

Numbers: A Chapter-by-Chapter Study

Introduction

The Septuagint and the English names for this book are based on the census lists found in the book. The original Hebrew name is “bemidbar,” which means “in the desert.” This book spans a 38-year period of the Jews wandering the desert following the establishment of God’s covenant and the law given to Israel (Exodus and Leviticus).

Although Moses is the traditional author of Numbers as well as the rest of the first five books of the Bible, it is believed and even probable that this book was scribed by others and the accounts from Moses inserted as appropriate. It is even likely that this book was not considered “complete” until after Moses’ death.

Despite the reputation of being one of the more boring books of the Bible, one of the most memorable stories is contained in this text: the story of Balaam having a conversation with a talking donkey. This account shows the supernatural protection of Israel even while God is punishing them by making them wander the desert for forty years. Another interesting note about this book is that many historians and scholars find the accuracy of the census unbelievable. The number of men recorded in this book far exceeds what many historians find acceptable for a race or nation of this era. There have been many attempts to “correct” this account down to more “accurate” and believable numbers, but the Hebrew language is clear in its recordings. This would also show the protection of God and the extensive health and procreation of the Jews.

Chapter 1

V1-16

The book of Numbers begins almost where Leviticus leaves off. Two years after Israel leaves Egypt, God calls Moses to take a census of Israel.

In Exodus 38:26, Jethro gives sound advice to Moses to organize the clans of Israel. With this organization already in place a census wouldn’t be that hard to perform. It should be noted that this would be a census of men over the age of twenty that were physically fit to do battle.

Each tribe of Israel would have one man that would represent his tribe to Moses, the God-appointed head of Israel. It should be noted that although there are twelve tribes listed, the tribe of Levi is not accounted for. Their census would come later. The tribe of Joseph is broken into two tribes: that of Ephraim and Manasseh.

- Elizur represents the tribe of Reuben
- Shelumiel represents the tribe of Simeon
- Nahshon represents the tribe of Judah
- Nethanel represents the tribe of Issachar
- Eliab represents the tribe of Zebulun
- Elishama represents the tribe of Ephraim, son of Joseph
- Gamaliel represents the tribe of Manasseh, son of Joseph
- Abidan represents the tribe of Benjamin

- Ahiezer represents the tribe of Dan
- Pagiel represents the tribe of Asher
- Eliasaph represents the tribe of Gad
- Ahira represents the tribe of Naphtali

V17-43

This passage recounts the census being taken in the wilderness.

- The tribe of Reuben records 46,500 men
- The tribe of Simeon records 59,300 men
- The tribe of Gad records 45,650 men
- The tribe of Judah records 74,600 men
- The tribe of Issachar records 54,400 men
- The tribe of Zebulun records 57,400 men
- The tribe of Ephraim records 40,500 men
- The tribe of Manasseh records 32,300 men
- The tribe of Benjamin records 35,400 men
- The tribe of Dan records 62,700 men
- The tribe of Asher records 41,500 men
- The tribe of Naphtali records 53,400 men

V44-46

The total number of available fighting men for Israel was 603,550. It is important to remember that these are healthy males over the age of 20. This is a census of a fighting army, not of a population.

V47-54

The tribe of Levi was not to be counted among the armies of Israel. They would be counted for a different purpose later (chapter 3). Their path was different than that of the other tribes and God set them aside. Hence, why the book of Leviticus speak specifically to this single tribe and why it comes before the book of Numbers. As important as being prepared for battle was, the tribe of Levi had a higher purpose. Speaking to God was more important than the defense of the entire Jewish nation.

Chapter 2

V1-9

This describes the east side of the camp arrangements. The tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun formed the east camp with 186,400 men. In modern culture, most maps orient towards the north. In the ancient Jewish culture, geographic references orient to the East. Judah is not only mentioned first, but is given the Eastern flank, a position of honor. This group would also be the leaders of the march by breaking camp first (end of v9).

V10-16

This describes the south side of the camp arrangements. The tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Gad formed the south camp with 151,450 men.

V17

The Levites and the tent of meeting reside in the middle of the camp. It should be noted that this puts the tabernacle at the middle of the encampment. Also, when the tribes were marching, the Levites were third in line putting two tribes in front and two tribes in back. This is a sound strategy that was adopted by many armies including that of Rameses II around 1300 BC.

V18-24

This describes the west side of the camp arrangements. The tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin formed the west camp with 108,100 men.

