**NUMBERS**

**Author:** *Numbers* is the 4th book of the OT. According to tradition, Moses wrote the first 5 books of the Bible, but today, most scholars believe the books arose from several sources, including Moses, with most of the substance of the books being written at a much later time. [For example, it is doubtful Moses would say he was, “more humble than any other person on earth.” (Num.12:3).]

**Date:** The book could be as old as the Exodus, which some date to 1400-1200 BC (1 Kings 6:1 indicates Solomon built the 1st Temple c. 960 BC= c.480 years after the Exodus) or 200 years thereafter (Ramses II ruled Egypt, 1279- 1212 BC; many believe he was the Pharoah of the Exodus). Many scholars today believe the book was written after the Babylonian Exile (587 BC) through the Jews’ return to Judea (539 BC).

**Location:** At the end of *Leviticus* and beginning of *Numbers,* Israel was on the Sinai Peninsula (now in Egypt), south of Israel. 38 years later, *Numbers* ends in Moab (now Jordan) as the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land.

**Name:** **The Hebrew name for the book is *B’midbar*, in the desert/ wilderness, referring to the first sentence, “The Lord spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert….” The name “Numbers” comes from the Septuagint/Greek (LXX) translation and refers to the book’s opening when the nation was about to begin its trek to the Promised Land.** Moses needed to know how many warriors were available to him. So the Lord told him to take a census, counting by tribes and families, all the men over the age of 20 who could fight. But the Levites were not to be counted because they were dedicated to God and were not to fight. Hence, *Numbers* begins with a census (and ends with one as Israel prepares to enter the Promised Land).

If the Levites were set apart and not counted, how did Israel have 12 tribes? The extended families of Joseph’s 2 sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were counted as separate tribes. So, the 12 tribes who received land in Canaan were:

Judah Reuben Ephraim Dan Issachar Simeon Manasseh Asher

Zebulun Gad Benjamin Naphtali

The first census revealed Israel’s fighting men totaled 603,550, which meant Israel began its trip with a total population of c. 2MM**. (Historians/ commentators dispute this number.)**

**Synopsis:** What should have been a journey of a couple months took the Israelites an entire generation (40 years), during which time almost all the original Jews who had been freed from Egypt died. Why? Instead of trusting God, Who had mightily rescued them from their enslavers, Israel spent most of its journey grumbling, complaining, and rebelling against God and Moses.

**Chapter 1-10:** These chapters portray **an obedient people** who are faithful to all the Lord commands. God had given them 10 Commandments and hundreds of other laws concerning all sorts of religious and ordinary matters. He also had ordered construction of a traveling worship center, the Tabernacle/Tent of Meeting, established elaborate, detailed worship rituals, and provided for ordination of priests. God had organized Israel into 12 extended family groups/ tribes, plus the Levites, who were specially consecrated to Him.

**Chapter 1**: On the 1st day of the 2nd month of the 2nd year, the Lord directed Moses to take a census of all the fighting men in Israel. To help Moses, God designated leaders from each tribe.

**Chapter 2**: God is a God of order. In minute detail, He designated a place for each tribe to camp around the Tabernacle/Tent of Meeting. The camp was arranged in 2 concentric squares with the Tabernacle in the middle. In the inner circle adjacent to the Tabernacle, were the Levites. The outer circle housed the 12 tribes, each of which had an assigned area to occupy under its clan banner. [The arrangement resembled Egyptian military camps.] (**See: Layout of Israel’s Camp).**

In the inner square, the families of Moses and Aaron were East of the Tabernacle. The other Kohathites were South of the Tabernacle. The Gershonites (Gershon was a son of Levi) were on the West of the Tabernacle. The Merarites (Levi’s other son was Merari) were on the North. **(See: Levitical Genealogy).**

Camped in the outer square were the families/clans of the 12 tribes. On the East were the tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. [Judah’s prominent location in the camp and line of march probably reflects its later primacy in Israel.] To the South were the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Gad. The Western part of the camp was occupied by the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. On the North were Dan, Asher, and Naphtali. The arrangement is a picture of the people in the 4-corners of the universe camped facing the Tabernacle in the center. (Like the 12 disciples seated with Jesus in the center.)

Camp followers, who were not Israelites and “unclean” Israelites, lived outside the camp and marched behind Israel.

**Chapters 3, 4**: The next chapters deal with the Levites, Levi’s descendants through his sons, Gershon and Merari, and the Kohathites, Levi’s descendants through his son, Kohath. Aaron and his descendants were Kohathites. They would be the priests; the other Levites assisted them. Levites served in the Tabernacle from age 25-50. They were set aside for their task with a laying on of hands ceremony and sacrifices for atonement of their sin.

The Lord accepted and ordained the Levites as substitutes for Israel’s first-born sons, who were to have been dedicated to the Lord. The census of the Levites totaled 22,000. Israel’s first-born totaled 273 more than that, so a redemption price was paid for the extra first-born Israelite sons.

**Each family of the Levites, under the direction of Aaron’s 4th son (2nd surviving son), Ithamar. [Aaron’s 2 older sons were killed for offering unauthorized fire before the Lord and they had no sons.] Each family/clan** received detailed instructions on specific tasks they were to perform for the march. Every article (each peg, cord, cloth, etc.) had to be accounted for and precisely packed by the assigned Levite clan. It took the whole Levite tribe to dismantle and re-erect the Tabernacle.

