

PARALLEL GUIDE 17

The Book of Numbers

Summary: This chapter surveys the camp at Sinai and the beginnings of Israel's wilderness wanderings. The people strike camp and march to Kadesh-barnea and then to Moab on the first leg of the trip to the promised land. The stories center upon the recurring theme of Israel's faithlessness, discontent, and rebellion, and Yahweh's consequent anger and chastisement.

Learning Objectives

- Read much of the Book of Numbers, especially **Numbers 20ff.**
- State what the constant complaints and rebellions against Moses show about (a) the people and (b) the status of Moses
- State the "sin" Moses supposedly committed that prevented him from entering Canaan and give a modern alternative viewpoint
- Define "**Baals,**" *herem*

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. State in your notebook the basic function which the priests serve beyond their specific ceremonial duties. Are there modern non-church parallels that you can identify in our culture?
2. Explore why some value ecstasy as religious fervor and others do not. What are the expressions of ecstatic faith in your church or in your community? What kind of feelings do they raise for you and others?
3. Among other things, this chapter talks about the problem of rebellion and authority. Look in your CLSM (6-9 and 5-10) for more information about the different ways to relate to authority. What way do you prefer to relate to authority or to act as an authority when called upon to do so?
4. Read Numbers 21:4-9 several times. Study the notes in your Bible and record points of interest. Look up the passage in a commentary and read what others have said. What did the passage mean to the author? How does the passage fit within the context of the entire book? In three sentences state your understanding of the significance the Book of Numbers has for Christian ministry. Record your statements in your notebook.

Preparing for Your Seminar

This is a good opportunity to look at the life of your EfM group. When have you encountered questions of authority in the life of your group? How did you react to them? When did the group fail to engage the authority? Have latent feelings remained about this? When did rebellion take place, in part to test the authority and in part to discover how much autonomy the group could grasp? How is authority handled when you have shared leadership?

Additional Sources

W. W. Hallo, "Numbers and Ancient Near Eastern Literature" in W. G. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern*

Commentary, pp. 1014-1023. Hallo's article offers a comparative literary approach to the Book of Numbers. It concludes that "in spite of its eclectic character," the book "does constitute some kind of literary unit."

Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper and Row, 1962) is much more than a discussion of individual prophets of Israel and Judah. Heschel addresses such questions as what manner of man or woman becomes a prophet as well as what is ecstasy and what is its relation to prophecy.

David Daube's *Studies in Biblical Law* (Ktav Publishing House, 1969; reprint of the 1947 edition by Cambridge University Press).

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Chapter 17 **THE BOOK OF NUMBERS**

The Hebrew name for the book we call Numbers is *bemidbar*, "in the wilderness," from the opening words of the book: "The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai. . . ." Since the narrative of the entire book is set in the wilderness, describing the camp at Sinai and the march toward Canaan, this may seem a more descriptive title than the English "Numbers," from the Septuagint's title *arithmoi*, which refers only to the census of the people ordered by YHWH (Num. 1:2). W.W. Hallo understands "Numbers" more accurately to point to the underlying structure dominating the text. Over and over again, we encounter lists: lists of the tribes, of their leaders, of their offerings, of their marching orders, of their numbers ("Numbers and Ancient Near Eastern Literature," Plaut, p. 1016).

The book can be divided into three sections: 10:10, the census, large sections from the Priestly code, and instructions for organizing the people for the march to Canaan; 10:11-20:13, the march to Kadesh-barnea and the harsh experiences of the people in the wilderness; and 20:14-36:13, the journey of the people as they set out from Kadesh-barnea to Moab, the first leg of the trip to the promised land. Within this last is the so-called "Book of Balaam" (22:2-24:25), which according to some existed separately at one time.

In this chapter we concentrate on the second and third sections. You should read the passages indicated by the bold headings in conjunction with the discussion following in this text. We looked at passages from the first section when we were studying the Priestly Code. We saw that the census figures of more than 600,000 males "from twenty years old and upward, every one able to go forth to war" (1:45) should probably be interpreted as meaning either that all the "sons of Israel" or that 600 platoons (or c. 6,000 men) were present—the total population would otherwise be impossibly large. A point that should be noticed, however, is that the elaborate instructions in Numbers 2 for the order of march—grouping the people by tribes and placing them in position by reference to the points of the compass—place the Levites and the ark in the midst of the camps (2:17). This expresses the Priestly theology of the presence of YHWH with and among the people.

The March to Kadesh-Barnea **Numbers 10:11-20:13**

A year after they arrived at Sinai, the tribes set forth for the wilderness of Paran. Three methods of guidance are provided them: (a) the Midianites, under **Hobab**, the son of Moses' father-in-law, go with them to act as guides (vv. 29-32); (b) the ark goes before to lead them (v. 33); and (c) the cloud of YHWH guides them (v. 34).