V25-31

This describes the north side of the camp arrangements. The tribes of Dan, Asher, and Naphtali formed the north camp with 157,600 men. These three tribes would bring up the rear when marching. This would put the largest of the tribes in the front.

V32-34

The total encampment came to 603,550 men, not including the women, children, or Levites.

Chapter 3**V1-4**

One of the interesting aspects of this passage is that the sons of Moses are never mentioned. It is understood that it would be difficult to lead God's chosen people if Moses were to grant his own offspring any kind of authority. The sons of Moses inherited nothing from their father and were included in the tribe of the Levites after his death.

Also, even though the tribe of Levi is singled out by God, only the sons of Aaron became priests. Aaron had already lost two sons (Leviticus 10:1-7) so his next two sons inherited the priesthood. At this point, there are only three priests, Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar.

V5-10

The tribe of Levi served the priesthood and preached the Word of God to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 24:8). This was their primary role in the Jewish social setting. The Levites also served as a sort of "police" for the Jews as they had the authority to kill anyone who approached the tabernacle without authorization.

V11-13

This passage is one of many examples that the "first fruits" of our labor belong to God. Not only are the firstborn sons His, but firstborn male animals also belong to God.

V14-20

Much like the census of Numbers 1, the Levites were to be organized and counted. Unlike Numbers 1, this was a population count. All males over a month old were to be included, not just males who could fight.

V21-26

The Gershonites numbered 7500 and were to camp on the west side of the tabernacle. Their duties included the tent of the tabernacle, its coverings, and cords.

V27-32

The Kohathites numbered 8600 and were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle. Their duties included handling the ark of the covenant, the table of showbread, lampstand, altars, and all the tools inside the tent.

V33-37

The family of Merari numbered 6200 and were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle. Their duties included handling the structure of the tabernacle, including pillars and boards.

V38-39

Moses, Aaron, and the priesthood camped on the east side of the tabernacle. The east side is also where the largest group of tribes, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, camped. So even though this was the smallest group of Levites, they were protected by the largest group of soldiers.

The number of Levites came to 22,000 men. Although the text says 22,000 exactly, the final count adding up the numbers of Levites comes to 22,300. This is either an error in translating the original Hebrew, or it could simply be a rounding of the number of men to the nearest thousandth. However, the remainder of the chapter refers to the count of 22,000, so it is most likely some sort of translation or text-reproduction error. In Hebrew, 6 is written as “ss”, where 3 is written as “sls”, so it is possible that the family of Kohath was actually 8300 men. The argument for the rounding of the number can also be found in the count of the Levite families. It is highly unlikely that each family had exactly a count of men that ended with double zeroes. This discrepancy is also used by scholars to point out that there may be more errors in the count and that these numbers may be exaggerated. Still others argue that the element of human error proves that the recording really occurred, and the counts should be considered realistic.

V40-51

The closing of this chapter sees a “swap” for the first-born sons of Israel for the Levites. It is often speculated that because the number of 22,273 firstborn sons seems extremely low that this might be the number of firstborn sons since Israel left Egypt.

This would give God the Levites in place of the firstborn sons of Israel, presenting a substitute sacrifice. This is another reflection of Jesus taking the place of humanity for their sins.

To offset the difference in numbers (22,273 firstborns vs 22000 Levite men), five shekels per man was to be paid to the Levites. This was most likely paid out from some form of equal tax divided among the different tribes.

Chapter 4

V1-15

This passage records the duties of the clan of Kohath. Able bodied men between the ages of 30 and 50 were counted and assigned the task of carrying the holy items from the tabernacle. This included the ark of the covenant. This census would be slightly different than the census in chapter 3 as this would narrow the count to those between certain ages even more stringent than that of the census of fighting men.

All the holy items were to be treated with reverence and respect. They were to be covered with fine materials. Most importantly, the holy items were not to be touched. Touching these items meant death from God. Verses 4-14 describe what Aaron and the priestly line must do before the Kohath's can do their work.

V16

Eleazar, son of Aaron, was assigned as the overseer of the disassembly of the tabernacle. This set the precedent for having one of the chief priests always in charge of the packing of the holy items.

V17-20

Here, God explains that the clan of Kohath would carry this role from generation to generation. Only the Kohathites would be allowed to carry the holy items. This was a sacred duty.

