proposal, repeating its terms carefully, and invoking God as witness to the covenant. If they join the battle for the land, once it is conquered they may return to the Transjordan. If they do not, they will come under divine judgment. On these terms, they may erect structures to protect their families and herds, and then join the invasion forces (verses 20-24).

The Gadites and Reubenites formally accept the terms of the agreement, again using the covenantal language 'servant' for themselves, and 'lord' for Moses (verses 25-27).

Since Moses will not be alive to oversee the fulfillment of the agreement, he brings together the leaders of the next generation: Joshua as his replacement, Eleazar as high priest, and the heads of the other clans. He formally repeats the terms of the covenant: the two clans will fight alongside the rest of Israel, then return home. Otherwise, they forfeit their claim on the Transjordan (verses 28-30).

The Gadites and Reubenites formally accept the terms of the agreement again, this time in front of the collective leadership (verses 31-32).

The ceremony concludes with Moses assigning the land to the Gadites and Reubenites, joined now for the first time by a portion of the clan of Manasseh. The remaining verses delegate their respective portions: the Gadites settle the central region; the Reubenites, the southern region; and various descendants of Manasseh receive northern portions (verses 33-42).



What God is saying to us. The continuing literal application of this passage today is difficult on many grounds. National Israel is now officially a secular state. Its national and regional boundaries no longer correspond to biblical parameters. Tribal identification is largely lost to history.

Above all, the New Testament never quotes or alludes to any verse within this chapter, nor does it confirm the continuing validity of the land promise to national or ethnic Israel, much less its allocation to the various clans.

Analogically, however, the passage is still relevant. God still calls his people to a common task and a shared life. Some branches of his local and worldwide Church still live in prosperity with freedom to worship, while other sections suffer under persecution and poverty. Both locally and internationally, we can still learn from Moses' insistence that the Reubenites and Gadites join with the remaining tribes until all share in the fulfillment of all God's promises.



“Should your fellow Israelites go to war while you sit here?” (32:6).

DAY 30

WILDERNESS ITINERARY

Numbers 33:1-49

Like the two censuses, this travel itinerary poses significant challenges to a modern reader. The location of many landmarks – even key sites like Sinai or the ‘Sea of Reeds’ – is no longer known. Nor is the rationale for inclusion on the list evident. Some campsites from Exodus and Numbers are omitted. Many other sites are listed here for the first time. Why did God command Moses to record it (verse 2)? Why should we even care about a list of the campsites as ancient Israel wandered through the wilderness? What can we take away from it?

What God said to them. Occasional expansions of the itinerary raise the possibility that the narrator may have more in mind than a bare recital of historical detail. The itinerary begins in a celebratory – perhaps even gloating – tone: Israel “marched out defiantly in full view of all the Egyptians, who were burying all their firstborn, whom the Lord had struck down among them; for the Lord had brought judgment on their gods” (verses 3-4). When the itinerary reaches Rephidim, the narrator alludes to its unfortunate event: “where there was no water for the people to drink” (verse 14). When the people reach Mount Hor, the narrator records the death of Aaron (verses 37-39). Nonetheless, the brevity of the comments does not match their importance, and other crucial events make no

appearance, such as the revelation at Sinai, or the crises in the wilderness of Sin or Zin.

One clue to the original significance of the itinerary comes from ancient Near Eastern backgrounds. As in many cultures, victorious generals and kings typically recorded the itineraries of their conquests in geographical order, to commemorate their impressive power and great exploits. Read against that backdrop, this list is a record not of Moses' acumen or Israel's power, but of God's faithful guidance and abundant provision over forty years, and through forty-two stops. At the beginning of the journey, the narrator highlighted God's guidance and Israel's obedience: "Whenever the cloud lifted from above the Tent, the Israelites set out; whenever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped" (9:17). Now, toward its end, this chapter tracks God's faithfulness, through all the dangers and privations, and in spite of Israel's frequent faithlessness.

Another clue to the original significance of the itinerary comes from the closing verses of the chapter. Israel is about to launch a long war for control of the Promised Land. Numbers 34 will set wide parameters for their conquest. The book of Joshua will describe a lengthy list of battles. The itinerary of God's recent faithfulness prompts hope that he will continue to lead and protect his people each step of the way. As a result, they will take possession of the land, and divide it among themselves.

At the same time, the promise comes with the same caveat as ever. Israel must drive out the inhabitants of the land,

and destroy their gods. Otherwise, if they permit the Canaanites to remain in the land, the two will intermarry, and Israel will worship their gods. Then, God concludes in somber tones, “I will do to you what I plan to do to them” (verse 56).