Beginning the March 10:11-35

The dialogue between Moses and Hobab seems to be incomplete. Moses asks Hobab to go with them, but Hobab refuses, saying he wishes to go to his own land. Moses insists, promising that Hobab and his people

will share in whatever good YHWH does to Israel. Though Hobab's final answer is not given, we assume he agrees, since Judges 1:16 says that the descendants of Moses' father-in-law went with Israel. The presence of the Kenites with them—worshipping YHWH yet living on the fringes,

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never fully integrated into Israelite society—seemed to puzzle the Israelites. Relationships between the two peoples were mixed: the Sinai story and this passage in Numbers show them as allies, but in Num. 31 the Midianites are ruthlessly attacked by Israel. The tension is shown again by the suggestion that they were descendants of Cain (Gen. 4). The Kenite hypothesis helps to account for the closeness of their relationship with Israel based on their common worship of YHWH, while the fact that they retained their semi-nomadic ways after Israel settled into an agricultural economy could account for occasions of friction.

The ark, the throne of the invisible God seated between the cherubim, symbolizes YHWH's presence among the people. Although the arrangement of the camp described in Numbers 2 has the ark placed in the midst of the people, in the order of march it goes before them, leading the way (10:33). The position of the ark then indicates also that YHWH goes before the people as their guide. Verses 35 and 36 contain "the Song of the Ark," a very ancient battle poem. YHWH is called upon to lead the hosts (armies) of Israel into battle and to defeat her enemies, who are assumed to be the enemies of YHWH. After battle, or at the end of the day's march, YHWH is besought to return to dwell again in the midst of the people. It seems that while Israel fought in her attempt to conquer Canaan, the people came to believe that as long as the ark was with them, YHWH would bring them victory. It came as a great blow, therefore, when the Philistines captured the ark (I Sam. 4). It added greatly to the prestige of David that he was able to regain it.

Numbers 11

The People Complain

Constant complaints, leading even to rebellion, characterize the Israelites in the wilderness. Again and again, apparently having learned nothing from previous encounters with the wrath of YHWH, the people show their lack of faith in YHWH and in Moses, the leader YHWH has appointed for them. The picture of Moses that emerges from this series of episodes is of the one YHWH has picked for leadership, the one who stands in a special relationship to YHWH. Stern punishment comes to those who rebel against YHWH or YHWH's servant—indeed, only the intercession of Moses himself prevents the punishment from being more destructive. We meet Moses, the spokesman for YHWH, who meets God face to face as we would talk with a friend; Moses the lawgiver, deciding justly disputes among his people as YHWH gives him direction; Moses the intercessor for his people.

It is small wonder that the Gospel according to Matthew takes Moses as a model for Jesus: the flight into Egypt, the killing of the boy babies, the deliverance of the new law in the Sermon on the Mount—all have contact with the Moses story.

Three stories are interwoven in chapter 11. Each is set against the complaints of the people. In vv. 1-3, the specific complaint is not named, but YHWH's anger causes fire to rage through the camp. Moses intercedes for the people and the fire abates. Although the main purpose of the story is to set forth the pattern of discontent, it also has an etiological function. It accounts for a place-name: Taberah, which means "burning," was apparently an oasis where the people stopped, but its location is now unknown.

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The other two stories are about a single incident in which the people complain that they have no meat to eat (vv. 4-6). The diet of manna has become too monotonous to bear, and they long for the varied foods of

Egypt. The irony of the people's boredom with the miraculous "bread from heaven" with which YHWH has sustained them is obvious. Against this background another grimmer version of the story of the miraculous gift of quails is told (compare with Exod. 16:3-13); and a different version is given of the appointment of the seventy elders who shared leadership with Moses (compare with 18:13-27). The story of the quails is in vv. 10-15, 18-23, and 31-35. The appointing of the elders is in vv. 16-17 and 24-30.

In vv. 10-15, Moses displays the anger, frustration, and disgust which the people's utter lack of vision causes in him—emotions apparently shared by YHWH. YHWH shows anger by granting their request for meat far beyond their desires: they shall eat meat "until it comes out of [their] nostrils and becomes loathsome to [them]. . . ." (v. 20). (How disastrous it can be when God answers our prayers literally!) And when Moses questions how so many people can be supplied with so much meat, he is rebuked—"Is the LORD's power limited?" (v. 23). The word of YHWH and the ability to carry it out are not to be doubted.

In vv. 31-35, a wind from YHWH brings quails from the sea in such numbers that it takes two days and a night to gather them. Then, while the people are satisfying their gluttonous craving, YHWH in anger sends a plague upon them. Once again, a place-name is derived from this event: Kibroth-hattaavah, meaning "graves of craving." This may mean that those who lusted after meat were buried here, or that their craving was, since they no longer desired meat. It may also be true that the name (already in existence) may have inspired the story.

The other story (vv. 16-17, 24-30) is set against the same complaint. The people have complained to Moses and he, brought to the edge of despair by the burden of such a people, raises his own complaint to YHWH. YHWH instructs Moses to select "seventy of . . . the elders of Israel." YHWH will cause some of the "spirit which is upon Moses" to come upon them so that they can share the burden of leadership with him. Possibly later writers were not satisfied that the organization of Israel was derived from the advice of Jethro, a Midianite, and wanted to show it coming from YHWH. The spirit which is upon Moses is pictured as a tangible, almost material thing, which can be apportioned to others.

As a result of the spirit which YHWH puts on the seventy, they begin to prophesy. The reference seems to be to an ecstatic frenzy which takes control of them, making them dance and leap about, uttering incomprehensible sounds. This phenomenon is common to many religions. When what is said in such a state is comprehensible, as in the case of some of the great prophets of the Old Testament, the words are received as the words of God himself. To "prophesy," however, has often meant to show signs of being seized by divine power—whatever the signs might be, whether or not they are comprehensible.