Under the oversight of Elēāzar, Aaron’s 3rd son and successor as High Priest, a separate census was taken of the Kohathites between age 30-50, the ages priests served in the Tabernacle. **[Note: The Kohathites did not begin to serve until 30, 5 years later than the other Levites, perhaps because priestly training took longer. It was no coincidence that Jesus began His ministry at age 30.]** The Kohathites packed and unpacked the holy things inside the Tabernacle, covered them and carried them on gold poles during the march. Aaron gave detailed assignments to each Kohathite concerning the packing and carrying of the assigned things on the march, but they were prohibited from touching or looking at the holy things, including the Ark of the Covenant, on pain of death.

**Chapter 5**: Once the camp arrangement was established, God instructed Moses to expel all unclean persons from the camp. Israel had to purify the camp for the march. Israel was to be clean/holy like the Lord, and the camp surrounded the Tabernacle where the Lord was present.

Next, the Lord sought to assure harmony among the people. He reiterated the laws regarding restitution for wrongs, thus underscoring Israel’s unique form of justice based on restitution, not revenge. [The offender had to confess the misdeed and restore to the one that had been wronged the value of the thing + 20%. The offender also had to atone for his wrong by sacrificing a ram.]

Perhaps the strangest part of the Chp.5 is the “trial by ordeal” ritual Moses established for a husband who was suspicious that his wife was unfaithful. Perhaps the only thing that can be said for this procedure is that it was an attempt to maintain harmony and prevent jealous husbands from doing worse to their wives when they became suspicious of them.

**Chapter 6:** As has been noted,God already established voluntary offerings for those who chose to do more than the required minimum tithe. Nonetheless, some were even more dedicated, so God established regulations for Nazirites, men and women who took special vows of service to God (usually, but not always, **for 30 days if no time was specified)** and separated themselves to the Lord. Throughout Bible history special people had become Nazarites, e.g., Samson, Samuel, John the Baptist, Paul. But Jesus was not a Nazarite; he was a Nazarene.

Nazarites could drink no wine or vinegar; they could not cut their hair or shave their beard; and they had to stay away from corpses and funerals, even of close family members. God also established rituals and sacrifices to be performed at the end of the specified Nazarite period. (Paul was going through such rituals when he was almost killed by a mob in the Temple.)

Finally, God told Moses to instruct Aaron to use the following **priestly blessing,** which still is loved and used by Jews and Christians worldwide (6:24-26**)**:

The Lord bless you and keep you,

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you,

The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

**[On a hill outside Jerusalem, archaeologist have found a tiny silver scroll from the 7th C BC with the blessing written on it.] In the synagogue, the blessing only was spoken by those of priestly descent, and those receiving the blessing turned their head and looked away to avoid attributing it to a man instead of to God.**

This blessing was the last equipment the people needed. They did not need advanced technology, great wealth or superior weapons. The Lord was going with them at their center. The blessing put God’s name on the people and assured them of His blessing.

**Chapters 7:** The next chapters are a chronological flashback to 1 month earlier when the Tabernacle was dedicated. At that time, daily special offerings were made by each tribe, one at a time, for 12 days. Among the offerings were 12 oxen (1/tribe) and 6 covered wagons (1 wagon for 2 tribes). These wagons and oxen were given to the Gershonites and Merarites to carry their parts of the Tabernacle. (The Kohathites carried the holy things on gold poles; they could not touch them.) In addition, the tribes, by their designated leaders, gave 12 silver plates, 12 gold dishes, flour with oil, and many sacrificial animals.

**Chapter 8: God told Moses to have Aaron set up 7 lamps- the 7- branched gold lampstand (Menorah) in the Holy Place, which was to burn before the Lord perpetually. Twice each day, the priests had to tend the lampstand to assure it would continue to burn as a symbol of God, Who is the source of light. (Jesus- “I am the way, the truth, and the light.”)**

The Menorah almost ran out of oil after the Maccabees vanquished the Syrians and cleansed the Temple, but God miraculously supplied enough oil to keep the lamps burning for 8 days- enough time to make more oil. (That was the basis for the Hannukah celebration.)

God also ordered Moses to consecrate/set apart the Levites from the rest of Israel. He was to make them ceremonially clean, by shaving and washing their bodies and washing their clothes. Aaron presented the Levites before Israel as a wave offering to the Lord. Then, they performed specific rituals and made special offerings to God. This consecrated them for their Tabernacle service.

**Chapter 9**: Beginning with the 2nd year after the Exodus, on the eve of their journey, God ordered Israel to observe Passover- a send-off supper. He provided detailed ritual to be observed and decreed all Israelites must follow it precisely. If a person could not keep the Passover because of uncleanness or because they were away on a journey, that person must keep it on the same day the next month. (God recognized the need to be flexible in certain circumstances just as the church has adapted to COVID.) Passover never could be “skipped.” God’s people were not permitted to cavalierly ignore the means of grace. (Resident aliens were not required to keep Passover, but if they chose to, they had to follow the ritual exactly as the Israelites. God again opened fellowship to the outsider. **However, although it is not mentioned here, for the male foreigner to participate in Passover, he had to be circumcised. See: Ex.12:48.)**

During the day the Tabernacle was erected, a cloud covered the Tent and from evening to morning it appeared as fire. That pattern continued while Israel was in the Wilderness. When the cloud lifted from the Tent, Israel followed it until it settled, and they camped at that place. They did not know where they were going or how long they would remain at any location, but they followed.