V21-28

Just like the Kohathites, the line of Gershon was to be counted and assigned specific duties. While the Kohathites were responsible for carrying the tabernacle furnishings, the Gershonites carried the tabernacle coverings. These were large and thick tapestries and could be very heavy, even about the weight of a large fallen tree. Verse 28 indicates that this is a sacred duty, just as the Kohathites had a sacred duty.

V29-33

This passage describes the duties of the clan of Merari. The Merari family was assigned the duties of transporting the frame of the tabernacle. These were not only heavy but made with precious metals. They would need to be treated with care to not damage the framework. As such, verse 32 specifies that each man would be responsible for certain items that they were carrying. There was more accountability in these duties than that of the previous clan's assignments.

V34-37

The Kohathites had 2750 men capable of fulfilling the assigned duties.

V38-41

The Gershonites had 2630 men capable of fulfilling the assigned duties.

V42-45

The clan of Merari had 3200 men capable of fulfilling the assigned duties.

V46-49

In total, there were 8580 men who would be responsible for the transportation of the tabernacle. It should be noted that the closing of this chapter says that all these men were consecrated by God for different purposes. As Christians, our tasks may not be equal, but God's love and commitment to us applies to everyone equally.

Chapter 5

V1-4

This passage reiterates some of the laws found in Leviticus. The difference is that Leviticus was written as instructions to the Levites. Here, these laws are publicly addressed to all of Israel.

The leper was to be exiled per Leviticus 13. Leviticus 15 covers a woman with irregular menstrual cycles. Finally, Leviticus 21 discusses the uncleanness of touching a dead body.

Do these seem like harsh commands?

The reason that these ailments came into existence is because of sin. God still loves all of us, but He can't be around sin. Even though these people were being exiled from the camp it doesn't mean that God didn't love them. It was the unfortunate effects of sin that meant their exile.

V5-10

This passage revisits Leviticus 5-6. Anyone who steals from another must confess their actions, sacrifice a ram as an atonement offering, restore what they stole, and add a restitution of 20%. There is even a caveat for if the person that was wronged is no longer alive. Restitution must be made to the family, "goel" in the Hebrew, as in the head of the family or family protector. If no such person is alive, then the restitution went to the temple.

Verses 9 and 10 reiterate that even these types of atonement offerings retained the right of the one who is making the offering to partake in it. This is so that those who are making the offering can commune with God and know that they are forgiven.

V11-15

What is the purpose of this passage? Why would this practice be necessary?

This is a unique passage not just in the Bible, but even by modern marriage counseling practices. This passage doesn't so much address adultery as it does jealousy. Because jealousy can be dangerous, God gave man a way to deal with that jealousy. Jealousy was bad enough that God wanted it brought before the temple. The priests would act as a mediator or even marriage counselor in some cases. This command would force a married couple to address any issues that were causing jealousy and it also served to keep the woman from being abused for no reason.

Why would this passage address an unfaithful woman but not an unfaithful man?

Much like most of the examples provided in Leviticus concerning laws, this passage is just that: an example. It was to be used as a precedent. It is believed that this same law would provide a woman a way to address the temple if she believed her husband was being unfaithful.

V16-28

If an accusation was made and pursued before the temple, then the priest would perform a ceremony involving the accused. The priest would address the accused with the "curse" and have the accused agree to it. The priest would then write the curse down on parchment and then scrape off the ink into the water along with dust from the temple floor. The woman was to let her hair down, a sign of "uncleanness," and drink the water. It is unclear how the Hebrew verbiage intends the use of the word "bitter." Some believe that the dust on the temple floor and the ink from the parchment would make the water taste bitter, but some scholars think that the water carried a "bitter curse" for the guilty. After the water had been consumed, a grain offering was made. This was the entirety of the ceremony. The only resolution offered was that God would deal with the guilty.

The curse was that the guilty woman would become barren. If she was innocent, she had nothing to fear. This left the punishment entirely up to God. Only God can administer justice in the case of jealousy. However, this ceremony was held in the public view of the temple. This was another way to deter adultery and jealousy. These accusations would be in full view of Israel.

V29-31

Unlike some subjects in the Bible, this passage has a distinct conclusion. It is stated again that God is the sole judge in the matter of jealousy. This speaks volumes to the catastrophic results of unchecked jealousy.

Chapter 6

V1-8

What is a Nazarite vow?

A Nazarite vow is taken when one has an overwhelming desire to grow close to God. This would involve separating oneself from worldly things in order to see the magnificence of God. This vow would alter what someone could eat and drink and how they looked. The minimum term for this vow was no less than one year. This vow could be taken by anyone.