A pervasive element in religion is the attempt to overcome alienation, to break down

the constraints that erect walls between the individual and the universe of people, nature, and God within which that individual is immersed. Self-control is a prized virtue; it makes rational life possible. The very elevation of the self to the center of control alienates one: the controller is set off from the controlled. The story of Adam and Eve suggests this relationship between control and alienation.

Ecstasy is the condition in which self-control is transcended. (The word comes from the Greek *ekstasis*, "standing outside of" one's self.) One feels united with the deity and controlled by it. In many religions any phenomenon in which a person is obviously not in control of him or herself has been regarded as a sign of ecstasy, and therefore of holiness. In Yahwism, because of the strong ethical strain that runs through it, a qualitative criterion came early to be applied to judge between being possessed by the spirit of YHWH and being possessed by evil spirits or demons. When one is possessed by the spirit of YHWH, one speaks the word of YHWH: one is not less rational, but more so. Thus the prophets, seized by the spirit, spoke the word of God to Israel, revealing the truth about Israel's relationship to YHWH. Some scholars

have wanted to distinguish in fact between “ecstasy,” in which one’s spirit stands outside the body in order to enter the divine realm—a realm populated by both good and evil spirits—and “enthusiasm” (or “inspiration”), in which God enters the person with power. Abraham Heschel wants even to extend the kind of distinction made here to differentiate between ecstasy and prophecy. According to Heschel,

The ecstatic is moved by a will to experience ecstasies. He is in quest of what is not promised and what does not spontaneously communicate itself, and he must ever anew to strive to attain his goal by means of various stimulants, including such things as dramatic gesture, music, dance, or alcohol and drugs. The prophet, on the other hand, is not moved by a will to experience prophecy. What he achieves comes against his will. He does not pant for illumination. He does not call for it; he is called upon. God comes upon the prophet before the prophet seeks the coming of God. (We might remember here the call of the unwilling Moses in Exodus 3.)

“Ecstasy,” Heschel goes on, “is motivated by man’s concern for God, by his will to be illumined. Prophecy, to the prophet’s mind, is motivated by God’s concern for man, by God’s will that the prophet illumine his people” (Prophets, p. 358). Even if we don’t make these distinctions, we must say that ecstasy, however intense, that did not lead to a heightened zeal for the ethical standards of the Torah became suspect. The ambiguous nature of ecstasy, its inherent threat of becoming irrational instead of supra-rational, caused the Israelites—as it has caused the members of most cultures—to try to control it.

The request that Moses rebuke Eldad and Medad may reflect this attitude. Still, when Moses is asked to rebuke these two who were prophesying inside the camp without having been selected among the seventy, he replies that jealousy for his sake should

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not be shown toward those who manifest the spirit of God—the jealousy which Moses has to combat every day comes from too little sharing in the spirit of YHWH, not from too much. It is interesting to note, however, that Eldad and Medad are never appointed to the seventy.

Numbers 12

The Rebellion of Miriam and Aaron

Some have understood Joshua’s concern for Moses, expressed in Numbers 11 (v. 28) as a result of his perception that the ordaining of more prophets not only weakened Moses, as if the spirit shared out from him was finite and limited, but also fundamentally altered his unique position with regard to the people. But Moses will have no part of Joshua’s concern. New prophets are appointed, and now Moses’ authority is shared. Is it inevitable that Moses has passed the peak of his power, and there can be nothing but descent on the other side? The rebellion of Aaron and Miriam is after all only the first of many challenges to his authority. Even though it is true that ultimately Moses will not be allowed to lead the people into the promised land, it is difficult to see him as diminished, especially in view of YHWH’s defense of him in this chapter.

Miriam and Aaron are moved to jealousy against Moses, supposedly because he has married a Cushite woman. (Who she was we are not told, unless Zipporah was thought of as a Cushite—that would take the word to refer to certain northern Arabian tribes among whom the Midianites may have been numbered. According to the P table of nations, Cush was Ethiopia.) A more probable reason for the jealousy is expressed in v. 2— “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?”

Because of Moses’ own humility (v. 3, cf. 11:29), YHWH must come to his defense. YHWH calls the three principals to the tent of meeting and there confronts Miriam and Aaron with the contrast between the way YHWH speaks through prophets—by visions and dreams, which must be interpreted—and the direct “mouth

to mouth” conversations YHWH has with Moses. Moses, it seems, does not even have to wait for God to come to him; God says “he is entrusted with all my house” (v. 7). No one else is given such direct access to the will of YHWH.

In punishment for her rebellion against Moses, Miriam is afflicted with leprosy. Aaron is forced to intercede with Moses, and Moses then intercedes with YHWH. Pointing out that even a slight displeasure with Miriam, such as that which would cause her father to curse her, to “spit in her face,” would call for her to be shut outside the camp for seven days, YHWH banishes her for that period of time. After her term of banishment has passed—and she is presumably healed of the leprosy—the march resumes.