**Chapter 10:**  The Lord told Moses to make 2 silver trumpets to summon the congregation to the entrance of the Tabernacle. (Josephus referred to 12”-long silver trumpets with slender bodies and wide mouths. Pictures of them have been found on ancient Jewish coins. They resemble trumpets common in Egypt between 1400-1300 BC.) The trumpets were blown when Israel went to war, on feast days, at the beginning of each month, and over sacrifices of well-being. They reminded the people that God said, “I am the Lord your God.”

In the 2nd year, 2nd month, 20th day, the cloud lifted. Israel took up its camp and the Tabernacle and followed the cloud. This was about 3 weeks after the 1st census and the 2nd Passover. Israel marched in the order God specified. For once, Israel did just as the Lord directed. No one argued and everything was in order. They travelled from the Wilderness of Sinai, at the southern part of the peninsula, to the Wilderness of Paran, on the northern part of the peninsula.

At God’s command, Moses had arranged for the people to march in 4 groups of 3 tribes each. The tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun led. Then came 2 groups of Levites, the Gershonites who carried the curtains and covers of the Tent and forecourt, and the Merarites, who were responsible for the Tent’s framework, pillars, pegs and cords. (They had ox-driven wagons to assist them.)

The tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Gad marched next, followed by the Kohathites, including Moses and Aaron. The Kohathites carried on their shoulders, the sacred objects of the sanctuary, all of which were covered, including the Ark of the Covenant. They could not touch the Ark, so they slid gold poles through rings on the Ark and other Holy items to carry them on their shoulders. Behind them, came the tribes of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Benjamin, and bringing up the rear, were the tribes of Dan, Asher, and Naphtali. **(See: Line of March).**

Then, Moses’ father-in-law, Hōbab (elsewhere called Reuel, Ex.2:18, or Jethro, Ex.31) went to Moses. He was a Midianite/Kenite, a wanderer through the Wilderness. Moses wanted his help and guidance on the journey so he could rely both on human wisdom and on God’s cloud and fire. (Midianites were experienced guides in the Wilderness.)

The section ends noting that in all these things, Israel obeyed the Lord’s orders as Moses had commanded.

**Chapters 11-25:** Israel decided it no longer would obey God; instead, the Exodus generation repeatedly disobeyed, murmured, grumbled, complained, and rebelled. Note: Their complaining came after, not before, they were “saved.” Ultimately God condemned all but 2 of that generation to die over a period of 40 years in the Wilderness. But God remained faithful and fulfilled His pledge by taking Israel’s next generation into Canaan.

**Chapter 11:** Israel had camped for about 1 year at the foot of Mt. Sinai before it was called to move. The distance from Mt Sinai to the Kadesh-Barnea oasis at the southern border of Canaan is about 200 miles. Sinai is a blistering, barren wedge of rocks, a desert like the Dakota badlands (or Mars). It would have been a difficult journey.

Not long after the journey began, some, **the rabble, began to complain about the hardships of the trek. [Most of these may have been non-Israelites who had followed Israel out of Egypt.]** God heard them and was angry- so angry that He sent fire, which consumed many on the outskirts of the camp. (This is difficult to accept. God was so angry with these complaints that he burned people up. Perhaps He was attempting to prevent them from giving up and dying in the Wilderness or going back to Egypt. Perhaps this was refining fire.) The people cried out to Moses, who intervened with the Lord on behalf of the people. God relented. The fire ceased.

Next, some people who had left Egypt with the Israelites and who probably lived on the outer edges of the camp, began to complain about the food. The earlier complaints had been general grumbling, but this was specific. The complainers were tired of manna; they wanted meat. So, they began to reminisce about the good old days in Egypt where they remembered the food as having been very good. Soon, the complaints spread all over the camp. Moses heard them and the constant whining and grumbling began to wear on Moses.

This time it was Moses, God’s servant, who complained to the Lord, asking why he should have to put up with those people. He asked the Lord: why He had treated him so badly and burdened him with these people. Moses even suggested the Lord should kill him; the burden of leadership was too much.

The Lord responded positively and gave Moses 70 respected elders to help him. (According to tradition, they were precursors of the Sanhedrin). **Moses called the 70 elders to the Tabernacle to be consecrated to God, Who took some of the Spirit He had given to Moses and gave it to each of them and they prophesied- that one time. Even 2 of the chosen elders, Eldad and Medad, who had not gone to the Tabernacle, prophesied. [The total was 72 elders- 70 at the tent, plus Eldad and Medad. And see: Jesus sent out 72 men at Lk.10:1).**

But God was angry with the people. Although He granted their request by giving them quail, He gave them so much quail that it covered the ground in every direction up to their waists for a month. The people gathered the quail and ate, but a plague developed and the people who had craved meat died. Death by overabundance. Plenty has its dangers, too. (Be careful what you ask for.)

**Chapter 12:** Now, the complaint comes from Moses’ inner circle. Miriam and Aaron began to speak against their brother Moses, allegedly because he had married a Cushite (a black woman from Cush= Nubia/Ethiopia). But Hōbab, another Midianite, recently had joined the leadership team. In fact, Aaron and Miriam were jealous over Moses’ position with God, even though Moses was “more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.” (12:3). Moses said nothing about their criticism, but the Lord intervened.

God called Aaron and Miriam to the Tabernacle and God reaffirmed to them His unique relationship with Moses. He struck Miriam with leprosy and put her out of the camp. (Why only Miriam was stricken is unclear. Perhaps she began the grumbling.) Again, Moses intervened and prayed for God to heal her. God said Miriam would have to live outside the camp for 7 days. (He shortened the time. Lev.13:4-6 requires 14 days before a cured leper may return to the camp.) Then she could return.