The word Nazarite means, “someone who is set apart.” The words Nazareth and Nazarene both stem from the same root word as Nazarite, but they are not the same word.

The Nazarite vow has been taken by many distinct characters in the Bible. Samson, John the Baptist, and even the apostle Paul all took this vow.

This vow involved not partaking in alcoholic beverages including the common drink of beer and the special drink of wine. The hair of a Nazarite was not to be cut. And a Nazarite could not go near a dead body, even that of a close relative. Death was the result of sin entering the world. A Nazarite was to keep as far away from sin as possible.

V9-12

There were caveats for the unintentional touching of a dead body, but there were still serious consequences. If a Nazarite unintentionally came in contact with a dead body, they would have to shave their head, offer a sin offering and a burnt offering, and renew their vow.

V13-21

When a Nazarite vow was complete, there was a public ceremony in the tabernacle. The ceremony consisted of the sacrifice of one male lamb, one ewe lamb, one ram, a basket of unleavened bread, and a drink offering. All of this would be at the expense of the one who completed the vow. Finally, the hair that had grown during the vow would be cut off and burned on the altar. The vow was complete when the Nazarite had taken a drink and, presumably, eaten portions of the sacrifice in the temple before God.

V22-27

The closing of this chapter finds God instructing the priests on how to address His people. The priests would often use this blessing as a greeting to the congregation. It is often used in part and sometimes in whole by modern Christians to greet one another.

To have God look upon someone with favor was the highest form of blessing. It is a welcome gift for the Creator to smile on His creation. Only the Creator can extend a grace that overcomes sin and a peace that supersedes all discomfort. To have God's face shine upon you is to have His full and loving attention. A true relationship between God and man.

Chapter 7

V1-9

This chapter is a record of what the tribal leaders brought to the temple while it was being consecrated. Most scholars believe this recording is not necessarily in chronological order. These gifts would have been presented during the ordination of the priests in Leviticus chapters 8 and 9.

The twelve tribal leaders provided six carts with two oxen each for a total of twelve oxen. These would be used to transport the tabernacle that the Levites would carry. The Gershonites received two carts and the Merarites received four carts. The Kohathites did not use carts to transport the inner contents of the tent. The holy items must be carried by hand, including the ark of the covenant (Num 4:15).

V10-17

When the altar was consecrated by the priests (again, Leviticus 8 and 9), each tribal leader provided identical gifts over twelve consecutive days, one tribe per day. The tribes offered their gifts in the same order as they marched when traveling. This would allow each tribe to show their dedication to God. Since the gifts were the same, no tribe would be better than the other. The gifts were as follows:

- One silver platter containing a grain offering
- One silver bowl containing a grain offering
- One gold pan containing incense
- One bull for a burnt offering
- One ram for a burnt offering
- One lamb for a burnt offering
- One male goat for a sin offering
- Two oxen as a peace offering
- Five rams as a peace offering
- Five male goats as a peace offering
- Five male lambs, each one year of age for a peace offering

Although the account of the gifts from each tribe seems long and redundant, it shows the importance of this ceremony to have it recorded in such detail.

On the first day, Nahshon, son of Amminadab from the tribe of Judah brought gifts to the temple.

V18-23

On the second day, Nethanel, son of Zuar from the tribe of Issachar brought gifts to the temple.

V24-29

On the third day, Eliab, son of Helon from the tribe of Zebulun brought gifts to the temple.

V30-35

On the fourth day, Elizur, son of Shedeur from the tribe of Reuben brought gifts to the temple.

V36-41

On the fifth day, Shelumiel, son of Zurishaddai from the tribe of Simeon brought gifts to the temple.

V42-47

On the sixth day, Eliasaph, son of Deuel from the tribe of Gad brought gifts to the temple.

V48-53

On the seventh day, Elishama, son of Ammihud from the tribe of Ephraim brought gifts to the temple.

V54-59

On the eighth day, Gamaliel, son of Pedahzur from the tribe of Manasseh brought gifts to the temple.

V60-65

On the ninth day, Abidan, son of Gideoni from the tribe of Benjamin brought gifts to the temple.

V66-71

On the tenth day, Ahiezer, son of Ammishaddai from the tribe of Dan brought gifts to the temple.

V72-77

On the eleventh day, Pagiel, son of Ocran from the tribe of Asher brought gifts to the temple.