It is strange to see Aaron cast in the unfavorable light in which the opening verses of this chapter show him. He is usually pictured as Moses’ faithful assistant and as the source of the Israelite priesthood. The opening verses may show the work of someone less favorably inclined to the Aaronic priesthood than the Priestly writer (cf. Exod. 32, and the remarks thereon). Perhaps it is significant that only Miriam is punished and that Aaron acts as her intercessor with Moses.

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Numbers 13 Spies Are Sent into Canaan

Spies are selected from each of the twelve tribes to go into Canaan “and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many” (v. 17), in general to discover what kind of situation lies before the people. The list of names and tribes is characteristic of P who provides this part of the account. Note particularly these two names: Caleb from the tribe of Judah, and Hoshea from the tribe of Ephraim (vv. 6, 8). Moses renames Hoshea Joshua, which means “YHWH is salvation” (v. 16b). And these two alone are not dismayed by the strength of the inhabitants of the land (13:30 and 14:6-9).

There are two contradictory presentations of the territory that the spies cover. In 13:21, they are described as going to “Rehob, near the entrance of Hamath.” This is at the northern extremity of Palestine, the farthest point that the Israelite kingdom reached in later years. The version in v. 22 is more probable—they go only into the Negeb to some of the cities in southern Palestine. This account has usually been assigned to JE. The first is P.

The spies report that the land “flows with milk and honey . . . yet the people who live in the land are strong . . .” (vv. 27-28). **The hill country of southern Palestine would not seem rich and promising to most of us**, but to people who had known nothing but the desert and the desert’s scarcity, it must have seemed so. It is, at any rate, the land of promise but the promise at this point seems impossible of fulfillment: the threat posed by the strongly fortified cities is enough to cause all but Caleb and Joshua to despair.

Numbers 14 Another Rebellion

The spies’ report causes the people to rise up against Moses and call for another leader to take them back to Egypt. In vv. 2 and 3, they express the wish that they had either died in Egypt, or that they might now die here in the desert. They go on to lament that their little ones will fall to the swords of the Canaanites. YHWH’s wrath is appeased by Moses’ intercession, which holds up YHWH’s own words (cf. Exod. 32:11ff). But YHWH commands them to turn and go back into the wilderness where they will spend forty years as punishment for their rebellion. Specifically, their punishment will be the fulfillment of their wish to perish in the wilderness, but their little ones are to come into “the land that you have despised” (v. 31). Only Caleb and Joshua, because they have opposed the rebellion and been faithful to YHWH (vv. 6-9), are to live

to enter Canaan. Forty years is sometimes used in the Bible as a round number to indicate a very long time. Since thirty-eight of the forty are passed over in silence, some scholars have argued that the Israelites actually spent only two years in the wilderness. This would fit with the JE narrative. The “forty years” belong to a P interpretation of events.

The people do attempt to make up for their rebellion. Verses 39-45 tell of their attempt to invade southern Palestine, but their obedience has come too late. Since YHWH commanded that they return to the wilderness, to invade Canaan now is against YHWH’s will. Moses and the ark—the two signs of the presence of YHWH—remain behind in the camp when the people set out to the hill country. Therefore, they must be defeated.

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This story may reflect an actual attempt to invade from the south in face of the fortified cities. Finding themselves no match for the Canaanite defenses, the Israelites would have returned to seek another approach. Further discipline—perhaps taking several years—would be required to shape them into a fighting force instead of a mere rabble. Israel did not interpret the many years spent in the wilderness this way, however. She saw it as punishment for the people’s lack of faith in YHWH and in YHWH’s ability to fulfill promises.

Numbers 16 **The Rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram**

We skip Numbers 15, which gives the Priestly Code’s instructions for various sacrifices. chapter 16 tells of two rebellions—that of Korah, a Levite, and that of Dathan and Abiram, “laymen.” The story is a very confusing one because of the interweaving of the two accounts. Apparently two traditions are joined together. At the beginning all three men lead an uprising against Moses, claiming that he has elevated himself too far above the assembly of the people. The rebels appeal to the holiness of the people as a whole—the holy nation, the kingdom of priests—and the presence of YHWH with them. Moses’ claim to a special relationship with YHWH is, in their view, excessive—“You have gone too far!” (v. 3).

In vv. 4-11 and 15-24, the story concentrates on the rebellion of Korah. Moses hurls back the challenge: “You Levites have gone too far!” (v. 7). The Levites, as Moses interprets Korah’s action, are seeking to rise above their status as assistants to the priesthood and are claiming the right to be priests themselves. This may reflect the downgrading of the Levites after sacrificial worship was centralized in the Jerusalem temple. (It is instructive that this story is followed in Numbers by legislation which finally sets forth and distinguishes priestly and levitical duties.)

Moses challenges Korah and his followers to come with their incense censers (symbolizing their claim to priesthood) and meet with Aaron at the tent of meeting (vv. 16-17). When YHWH appears at the tent of meeting, YHWH warns Aaron and Moses to withdraw to a place of safety, for God plans to consume the entire congregation (v. 21).

The people plead with YHWH: “Shall one person sin, and you become angry with the whole congregation?” (v. 22). They take issue with the idea of corporate guilt—that the whole community stands guilty for the offenses of one of its members. Abraham, in the argument with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, attempted to reverse this idea, pleading that the innocence of ten people ought to establish corporate innocence. As in that instance, YHWH gives in to the argument and warns the people to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

Verses 12-14, which effectively interrupt the story of the levitical revolt, repeat from the mouths of Dathan and Abiram the constant refrain: Moses has failed to bring the people into the land of promise; they will die in the wilderness; he is not a fit leader. The two rebellions are quite different: Korah leads a revolt against the supremacy of the Aaronic priesthood, while Dathan and Abiram reflect the continual disaffection of the

people with Moses' leadership.