The outlying parts of the camp stopped smoldering, the quail were cleared out, and Miriam’s leprosy was healed. Now God gave Israel a chance to redeem itself and enter the Promise Land. So, the people moved on to the Wilderness of Paran. They were moving with God in their midst, but if they could not be holy, consequences would continue to arise.

**Chapter 13, 14:** When they arrived near Canaan’s border (probably July/ August= the 1st ripe grapes), Moses sent 1 man from each of the 12 tribes to explore/spy out the land for 40 days. On their return, the spies reported the land truly was flowing with milk and honey, a bountiful country.

But all the spies, except Joshua and Caleb, gave an unfavorable report of their mission. They said Israel should not attempt to conquer the land because it had powerful giants, who lived in large, fortified towns. Indeed, the unbelieving spies exaggerated Canaan’s dangers. They said the people of the land were stronger than the Israelites. They included Anakites (Deut.9:2), descendants of the Nephilim, a race of giants, who were the evil product of fallen angels (“Watchers”) who had mated with human women in Noah’s time. [Anakites lived in the west of Canaan among the Philistines of Gath, Gaza, and Ashdod. See: Goliath of Gath, and David’s men who killed 4 Anakites. (2 Sam.21:18-22).]

Only 2 of the scouts, Caleb (and Joshua), urged the Israelites to proceed and conquer the land with God’s help. [Caleb was from the tribe of Judah, and Hōshēa, whom Moses renamed Joshua, was from Benjamin. ***Hoshea* means salvation; *Joshua/Yehoshua* means YHWH saves. That was Jesus’ name.]** Caleb may have been a Kenizzite who was adopted into Judah. Num.32:12, Josh.14:6, 14]. Here, Caleb is the only spy who urged Israel to move forward; Joshua was added later. They argued that the real danger was not the people of the land, but it was Israel’s rebelliousness against God.

That night, the Israelites began to whine and grumble against Moses and Aaron and began plotting to choose another leader to guide them back to Egypt. Moses and Aaron fell on their faces in front of the assembly. (Note: Moses and Aaron regularly seem to fall on their faces in *Numbers*.) Caleb and Joshua defended Moses and Aaron and insisted the Lord would deliver the people if they went forward into Canaan, but the people were ready to stone them.

Only God’s intervention saved Moses and his team. The glory of the Lord appeared at the Tent of Meeting. God declared He would wipe out all of Israel. [He said that also when Israel built and worshipped the golden calf.] But incredibly, Moses again interceded for the people. He and Aaron again fell on their faces in humility before God, and Moses boldly asked God to keep His promises. He argued that if God wiped out the Israelites, the Egyptians and other peoples who had heard God was in the midst of Israel, would claim He was not powerful enough to give them Canaan. Moses also reminded the Lord that He had said: “The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love, and forgiving sin and rebellion.” (Num.14:18 quoting Ex.34). A bold thing to say to God.

Moses’ plea prevailed, but the 10 scouts who recommended against going forward were immediately killed, and God sentenced the rest of Israel 20 years of age and older, except Joshua and Caleb, to wander 40 years in the badland Wilderness. (40 years in the desert - 40 days of spying). They would not enter the Promised Land. [Indeed, even Moses, Miriam, and Aaron would not go into that Land.] Their children, whom the grumblers had murmured would be booty for the Canaanites, would be the ones to conquer the Promised Land.

The Lord directed Moses, to turn and go into the Wilderness to the Red Sea. When the Israelites heard this, they repented and decided to invade Canaan on their own/without God. But Moses said it was too late. God had pronounced His sentence. They would not enter the Land and their proposal to go and fight at this point was tantamount to further disobedience. Moses begged Israel not to invade and warned them they would lose. Israel invaded anyway; but they did not take the Ark because they were not following God’s orders. Not surprisingly, they were soundly defeated by the Amalekites and Canaanites.

**Chapter 15:** Just after God announced Israel would spend the next 40 years in the Wilderness and sealed that pronouncement with their defeat by the Amalekites and Canaanites, God returned to issues of ritual from *Leviticus*. All of God’s instructions seem to have been expanded and detailed.

He provided that resident aliens could participate in festival worship. At vs.16, the Lord declared, “you and the alien who resides with you shall have the same law and the same ordinance.” Flour/grain and wine were to be added to all offerings. First fruits now included fruits from inside the kitchen not just from the fields. (The first loaf of the batch of baked dough was to be offered.)

The most dramatic expansion was of Ex.35:2= Israelites were forbidden to kindle fire on Sabbath, or they would be put to death. In Num.15:39, a man was gathering sticks to build a fire on Sabbath, and God ordered Moses that he must be stoned to death. His intentional sin would not be forgiven. [The intentional sinner was to be cut off either by execution or removal from the community.]

To keep His commandments on the minds of His people, God told Moses to order the people to put fringes*/tassles (tzitzivot)*, with blue cords in the middle, on the corners of their garments**. (Later, these fringes, tallit, were placed on the corners of Jewish prayer shawls and included 613 knots representing the number of commandments in the Torah according to the rabbis.)** They were to remind the Israelites of the commandments so they would follow them and not do just as they wanted.

**[In neighboring lands, the blue/violet cords were a symbol of royalty. These tassels symbolized the royal status of the whole community with God as King. David cut off the corner of Saul’s robe/the tassels, symbolizing that royalty was being taken from him. The woman touching the hem/tassels of Jesus’ robe was making a statement of faith.]**

**Chapter 16:** At first, the Israelites seemed to want to do better. God had been merciful and had not exterminated them. But without warning more griping, complaining, and grumbling began, and a major rebellion arose.