V78-83

On the twelfth day, Ahira, son of Enan from the tribe of Naphtali brought gifts to the temple.

V84-89

This passage summarizes the total of the gifts from the twelve tribes stating that all the gifts were equal, and all twelve tribes contributed.

The closing of this chapter records that once the tent was consecrated and dedicated to God, Moses communed with God, although Moses only heard God's voice. God did not visibly appear to Moses inside the tent.

Chapter 8

V1-4

These are the same lampstands that are found in Exodus 25:31-40. This passage provides more detail on the craftsmanship of the lampstands for the tabernacle. In Revelation 1:20, the church is compared to lampstands. As the church, our job is not to shine, but to lift high the One who shines, just as a lampstand does for the lamp.

V5-13

Leviticus chapters 8 and 9 describe the consecration of the priests, but this passage describes the dedication of all the Levites for service to the temple. Most scholars compare the distinctions between the priests and Levites. While the priests were made "holy," the Levites were made "clean." Yet, their service to God was no less important than the priesthood. The priests were set apart to interact with God on a more personal level, but they could not do their jobs without the support of the Levites.

Part of the cleaning ritual of the Levites was to shave their entire body. This would be similar to a cleansed leper shaving in Leviticus 14:9.

Once shaved, the cleaning ceremony would take place with a sin offering, a burnt offering, and a grain offering. A wave offering meant that whatever was being offered belonged to God. Here, the Levites themselves belonged to God.

V14-22

Instead of God taking the first-born from every man in Israel, God took the Levites as a substitute. The wave offering was a symbol of their separation from Israel and dedication to God. The work the Levites did in the tabernacle also kept it pure from being defiled by the rest of Israel.

The closing of this passage is another of numerous examples of the record of Israel doing what God commanded of them. Once the Levites had been made ritually clean, their service in the temple began.

V23-26

The Levites performed their function of serving the tabernacle at the age of thirty and retired at the age of fifty. At the age of twenty-five, they began their apprenticeship training. This would be unusual for the Israelites (and many other cultures of the era) as most people worked until they either died or could no longer perform any function. God only wanted people in their prime to perform the functions of the temple and once their service had ended, they could rest.

Chapter 9

V1-5

This passage coincides with Exodus 12:14 which says to celebrate Passover throughout the generations. This command is given one year after the first Passover was observed. The building of the tabernacle had been completed, the dedication ceremony held (ch7), and a cloud descended upon the camp (v15). One of the first things God tells His people to do is celebrate Passover and remember where they were, where they are now, and Who freed them from slavery.

How did the Israelites perform the task of painting their doorposts with blood while they resided in tents?

There is no clear description given of how all the Passover rituals were observed. It is possible that the Israelites smeared blood on wooden stakes or posts in front of their tents or even smeared blood on the tents themselves.

V6-12

At the beginning of the established Jewish religion, the Israelites upheld two (of many) principles: every Israelite must partake in Passover and no one who was ritually unclean could participate in a religious ceremony. This would be a legitimate dilemma for the Israelites to ask about since these two principles seem to contradict each other. Moses consults God for an answer. God responded to Moses with which one of the principles superseded the other. Passover would still need to be observed. However, they would observe Passover one month later. God also made exceptions for those that were on a journey and could not celebrate Passover with the rest of Israel. A delayed Passover satisfied both principles.

V13

Passover was so important to God that anyone not observing Passover was to be exiled. A person not partaking in Passover would bear their own sin instead of receiving the forgiveness of God. They would cease to be capable of being in the presence of God.

V14

This verse is another example that the Jewish religion is not just for the Jews. Just as those who didn't observe Passover were to be exiled, those strangers who did observe Passover were to be accepted by the Israelites.

V15-23

God descends upon the Israelites as a cloud by day and fire by night and continually remained among His people. This would be a visible and even ominous sign that God was with them. It commanded reverence from all who observed. But it also brought light and comfort at night and provided shade in the desert during the day. This would result in a fearful respect, much like a child trusting and following their father.

When the cloud moved, the Israelites moved. If the cloud stayed, the camp remained in place. The Israelites were utterly dependent upon the commands of God Himself. This was a harmonious relationship between the people and God.

Chapter 10

V1-10

This passage discusses the creation of the two silver trumpets used to call the camp to move out. Although not described here, there are numerous depictions of these trumpets found throughout history. Josephus describes them in his historical accounts. They are even pictured on the arch of Titus in Rome. The trumpets would be straight, somewhere around 18-24 inches in length (accounts vary on actual size), and a flared opening. The trumpets would emit a piercing sound that could be heard throughout the entire encampment. It should also be noted that these trumpets were different from the trumpet used to announce the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 25:6).