The two rebellions are treated as one in vv. 25-35—although v. 35 in its reference to the fate of the Levites who offered the incense shows that the original story involved only the levitical revolt. After warning the people to remove themselves from the vicinity of the rebels, Moses sets up a test to demonstrate his authority: if nothing happens to the rebels— “if these people die a natural death, or if a natural fate comes on them

. . .” (v. 29)—then he fails the test; but if “the LORD creates something new” (v. 30), then Moses will have been upheld. Thereupon the ground opens up and swallows the three men with their entire households, and fire consumes the two hundred fifty Levites who offered the incense.

In vv. 36-40, the point is made clear: **legitimate priesthood is found only in the successor to Aaron**. Aaron's son Eleazar is instructed to take the censers which the Levites used, hammer the metal into plates, and put the metal on the altar as a covering to remind the congregation of the holiness of the office of priest and to warn anyone outside the priesthood against claiming the office—“so as not to become like Korah and his company.”

Having learned nothing, the people once more complain against Moses (v. 41), claiming that he is responsible for the deaths of the Levites. YHWH's anger blazes forth. Once again Moses acts to save the people, ordering Aaron to take fire from the altar and put it in his censer to make atonement for the people (v. 46). Aaron also stands “between the dead and the living” (v. 48), acting as a buffer between YHWH and the people. These two acts describe the role of priest. Thus, both Moses' authority and the authority of the Aaronic priesthood are now firmly established by the power of YHWH.

Numbers 17 Aaron's Rod

The point of this story is to reestablish the priestly role of the house of Aaron. Representatives from each of the tribes plant rods bearing the names of the tribes. (The Hebrew words for “rod” and for “household” are from the same root, so there is a play on words in this symbolic act.) Aaron's rod alone puts forth buds and even bears almonds overnight. (Once again a play on words: the words for “almond” and for “chosen” have the same root.) Thus Aaron's household is chosen for the priesthood.

Verses 12-13 state the difficulty which the priesthood is to resolve: because of the awesome holiness of YHWH, anyone who comes near the tabernacle will die. **The priests are to be buffers between YHWH and the people**—“You and your sons and your ancestors' house . . . shall bear responsibility for offenses connected with the sanctuary . . .” (18:1). Any risks involved with cultic acts—improper ritual, pollution, and the like—will be run by the priests. Verses 1-8 establish in some detail the duties of the Levites. The duties of the priests with regard to offerings and cultic remedies for various impurities and pollutions comprise the rest of chapter 18 and all of 19.

Numbers 20:1-13 The Waters of Meribah

Israel arrives at Kadesh-barnea and camps there. The time of wandering which YHWH has imposed as a punishment is drawing to a close. Miriam dies at Kadesh, and soon Aaron will die. The next phase in the movement toward Canaan is about to begin, but one more account of rebellion is told—a story which, on the surface,

seems intended as an etiology for a spring called Meribah. The story has been forced to play a second role as well. In a contrived way it relates the sin which will keep Moses from entering Canaan with his people. Though he will remain throughout the rest of Numbers and in Deuteronomy the great father of his people, ultimately Moses—like Miriam and Aaron—belongs to the past, the generation that is not to enter the land.

There is no water for the people to drink. (The camp was at Kadesh-barnea, according to v. 1, and Kadesh-barnea was an oasis—yet there is no water.) The similarity of this story to one in Exod. 17:1-7 and the contradiction involved in speaking of a waterless oasis show that the original purpose of the story was to account for the name of one of the springs. “Meribah” means “contention.” A story of contention between the people and Moses—or between the people and YHWH—could account for the name of the spring, and the tradition that Moses brought forth water from a rock (Exod. 17:1-7) in the face of such contention lay readily at hand.

YHWH tells Moses to take his rod, assemble the people, and tell the rock to yield water. But Moses “lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff.” In v. 12, YHWH accuses Moses of not believing in YHWH, apparently on this basis:

Moses does not tell the rock to give water, but strikes it. In Deut. 1:37, 3:23-26, and 4:21, Moses tells the people that he has been forbidden by God to enter the promised land because God is angry with him “for your account.” Psalm 106:32 refers to Meribah as the site of this transgression, as does Psalm 95:8—though the passage in Psalm 95 refers only to the sin of the people at Meribah. **Why so much emphasis on such a little matter?** From the viewpoint of the Old Testament writers some way had to be found to account for the tradition that Moses did not, in fact, live to enter Canaan. It seemed impossible that YHWH would have deprived Moses of this privilege after having called him for such a long and difficult task of leadership. YHWH had upheld Moses against all attempts to undermine his authority. He allowed Caleb and Joshua—for one act of faithfulness—to enter the promised land. Something must be found to account for this apparent injustice. The biblical account places the incident at Meribah.