A man named Korah, a descendent of Kohath and Levi (and an ancestor of a group of Temple singers mentioned in several Psalms), plus some Reubenites, Dathan and Abiram (and On), with 250 leaders of the congregation rebelled and confronted Moses and Aaron. [The story is somewhat disjointed- perhaps due to repetitions over time, but it seems to be a 3-proinged rebellion.]

1. Korah, who was an excellent speaker but a bitter man, wanted more

status/power/honor. As a Kohathite, he was one of the holiest persons in Israel, with the special privilege of carrying and caring for the sanctuary’s holy things. But he wanted to be a priest like Aaron, and he was jealous of Moses’ special access and relationship with God. (Even though Moses was the humblest and although Moses’ intercession had just saved Israel). He accused Moses of “exalting/taking too much on himself”- trying to usurp authority that was not his; was outside his calling. (He also said Moses had gone too far (perhaps with the new regulations?) This was a direct attack on the priests, who provided Israel access to God.

1. The Reubenites, who traced their lineage to Jacob’s oldest son/firstborn,

seemed unhappy with their march position behind 3 tribes and the Levites**. [They may have forgotten Reuben’s great sin against Jacob when he slept with Rachel’s maid/Jacob’s concubine, Bilhah. As a result, Jacob cursed Reuben and said he never would excel. Plus, he took Reuben’s double share as first born and gave it to Joseph, whose 2 sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, each inherited a separate share/tribe in Israel. Gen.35:22]** They murmured that Moses was too high-handed, claiming he had taken them from Egypt, “a land of milk and honey,” but their real challenge was against God, Who had set up Moses, a descendant of Levi (Jacob’s 3rd son), as ruler/leader.

God told Moses and Aaron to stand aside because He was going to wipe out all of Israel for this rebellion. Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before God and interceded. Moses ordered the rebels to return the next day and make their case before the Lord, Who would determine who was holy. The rebels and Aaron were to put incense in their censers and lay them before the Lord. (Censers were bowls filled with hot coals on which incense was laid to burn.)

Moses, Aaron, and the rebels came to the Tabernacle entrance the next day with their censers. Then, the Lord told Moses who told everyone else- move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (On?). They did. Then, God sent a huge earthquake. The ground opened and swallowed up Korah, Dathan, Abiram, their families, and possessions. Then, the ground closed. [These men had been unhappy about Moses being over them; now, all Israel was standing over them.] (The area where this occurred is called the Great Rift Valley and is earthquake prone, but here punishment was targeted just on those who had rebelled and their families, a pattern that would be repeated in the OT.)

Following that, God sent a fire from heaven and instantly killed the 250 men who had followed Korah. But God deemed the bronze censers they had laid before Him to be holy, so God told Aaron to hammer them out and make a cover for the altar, which he did. The cover reminded Israel that only Aaron and his descendants could approach the alter and burn incense before the Lord.

1. Finally, the next day, all the people joined the revolt, claiming Moses

had killed the Lord’s people (Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and the 250). God was again angry and said He was going to consume the whole lot. But Moses told Aaron to put incense in his censer and take it throughout the people. (This was risky, life-threatening business for Aaron to go through the people that already had been cursed with the plague.) Still Aaron complied. The incense made atonement for the people and stopped the plague right up to where Aaron and his censer stood.

Nonetheless, 14,700 already had died-

**Chapters 17, 18:** God then moved to restore order.He instructed Moses to have each tribe provide him a staff with the tribal name inscribed on it. Aaron was to provide the staff for Levi. Moses was to place all the staffs overnight before the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle. The next morning Aaron’s staff had buds, blooms, and ripe almonds; the other staffs had nothing. Aaron’s staff was placed by the Ark as a reminder and warning against any further complaints about his authority.

**God made a covenant of salt/a permanent covenant with Aaron. [Salt was required for all sacrifices. It was a perseverative in contrast to leaven and other fermenters that were forbidden at the altar.]** God again clarified that the Levites were subordinate but important to the High Priest as assistants. He also explained that neither Aaron’s family nor the Levites would receive any land in Canaan. They would receive the 1/10th tithe from all Israel and from that, the Levites were to tithe the best 1/10th of all they had received to the Lord.

**Chapter 19:** The Lord also instituted a new ritual to deal with ceremonial uncleanness among the people. **[This is the only sacrifice ritual not conducted in the Tabernacle.]** The camp had 14,700 dead bodies in it. Israel needed to move from death to life.

God told Moses and Aaron to take a never-yoked, unblemished, red heifer (cow) and give it to Elēāzar, Aaron’s son and next in line for the High Priesthood, to take the cow outside the camp and slaughter it. (Cut its jugular vein, nearly instantaneous and painless.) Then he was to take some of its blood with his fingers and sprinkle it 7 times toward the Tabernacle.

Thereafter, the heifer was to be completely burned, including his skin, blood, and dung in front of Elēāzar, who was to throw cedarwood, hyssop (an aromatic plant used in cleansing rituals), and crimson cloth into the fire. [All these things were red and symbolized blood, a purifying agent.] Thereafter, Elēāzar was to wash himself and his clothes and remain unclean until evening.

A person who was clean was to take the heifer’s ashes to a clean place outside the camp where it was to be deposited and kept for Israel’s purification washings. The one who gathered the ashes then was to wash his body and clothes and remain unclean until evening.

The ash water was used on the 3rd and 7th days after a person touched a corpse to purify their uncleanness. The same was true if a person was in the same tent with a corpse or touched one who had touched a corpse.