Overall, the chapter is upbeat. Finally Israel has completed their assigned forty years wandering in the wilderness. Even though this delay was divine punishment, God remained with them, guiding and providing every step of the way. Now they are about to conquer the land of promise, with each family taking permanent possession of its allotted portion. Though the final note is cautionary: all this will be spoiled – the land forfeited, and worse – if they allow Canaanites to remain in the land, to tempt them to commit adultery against God.

Later, Joshua will repeat the warning (Joshua 23:12-13). Israel, however, will ultimately disregard it (Judges 3:5-6).



What God is saying to us. This passage points to the relevance of Church history and missions history to our task today. Israel’s conquest of the land – like the spread of the gospel from small beginnings in Jerusalem to a world-wide movement today, and its recent explosion across Latin America, Africa, and Asia – inspires confidence as we turn our attention to the remaining areas of resistance around the world, and to the work that remains to be done in each locale. The record of Numbers 33 is part of our history as

the people of God. In the centuries since, God has added innumerable sites to the itinerary. Read in this light, the record of those advances is not dry. It nurtures hope, and motivates action. Yet that history will make little difference if we are unfamiliar with it.



“At the Lord’s command Moses recorded the stages in their journey. This is their journey by stages” (33:2).

DAY 31

CONQUERING AND ALLOCATING THE LAND

Numbers 33:50-34:39

The preceding itinerary left Israel encamped on the plains of Moab, alongside the Jordan River, across from Jericho. There, Moses pauses to outline the next stage of their journey: the invasion of Canaan. The structure, theme, and content of this chapter are all clear, though its application is not immediately obvious.

What God said to them. In the first paragraph, God speaks through Moses, setting the agenda for the invasion of Canaan. The paragraph is structured in a chiasm (abb'a'). The beginning and end urge Israel to drive the current inhabitants and its gods completely out of the land (a); otherwise, they will come under Canaanite influence, and fall under divine judgment (a'). The middle units address the flip side: Israel is to take permanent possession of the land, as promised by God (b), dividing it among the clans, proportionately, by lot (b') (33:50-56). The remainder of the reading elaborates the middle terms of the chiasm: the occupation and distribution of the land.

The second paragraph traces the boundaries of the Promised Land. The first and last verses of the paragraph form an inclusion, underscoring the theme. In between the boundaries are listed: southern, western, northern, eastern.

The Transjordan region, settled by the clans of Gad, Reuben, and half the clan of Manasseh, is omitted (34:1-12). As it happens, Israel never fully occupies these borders. The closest they come is during the united monarchy, under kings David and Solomon. Subsequent biblical books will explain the reason for this failure.

The final paragraph guides the division of the land. Portions are to be assigned by lot, so that the process is transparently unbiased. The two-and-a-half tribes assigned the Transjordan already have their share, so they will not receive any of this allotment. The process is to be administered by senior and representative leadership, so that it is beyond challenge: Eleazar, the chief priest; Joshua, the national leader; and one specified ranking member from each of the remaining nine-and-a-half clans (34:13-29).



What God is saying to us. With any modern country, the careful delimitation of external and internal boundaries serves many purposes. For ancient Israel, there is an additional reason: within these parameters, they could go to war confident in God's help; outside, it was risky to venture. But how is any of this relevant today, any more than, say, the boundaries of ancient Egypt, or the extent of the Ottoman empire?

In this instance, the main effect is to correct widespread misapplication of the passage. With the perfect vision of hindsight, we rightly reject the application of this passage

to the European settlement of North America, with the Amerindians reprising the role of Canaanites, and European settlers assuming the role of God's anointed invaders. For the most part, the Amerindian genocide occurred without any attempt at theological justification. But where the concept of Promised Land was invoked, it abused the Bible.

Lacking the perfect vision of hindsight, another application remains popular among Christians today: that Numbers 34 legitimizes the current Israelite settlement of Palestine. This issue is too controversial and too complicated to resolve here. At the very least, though, it should be noted that to apply the passage in this way would require careful argument and extensive justification.

On the face of it, several considerations challenge such an application. For one, contemporary Israel is a secular state, not coterminous with the chosen people in Numbers. For another, the boundaries of contemporary Israel were imposed by Western might, displacing its Palestinian inhabitants. For a third, the boundaries of modern Israel do not match this biblical record (and will not, without additional wars fought and won). For a fourth, as noted before, the clan origins of most Jews are entirely lost to the dislocations of history. So this allocation of land, and other aspects of Old Testament land laws, cannot be applied directly.

The biggest challenge to such application, though, is that the New Testament never confirms ethnic Israel as the ongoing people of God. Instead, it proclaims that the

Church – combining both ethnic Jewish and ethnic gentile Christians – is the people of God. Our promised home is no longer geographical Palestine, but the new Jerusalem, descended from heaven (Revelation 21-22).