Since Moses’ striking the rock instead of speaking to it does not seem to be a sufficient offense, scholars have sought alternate explanations. One suggestion that has been offered is that Moses committed some more shameful sin at Meribah, and that the editors—out of deference to Moses’ stature—eliminated it, substituting the insignificant “offense” which the story now contains. While this is possible, scholars usually consider the suggestion that something has been dropped from a story a rather weak solution—one that should be adopted only as a last resort and then preferably on the basis of some evidence.

David Daube in his book *Biblical Law* has offered an intriguing alternative. The account of the death of Moses is given in Deut. 34. In Deut. 34:1-3, Moses is on the top of Mt. Nebo (or Mt. Pisgah—two traditions are compressed here). YHWH shows him “the whole land, Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain,

that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar.” This is the entire extent of the land eventually ruled by King David, the whole land of promise. Daube reminds us that, by ancient legal custom, a person took possession of land either by pacing off its borders on foot or by **looking over its extent**. Recall that Abraham took possession of the land by both means—[Gen. 13:14-17]. He suggests, therefore, that rather than being punished for some offense, Moses did take possession of all the land by the authority of YHWH; YHWH shows him this land as a final reward for Moses’ faithful service. Later biblical writers, not knowing of this ancient legal practice, interpreted Moses’ death prior to the entrance into the land as

punishment and tried to find some cause. After searching the entire tradition about Moses, they could find only the slight discrepancy at Meribah as a possible offense. Although Deut. 34:6 says that YHWH buried Moses in the valley, the verse continues: “**but no one knows his burial place to this day.**” Taken at face value, this would mean that the location of his grave is unknown. Later tradition, however, suggested that Moses was assumed into the presence of God directly—without dying and certainly without being buried. Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (II Kings 2:11) were both taken directly to God, and the tradition grew that Moses was also given this reward. You will recall it is Moses and Elijah—two people who, according to the tradition of their assumptions, were still alive with God—who appear with Jesus on the mount of the transfiguration.

Besides accounting for the “sin of Moses,” this story has been used as a sign of YHWH’s gracious care for the people—the original point, undoubtedly. In Isaiah 48:21, the prophet seeks to encourage the exiles in Babylon by reminding them that in the days of the wilderness “they did not thirst . . . he made water flow for them from the rock.” Paul, in **I Corinthians 10:4**, calls the supernatural rock Christ—as the source of the gracious care and sustenance of God—and says that the rock followed the Israelites in the wilderness. He apparently accounts for the duplication of the story in Exod. 17 and in Num. 20—once on the way to Sinai and the second time on the way from there—as tradition did, by the idea that the rock moved and followed the people on their journey.

Numbers 20:14-36:13 From Kadesh-barnea to Moab

Moses sends a request to the king of Edom for permission to go through his territory. The King’s Highway was a caravan route between the Gulf of Aqaba and Syria. It was not truly a road, but was similar to the trails that wagon trains used in the early days of migration into the western United States.

Numbers 20:14-21 The Request to Edom

Moses’ salutation to the king of Edom recalls the kinship between Israel and Edom introduced by the story of Jacob and Esau. Both groups were “Hebrews”—seminomadic tribes which continually pressed in upon agricultural Canaan. **The king’s refusal reminds us that Jacob and Esau, though brothers, were enemies.** Since Edom refuses passage to the east and the fortified cities of the Canaanites prevent an attack from the south, another route has to be found.

Numbers 20:22-29 The Death of Aaron

Before attention can be given to this problem, however, YHWH decrees the death of Aaron and the transmission of the priestly office to Aaron’s son Eleazar. A genealogy from the P writer, Num. 3:1-4 (a passage we have not studied) lists four

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sons of Aaron: Nadab and Abihu—the two men who, in Exod. 24:1, accompany Moses, Aaron, and the seventy elders of Israel up the mountain to receive the covenant—and Eleazar and Ithamar. Nadab and Abihu die without children, struck down by YHWH in the wilderness of Sinai for a cultic transgression which is described as offering “unholy fire” (3:4). Now YHWH’s instructions to Moses (20:25-26), to take the priestly garments from Aaron and put them on Eleazar, establish Eleazar as Aaron’s successor. The Zadokite priesthood, which would become the official priesthood of the Jerusalem temple after the return from the Exile, traced its descent from Eleazar.

Because he rebelled against YHWH’s command at Meribah (20:24), Aaron, like Moses, would not live to see the fulfillment of the wilderness journey. We surmise that the Meribah story is being used to account for what again must have seemed an untimely death for such an important leader.

Numbers 21:4-9

The Bronze Serpent

The attempt to invade Canaan from the south was a failure according to the account in Num. 14:39-45. The first three verses of chapter 21 give another version of this battle: after an initial failure, Israel destroys the Canaanite defenders of Hormah. This may be either a rewriting of history to shed a more favorable light on Israel's forces or a story of an earlier invasion by Judah into southern Canaan. As it now stands, it is only an intrusion into the account.

As the Israelites detour around Edom, the frustration of the people expresses itself once more in murmurings against Moses. This time YHWH sends “fiery serpents”—poisonous snakes whose bites cause the skin to become inflamed—to punish the complainers. When the people repent and beg Moses to intercede, he does so. At YHWH's command, Moses makes a serpent out of bronze and sets it up on a pole for people to look at and be healed.