**Chapter 20:** Moving again, the people travelled into the Wilderness of Zin and stayed on the border of Edom. There Miriam died and was buried in the 1st month of the year. (She may have been about 130 at the time.) [Chp.20 begins with Miriam’s death and ends with Aaron’s. Moses proceeded alone.]

But Israel lacked water and again turned against Moses and Aaron. (A parallel story is at Ex.71:1-7.) Moses and Aaron went to the Tabernacle and again fell on their faces. The glory of the Lord appeared to them, and God told Moses to take the staff and assemble the congregation. Then Moses was to command a large rock, later called Meribah/quarreling, to yield water and it would do so.

Now, it was Moses who disobeyed. He gathered the congregation at the rock but failed to follow the Lord’s instructions. He lashed out at the people calling them rebels, and asked whether *he* had to bring water for them out of the rock? Then, **instead of commanding the rock, he struck it twice (God only said one tap) with the staff.** The Lord sent abundant water, nonetheless.

Then, the Lord told Moses and Aaron that, since they had not trusted Him and revealed His holiness to the Israelites, they would not lead Israel into the Promised Land. [This punishment seems disproportionate to Moses’ sin. Did Moses doubt God’s ability to bring water out of the rock? Or did he merely want Israel to believe he had done the miracle himself?]

From there, Moses planned to take the people north, through Edom, to the Promised Land. [Edom is south and east of Canaan.] Moses promised Edom’s king Israel would go through Edom on the Kings Highway and take no water, wine, or food without paying for it. [The Kings Highway was the major thoroughfare from the Gulf of Aqaba to Damascus and going through Edom, Moab, Ammon, and Aram (Syria).]

But Moses could not persuade the Edomites, their “brothers,” to allow Israel to pass through their territory. (The Edomites were “cousins”- descendants of Esau, Jacob’s brother; the Israelites were descendants of Jacob’s 12 sons.) The Edomites came out in force to block Israel from going through their land. [This was the first time in a long while Israel faced an external enemy, mostly they had been trying to destroy themselves from within.] God instructed Moses not to quarrel with their kin. So, Israel travelled east from Kadesh to Mt. Hor, NE of Kadesh/NW of Edom’s border.

At that point, the Lord told Moses and Aaron that it was Aaron’s time to be “gathered to his people”/die. Neither Moses nor Aaron would enter the Promised Land because they had rebelled against God at the waters of Meribah. But God oversaw the process very carefully and thoughtfully. They were to go to the top of the mountain with Elēāzar. Aaron was to remove his ceremonial robes and put them on Elēāzar, thereby transferring the high priestly office to his son. After Aaron did this, he passed away. He was 123. All Israel mourned him for 30 days.

**Chapter 21:** At that point, the Canaanite king of Arad (in the Negeb) heard the Israelites were coming and opted to fight them. He attacked and captured some of them, but this new generation seemed ready to rely on God. They vowed that if God would give them victory, they would wipe out Arad and his people and destroy their towns (holy war/*herem*). God was pleased with their vow and granted Israel victory. They called the place Hormah/destruction.

Then Israel went from Mt. Hor to the Red Sea, going around Edom. Again, the people grumbled against God and Moses, asking why they had been brought out of Egypt and left without food and water to die in the Wilderness. God was furious and sent poisonous snakes among the people. The snakes killed many and the people repented, begging Moses to pray to God to take away the snakes.

The Lord told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Those who were bitten and looked up at the bronze snake (*Nehushtan*) would not die. Note: God did not eliminate the snakes, but He gave people a way to be cured from the bites by just looking up. (Later, as part of his reforms, King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze snake which had been erected in the Temple because the people had begun to worship it- 2 Kings 18:4. And: Jesus referred to the bronze snake who gave life as a metaphor for His being lifted up on the cross and resurrection- Jn.3: 14, 15.

As Israel approached the Promised Land from north of Moab, they reached the small territories of 2 kings, Sīhon and Og, who purportedly were brothers and giants. Israel sent messengers to Amorite King Sīhon making the same request as at Edom- to be allowed to travel through his territory on the King’s Highway. Sīhon refused and went out to fight Israel, but God gave Israel victory. Some Israelites settled in Heshbon, Sīhon’s city on the East of the Jordan.

The Israelites then did the same with King Og of Bashan (NE of the Sea of Galilee) with the same result. Israel left no survivors. They killed everyone, including the king. Then, they took possession of the land and settled some Israelites there. Things seemed to be turning in Israel’s favor. God had given them 3 victories in a row.

**Chapter 22- 24:** So, Israel reached Moab, E of the Jordan and parallel with Jericho. There, on the brink of the Promised Land, Israel would be engaged in an epic battle, and it won’t even know it or be involved in the struggle. This was strictly God’s war- a spiritual battle.

As with Pharaoh, Herod, and Pilate, the king was under threat-an inherently dangerous situation. Israel had won several victories, and Moab’s king, Balak, was afraid. He asked the Midianites for help. He also summoned a famous seer and prophet-for-hire, Balaam, at distant Pethor on the Euphrates. (Balaam is a strange OT figure. He was not part of God’s people, but he had a personal relationship with God.) Although Balaam was a pagan, his knowledge came from God, and nothing could keep Balaam from speaking God’s word. Ancient people believed blessings and curses, the spoken word, had power, so they thought whomever Balaam cursed, would be cursed, and whomever he blessed, would be blessed.