This is not to suggest that Israel is an occupying force without legitimate territorial claims. It does suppose, though, that the Bible provides no justification for denying Palestinian rights to a share in the land. If this passage has any contribution to make to the current controversy, its original principles may provide a starting-point for negotiated settlement: defined boundaries, proportionate share, tribal (or ethnic) borders, negotiated by representatives from all stakeholders.



“This will be your land, with its boundaries on every side” (34:12).

DAY 32

OTHER LAND-RELATED REGULATIONS

Numbers 35-36

If Numbers were an independent, self-standing book, its end would seem anti-climactic. But as the fourth in a five-part series, it is unsurprising that the closing passage would tidy up various aspects of land distribution before the next stage of the story begins in Deuteronomy.

What God said to them. The itinerary of chapter 33 brought Israel to the banks of the Jordan, and the borders of Canaan. Chapter 34 then outlined the external borders and internal subdivisions of the Promised Land. Now, chapters 35-36 address three remaining topics related to land distribution.

The first pertains to the Levites share of the land. Earlier, God indicated that he – not a parcel of land – would be their inheritance (18:20). Nonetheless, they still need a place to live, and pasture for their herds. God instructs the other clans to establish forty-eight towns around the country where Levites can live and tend herd. Six of the towns are also to serve as cities of refuge (35:1-8).

The cities of refuge provide a safe zone for those who accidentally kill someone (35:9-15). This provision requires careful distinction between murder and manslaughter. The

use of a weapon made of iron, stone, or wood, classifies the death as murder, and permits the victim's family to avenge in kind. Motive also factors into the criteria for murder: even when no weapon is involved, where there is evidence of malice, and death ensues from shoving, throwing an object, or punching, the instigator is guilty of murder, permitting the victim's family to avenge death by death (35:16-21).

In the absence of either weapon or malice, the killing is assumed to be accidental. The killer is to flee immediately to a city of refuge. A leadership assembly from the scene of the death assesses the circumstances. If the death is confirmed to be accidental, the perpetrator must live in the city of refuge until the death of the current high priest. Otherwise, the victim's family may avenge their loss by killing the accused (35:22-29).

The guidelines for differentiating accidental death from murder segues into a digression on the punishment for murder. A murder conviction requires the testimony of two eyewitnesses. Murder may not be compensated monetarily. Murder defiles the land, where God dwells among his people; executing the murderer cleanses the land (35:30-34).

Reverting to land regulations, chapter 36 revisits the allocation of Zelophehad's land after his death. Earlier, to provide for his daughters' well-being, God authorized Moses to allot them their father's land (chapter 27a). Now clan leaders worry that if any of the daughters marries out of the clan, the land will permanently follow them. God

resolves this concern: any woman who inherits land must marry within the clan (36:1-13).

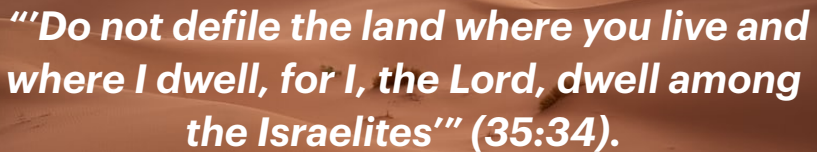
With these guidelines in hand, Israel is ready to invade Canaan. But first, in Deuteronomy, God will invite the new generation to renew the covenant.



What God is saying to us. Chapter 34 anticipates the long-awaited fulfillment of the land promise, a cause for great celebration. At the same time, God reminds Israel of their responsibilities in the use of the land. While these regulations originally applied to the people of God resident within in the land of God, they reflect his character and values. Our culture ignores them at its own risk.

Three of the four paragraphs restrict land grabbing. Land owners must set aside some land for the use of the landless clergy. They must reserve other areas for cities of refuge. They are to retain the remainder of their land within the family and clan, for the sake of generational prosperity. Broadly conceived, these guidelines have the effect of providing stability and security for the entire populace, including the disenfranchised, while restraining the accumulation of perpetual wealth in the hands of a few wealthy landowners. Today, other assets compete with land ownership as the basis for of financial prosperity. Adapting for that difference, biblical strictures against unbridled wealth accumulation and perpetual economic inequity are no less urgent today.

The remaining paragraph calls for the execution of murderers, subject to two regulations. The evidence must be conclusive, requiring at least two eyewitnesses. Justice must be impartial: the wealthy are not allowed to buy their way out. Within contemporary jurisprudence, neither regulation is consistently applied. Capital punishment is widely opposed in principle, no matter how heinous the crime or certain the evidence. At the same time, the administration of justice – from arrest, to trial, verdict, and sentencing – is severely distorted by race and socio-economic status. Both flaws defile the land and offend God. Even though massive reform of the legal system would be required to effect meaningful change, it arguably finds support in this passage of Scripture.



“Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites” (35:34).