There actually was a bronze serpent in Jerusalem until King Hezekiah (eighth century BCE) destroyed it as part of his attempt to reform the cult (II Kings 18:4). Most scholars think that this was a sacred object left over from the cult of the Jebusites, the original inhabitants of Jerusalem prior to King David's conquest of the city. If so, the story in Numbers may have been told to account for—and justify—the use of the serpent in the context of YHWH worship, in direct contradiction of the second commandment. The problem seems to have been bothersome. According to the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, the serpent must be only a lesson and symbol, “a token of deliverance to remind” the people of the Law; so that “for the one who turned toward it was saved not by the thing that was beheld”—i.e., the serpent—“but by you, the Savior of all” (16:6-7).

Numbers 21:10-35

Victories in Moab

After recounting the death of Aaron and the plague of fiery serpents, the narration returns to the problem of avoiding Edom while marching to Canaan. The solution was to go through the valley of Brook Zered. This brook marked the border between Edom and Moab, and by following it, the Israelites are able to move eastward to the King's Highway without crossing Edom. Turning north, they cross the Arnon River, the border between Moab and the land of the Amorites.

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Three ancient songs appear in this chapter. One (21:14-15) is identified as being from the Book of the Wars of YHWH—one of several Old Testament sources no longer in existence but preserved only in biblical quotations. The other two are quoted without mention of their sources. The first song is impossible to interpret as it stands. The song in vv. 17-18 may show an ancient formula for the opening of a new well. The third song, vv. 27-30, is a taunt against Moab: Israel has just defeated Sihon, king of the Amorites, who had roundly defeated Moab in the past. Could there be any doubt, then, that Israel would be victorious if matched against Moab?

Having secured the land east of the Jordan River, the Israelites strike as far north as Bashan. This seems farther than necessary if the goal is to strike across the Jordan at Jericho. Perhaps the invasion plan was not formulated and the strike against Bashan was necessitated by some threat from King Og. At any rate, Og, king of Bashan, and Sihon, king of the Amorites, were remembered in folklore and song in Israel. Israel apparently hoped to avoid having to fight the Edomites and the Moabites. Although they were **Habiru, as was Israel**, they had managed by the thirteenth century BCE to establish themselves as kingdoms and build fortified cities. The archaeological evidence of the destruction of many of these cities in the thirteenth century is one of the reasons—perhaps the most telling—for dating the Exodus and Israel's invasion of

Canaan during this period.

Some will argue for two separate traditions about the settlement of Canaan. One tradition speaks of a group—the later tribe of Judah—that spent thirty-eight years at Kadesh-barnea, where they experienced YHWH at the sacred mountain. This argument locates the mountain near Kadesh-barnea, not at the traditional site of Mt. Sinai in the south of the peninsula. These Judeans then pushed gradually into southern Palestine, engaging perhaps in a few battles but mainly intermingling with the Canaanites. A century or two later the group that left Egypt arrived in Kadesh-barnea, encountered YHWH worship without repeating the Sinai experience, and left after two years to move up the east bank of the Jordan for a strike into central Canaan. The two groups met, recognized their common YHWH worship, and merged the exodus tradition with that of Sinai.

This hypothesis would account for there being only a short period of time given for the sojourn at Kadesh-barnea, coupled with a surprisingly long period of aimless wandering in the wilderness to make up the total of forty years. The biblical explanation for this is that the wandering was punishment for Israel's lack of faith; the hypothesis noted above suggests there is a conflation of two traditions. The evidence for this hypothesis stems from a number of puzzling discrepancies in the story, but it must remain for the present merely a hypothesis: the Pentateuch abounds in discrepancies.

Numbers 22-24

Balak and Balaam

Balak, king of Moab, sees the might of the Israelites and hears of their victory against Sihon. He calls in a professional curser, Balaam. Curses and blessings were considered powerful and effective, and some people seemed to possess more than ordinary ability to unleash their power. These were the magicians, the “sages” who

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were skilled in the way of the supernatural. Balak calls in one of these to lay a curse upon Israel's hosts.

Balak's messengers approach Balaam with their king's request. Balaam consults YHWH for instructions. **Surely YHWH is not the god Balaam is accustomed to worship, but the tradition seeks here to show that YHWH rules even over Balaam.** Balaam is told that Israel is blessed, and that therefore no curse is to be spoken against her. After repeated requests from Balak, Balaam agrees to come to Moab; but he insists that he can do only what YHWH commands, not what Balak desires (22:18).

In spite of the fact that Balaam is obedient to YHWH's instructions in agreeing to go to Moab, YHWH is angered at his decision. The ensuing fable of Balaam's talking ass is a delightful sample of fanciful ancient lore about talking animals, but it only adds confusion to our attempts to understand the story and may not be a part of the original version. In what may be an attempt to blend the fable—in which YHWH is opposed to Balaam's going to Moab—with the rest of the story, the angel of YHWH repeats the instructions that Balaam speak only what YHWH gives him to say (22:35).

In three successive episodes Balaam pronounces a blessing upon Israel instead of the curse which Balak desires. Chapter 24 contains still a fourth oracle praising and blessing Israel. The third oracle, 24:3-9, has already used the imagery of a lion and a lioness—symbols of the Davidic monarchy. In the fourth oracle, 24:15-19, the hints of David's kingship are even more pronounced: the star and the scepter were to become symbols of David, and the prediction that Moab and Edom would be conquered would be fulfilled under David. It is not certain whether all of this was composed after David and read back into the mouth of Balaam, or whether some seer in fact made such predictions. But the mention of Agag (24:7), who was a king of Amalek in the days of Saul, would suggest a later time than the one given in the story.