**[Archaeologists have found a prophetic piece from the 8th C that confirms the name of Balaam, son of Beor.]**

Balak wanted not to bring the forces of the next world, the principalities, and powers, to fight for him against YHWH to remove God’s blessing of Israel and instead to curse it. Balak was declaring war on YHWH Himself! If Israel had known what was going on in the heavens, they certainly would have offered sacrifices and had an all-night prayer session. Moses seemed oblivious to the heavenly battle going on around him.

The elders of Moab and Midian took money to Balaam as a fee to curse Israel. Balaam made them wait all night before he met them. Then he asked God what to do. He returned and told the messengers God, whom he referred to by His sacred name, YHWH, told him not to go with them and curse Israel.

Balak would not be daunted. He sent even more prestigious messengers to Balaam with more money. But Balaam loved God more than mammon and he only had one King, God. Again, he made the messengers wait all night. This time, the Lord told Balaam to go with them, but he was *only to do as God said*. [Kings cannot manipulate God and determine whom He will bless or curse.]

So, Balaam saddled his donkey and went with the messengers. [Now, one of the great comedic interludes in Scripture begins.] As he went, an angel of God, with a drawn sword, stood in the road in front of Balaam. The donkey saw the angel; Balaam, the great seer, did not. The donkey turned off the road into a field. Balaam hit the donkey to make it get back on the road. This happened a second time and the donkey scraped Balaam’s foot against the wall to get out of the angel’s path. Balaam again struck the donkey. A third time, there was nowhere to turn, so the donkey lay down under Balaam in the middle of the road!

Balaam again struck the donkey, who finally spoke to Balaam: Why have you hit me 3 times? Balaam responded: Because you made a fool out of me. If I had a sword, I would kill you. (Of course, the angel standing right there was the one with the sword.) The donkey replied: I am your donkey and you have ridden me all your life. I have not treated you this way before.

Then, the Lord allowed Balaam to see the angel in the road with the drawn sword. The angel told Balaam he would have killed him if the donkey had not turned away. Balaam offered to turn around and go home, but the angel told him to go on. He warned Balaam *only to say what God told him to say*. So, Balaam went forward.

Balak went out to meet Balaam, who again declared he only could speak the words God put in his mouth. The next day, Balak took Balaam to a high place where they could see some of Israel’s forces. Balaam had Balak build 7 altars and to sacrifice a bull and a ram on each. Balaam then went to confer with the Lord, who ordered Balaam to bless, not curse, Israel. When Balak found Balaam, he was blessing Israel and Balak was outraged. Balaam reminded Balak he only could speak what the Lord told him. This was Balaam’s 1st blessing.

Balak said: Let’s go to another place where you can see the Israelite troops. There Balak built another 7 alters and offered another group of sacrifices, but the result did not change. Balaam blessed Israel for the 2nd time.

Balak was furious and demanded Balaam must try again for a 3rd time. They went to a place overlooking a wasteland. This time, Balaam not only blessed Israel, but he prophesied that Israel would have fertile land and military strength. Balaam spoke of Israel as a lion, Judah’s symbol. [This may refer to King David and his dynasty. David defeated Moab and Edom/Seir.]

Even though Balak had dismissed Balaam, God gave him an oracle reaching far in the future- a prophetic vision and he pronounced a 4th oracle. He cursed Moab and promised a blessed, mighty royal leader for Israel (the opposite of what Balak wanted.) Balaam referred to a star (perhaps the one seen thousands of years later by other seers from the East), and a scepter, which Jews and early Christians considered a Messianic reference. At that point, Balaam went home.

This had been a cosmic war of words. On one side, Balak, king of Moab, sought to curse Israel and change its God-given destiny. (The Moabites were descendants of Lot, Abraham’s nephew; hence, they were cousins of the Israelites.) On the other side was Balaam, a pagan seer who somehow knew God. did His will and spoke His words. He could not help but bless and Israel and even prophesy the One Who was to come- Messiah. The 3rd Actor here was the Lord God, Who controlled the entire drama. Moses and the Israelites were oblivious to the great drama, but God was keeping His promises. Nothing and no one on earth or in heaven could stop Him.

**Chapter 25, 31:** At this point,Israel should haveengaged in major thanksgiving! But it did not. Israel had begun to settle on the east of the Jordan. Whenever Israel began to settle. Starting in the Wilderness when Moses spent an extended time on Mt. Sinai, trouble began when Israel began to settle down. That time, Aaron and the people built and worshipped a golden calf. Now, the Israel was settling again, and problems arose.

**Balaam, who had been God’s man, refusing to curse Israel and instead cursing Moab, turned aside. He suggested to Balak a way to cause Israel to self-destruct by playing to their baser inclinations. (31:16.) He said Balak should encourage the Midianite (and Moabite) women to have sex with Israelite men.**

So, Israel’s men begin to engage in sexual relations with the Moabite women and to intermarry with Midianite women. The result was the women led the Israelite men into Baal worship. God’s anger flared. Israel was supposed to be a special people, different from the other nations, but when they settled down, they began to accommodate and conform to those around them. They had moved to the brink of the Promised Land and already they were breaking the 1st Commandment and worshipping other gods. Israel had to find a way to remain holy and separate from the surrounding nations or it had to wipe them out.

In His anger, 2 things happened. God told Moses to impale all those who had yoked themselves to Baal and a plague began among the people.

An Israelite man from the tribe of Simeon (Zimri) had married a Midianite woman (Cozbi). Phineas, Elēāzar’s son and ancestor of David’s high priest, Zadok, rammed a spear through both the man and woman, killing them. **It was very risky for Phineas to kill two people from prominent families. It could have initiated a tribal war between his people, the Levites, and Zimri’s, the Simeonites. Or the Midianites might have begun a major war against Israel for killing their princess.**

Phineas’ zeal greatly please God, Who promised he and his descendants a perpetual priesthood dynasty (an extension of the promise to his grandfather Aaron.) Because of Phineas’ zeal, God ended the plague against Israel, but only after 24,000 Israelites had died. (This is another difficult passage for modern readers, but God knew that intermarriage ultimately would be the end of Israel, His holy nation.)

Then, the Lord told Moses to avenge Israel against Midian, the people who had been the source of the uncleanness. God also told Moses it was his time to “be gathered to his people”/die.

For the “holy war,” 1000 warriors were chosen from each tribe to go with Phineas, the Ark of the Covenant, the holy vessels from the Tabernacle, and the silver trumpets. They fought and killed every Midianite male, including the 5 kings of Midian and Balaam. The Israelites took the women and children captive; burned all the Midianite towns and camps; and took the spoils to Moses and Elēāzar. (But that was not the end of the Midianites.) No Israelite warrior was missing or dead.

Moses was angry the military leaders had let the women live since they were the ones who had corrupted Israel. He ordered all captive women who were not virgins and all male child captives to be killed. The Israelites could keep the girls for themselves. [Note: Moses had married a Midianite and Ruth, David’s grandmother, was a Moabite.] After this, the warriors had to stay outside the camp 7 days to be purified for having touched corpses.

**Chapter 26:** Finally, the next generation was ready to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. God ordered Moses and Elēāzar to take a census of the new generation. Each Israelite over 20 years old who could go to war, other than Levites, was to be counted by tribe. The land of Canaan was to be allotted based on the size of each tribe. Only Caleb and Joshua of all the Israelites who were counted had been part of the 1st census.

The census revealed a total of 601,730 people, as opposed to the first census which showed 603,550. The Simeonites had the greatest decrease in population, perhaps due to the sin of Zimri. [A separate census was taken of the Levites 1 month and older, but they would receive no land.]

**Chapter 27, 36:** God divided the land among the 12 tribes. Fathers were ordered to pass their land as an inheritance to their sons, so the land always remained within the family/clan. (A girl might marry into another tribe and the land would become property of her husband’s tribe. That was not God’s plan.)

One man, Zelophehad, who had died in the Wilderness, had 5 daughters and no sons. The daughters went to Moses and said their father would be deprived of his share of the Promised Land because he had died without sons, even though he had not participated in Korah’s rebellion. Moses asked God for advice. God said that if a man died with no son, his inheritance should go to his daughters, on one condition. The inheriting daughter(s) must marry within her own ancestral tribe so the land would stay in the tribe.

Thereafter, God told Moses to commission Joshua as his successor. God told Moses to go before Elēāzar, the High Priest, in front of the congregation, and inquire of the Urim (and Thumin) whether Joshua was the right leader. He was. Moses laid his hands on Joshua’s head and passed on to him Israel’s leadership.

As a result of Moses’ sin/departure from God’s instructions at Meribah, God refused to allow Moses to enter the Promised Land; however, God allowed Moses to glimpse Canaan from a mountain top. Moses died at about age 120.

**Chapter 28, 29:** The Lord instructed Moses on certain offerings, most of which were dealt with elsewhere: daily, weekly, monthly, Passover, Pentecost, Trumpets/Rosh Hashana/New Year, Atonement/Yom Kippur, and Booths/Sukkot.

**Chapter 30:** As for vows, men were responsible for their own oaths/vows. Fathers were responsible for their unmarried daughters’ vows and husbands for their wives. Widows and divorced women were responsible for their own vows.

**Chapter 32:**  Before Israel entered the Promised Land, the tribes of Reuben and Gad, shepherds who needed expansive, fertile grassland for grazing, asked whether they could settle on the conquered lands east of the Jordan. (Later, half of the tribe of Manasseh joined them.) [These were the lands captured from King Sīhon and the hilly, fertile land of Gilead, taken from King Og.]

Initially Moses rejected the request to leave some tribes east of the Jordan, but then the tribes offered a compromise. They would leave their wives, children, and animals East of the Jordan, but their fighting men would cross the Jordan to capture that land with their brothers. Moses then consented to the request.

**[By David’s time, the tribe of Reuben seems to have been gone from the Transjordan. Only Gad is mentioned as living there in 2 Sam.24:5.]**

**Chapter 33-34:** The book closes with a recap of Israel’s journey from Egypt. The Lord told Moses to order Israel to drive out all the inhabitants from Canaan and destroy all their holy places and idols. If Israel failed to do so, the Canaanites would continue to cause Israel trouble. Israel never fully captured Canaan all the way to the Mediterranean and the indigenous people continued to trouble Israel.

The boundaries of Canaan and tribal leaders were listed as a background for apportionment of the land, which was to extend from the Wilderness of Zin in the south, alongside Edom, to Libo-hamath in the north. The Jordan marked the eastern boundary, and the Mediterranean was to be the western boundary -though Israel never conquered that far.

Finally, the book deals with the Levites’ towns, of which 6 were to be cities of refuge for those who accidentally killed a person. The Levites received 48 towns, plus the pastureland around them.

God required the death penalty for intentional murder. That penalty could not be escaped by paying a redemption price because God declared bloodshed polluted the land. Accordingly, intentional murderers could not to be permitted to live among the people with whom God dwelt. However, no conviction of intentional murder could be had without evidence of 2 corroborating witnesses.