Numbers 25

Harlotry after Baal

The fertility gods which the Canaanites worshiped were all referred to as baals (BAY-als). The word in Hebrew simply means “lord,” but in the developed religion of Canaan it had become a proper name for the god of fertility. Often the name Baal was joined to a place name to designate the god of that area. In this chapter of Numbers, some of the Israelites, having camped long enough to become intimate with Moabite women, are persuaded to attend sacrifices to the Baal of Peor. YHWH’s anger is aroused, and the men are hanged.^{top}

In a second story (vv. 6-9), an Israelite man brings a Midianite (Moabite?) woman into the camp and is slain with her by one thrust of the spear of Phinehas, Aaron’s grandson. As a reward for this purifying act (!), Phinehas is given the promise of a perpetual priesthood (24:13). The story represents another attempt to root the Zadokite priesthood firmly in the early tradition of Israel.

The rest of Numbers is predominantly Priestly ceremonial laws and a recitation of the events since the Exodus from Egypt, but imbedded in this material are two matters of significance to the narrative.

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Numbers 27:12-22

Joshua is made successor to Moses

There are three accounts of the selection of Joshua to succeed Moses. This one is from the Priestly source. Saying that Moses will die before the Israelites enter the promised land, YHWH calls Moses to the top of a mountain to see the land. Moses asks YHWH to appoint a successor to lead the Israelites. YHWH selects Joshua and orders Moses to commission him. Some of the authority of Moses (27:20) will be passed on to Joshua, but not all of it—Joshua is not to be the equal of Moses. The other two accounts of the appointing of Joshua are the D version in Deut. 1:38—a short statement from Moses with no ceremony involved—and the JE account in Deut. 31:14-23, in which it is YHWH himself who commissions Joshua.

Numbers 31:1-54

War of the Lord against Midian

The account of the war of vengeance against Midian is very confused. Notice that Balaam is considered an enemy of Israel and slain, in spite of the earlier view of him in which he was a friend of Israel and of YHWH. It is not for this particular battle, however, that we have drawn attention to chapter 31, but for the strange, terrifying, and—to our modern sensibilities—repugnant practice of the holy war. Although this is not a biblical term, it has come into modern usage. The holy war involved more than just another battle. It was an occasion in which YHWH—YHWH’s honor or purpose—was at stake. Enemy cities, including the entire population and all their belongings, were YHWH’s—all was to be offered to God in sacrifice. In practical terms, this meant that all the people were to be slain and the property burned as an offering to YHWH, except for those items which were specifically designated as booty. The dedication of all the spoils of war is called **cherem**, literally “ban.” (Remember: ch is pronounced as a hard “h.”) The practice appears with horrible frequency in the accounts of the invasion of Canaan, and we discuss it in greater detail below. For the present, if we are to do justice to the biblical point of view, we must see this aspect of the war as a testimony to the dedication of Israel to YHWH and withhold our judgment—**which has had the advantage of many centuries of further experience with God**—on the expression of this dedication. A “war of the LORD” had certain characteristics. First, it was pronounced by God, not by the people. God gave instructions which the people could choose to carry out or to ignore. Whatever the instructions, they were well within the capability of the people. The instructions were never the same twice—meaning that the people had to rely on God for

guidance. Finally, the “task” was never something humans would think up themselves as a good military tactic. For this reason, it was clear to everyone that the victory belonged to the Lord and not to the people.^{top}

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End of Chapter

cherem^{back}

Incompetent knave! Transliterate the Hebrew consistently!

Small wonder^{back}

You mean the Jesus stories aren't true?

Prayers answered literally^{back}

And why would a loving God do that?

One from each tribe ^{back}

There's something very convincing about this. It sounds as though the tribes didn't quite trust each other.

Milk and honey^{back}

Also after nearly 3000 years' environmental degradation.

Aaron's successors^{back}

Think also of the Apostolic Succession of our bishops.

Priests as buffers^{back}

Yes I know I'm in a bad mood, but isn't it still thus? In some Christian sects at least?

God is annoyed with Moses^{back}

What a sh--ining example to one and all this God is. This is a perfect illustration of why I think detailed study of the Old Testament can go too far. Perhaps we should just say the Israelites' position evolved, and leave it at that. And if God really is that petty, then we're all screwed anyway.

looking over its extent^{back}

Assuming no-one else had looked over its extent previously.

No one knows... ^{back}

I'd be inclined to see another place where the story is a mess, and we don't need to bother trying to understand it.

Jacob and Esau were enemies^{back}

No they weren't. They made up.

Habiru ^{back}

But see Year 1, Chapter 8, page 113.

Balaam^{back}

No, he just worships more than one god.

Many centuries of further experience... [back](#)

This was the result of their early experience of YHWH?

chauvinistic^{back}

Is "chauvinistic" even a word? The writers have forgotten that chauvinism means an exaggerated and unwelcome kind of patriotism. The term "male chauvinist pig" was a joke. Say "sexist."