It is also presumed that there were no slides with which the tone of the trumpets could be changed. This meant that there would only be one tone. It is assumed that the length of the trumpet blows or how many times the trumpet blew could also indicate different activities. One horn blowing meant the tribal leaders were to assemble. Both horns blowing meant the entire congregation should gather at the tabernacle. But two horns blowing also meant that the camp was under attack (v9), so it is believed that the length of the horn blowing is also significant.

V11-13

The Israelites had been encamped at the base of Mount Sinai for over a year. This marks their first movement since they left Egypt and crossed the sea to escape their captors. The year had been spent organizing the tribes, setting up the temple, establishing the priesthood, and receiving law from God. Instead of running away from Egypt like a herd of cattle, the Jews would now march in an organized fashion on their journey.

V14-28

This was a successful test of the Israelites following God's orders. The tabernacle was taken down, the Levites carried their entrusted articles, and the Jews marched in the order they were supposed to.

V29-32

Moses' father-in-law was not a Jew. But Moses welcomed him on the journey. Hobab was a smart and wise man. Even if he wasn't (yet) a follower of the God of the Jews, he and his family were still welcome. Hobab's descendants must have been incorporated into the Israelites at some point since one of Hobab's descendants, Jael, is mentioned in Judges as the one who drove a tent-peg through the temples of Sisera (Judges 4:18-22). It should be noted that this is a different father-in-law than Jethro from the book of Exodus. Zipporah was the daughter of Jethro, so it is possible that Zipporah had passed away and Moses had remarried, although this is a highly debatable topic.

V33-36

Paran was a three-day journey from Sinai. Whenever the Israelites would stop for the night, Moses would pray for God to protect them. When they set out in the morning, Moses prayed that God would lead them and drive away whatever harm was in front of them.

Chapter 11

V1-3

After one year at the foot of Mount Sinai, the Israelites set out through the desert. Since Paran was only a few days away, it is believed that the Israelites started complaining almost immediately.

This passage is vague on what happened, when, and why. There is no description of what the Jews were complaining about or what started it. Most scholars believe that it was the attitude of the Israelites that caused the wrath of God to fall upon them, not so much their words. It was their hearts that concerned God.

Does the wrath of God seem warranted here? Does the loss of life seem reasonable?

There is not much to go on as far as what caused the Jews to complain or what made them so vocal about it. But the point is clear: God *saved them* from Egyptian slavery. God destroyed the Egyptian army. God parted the sea so Israel could cross on dry land. Their very lives were His. They owed Him everything. Exodus 20:2-6 gives the first and second commandments. Both would be relevant here. The Israelites, the very people saved by God, put Egypt above God. This would certainly draw the ire of God.

V4-6

Some translations use the phrase "mixed multitude" in verse 4. Others use the word "rabble." What does this phrase mean?

The original Hebrew translation of this verse is believed to be referring specifically to the non-Jewish members of the congregation. Exodus 12:38 mentions that more than just the Jews left after the first Passover. It was these that craved meat the most as they would have had a more opulent lifestyle than the Jews who were but poor slaves and couldn't afford meat regularly.

There is also another school of thought that believes the "mixed multitude" were those that were following the Jews simply because they were Jewish by birth. They didn't truly believe or want to believe in what was happening. Or, even if they did believe since the evidence was right in front of them, they didn't want to follow.

Regardless of which definition is true, the complaints spread throughout the marching Jews. Their memory became selective as they remembered the food that was in Egypt, but forgot the slavery, the hard labor, the unfair treatment, and even murder at the hands of Egypt. They even came to despise the very manna that God provided for them out of nothing!

V7-9

This passage revisits Exodus 16 which provides a description of manna and how versatile it was. It could be eaten as-is or it could be made into a pastry. It was also nutritional as it had provided the majority of food for Israelites for over a year.

V10-15

Not only was God angry, but Moses was frustrated with having to deal with the bickering of the people. He laments to God about his role as the “complaint box” for the Jews. He even asks God to take him now so that he no longer has to bear the burden of leadership.

V16-17

It didn't surprise God that Moses couldn't lead the whole of the Jewish population on his own. Some believe that God needed Moses to see his own limitation to lean even more on the Lord. God answered the prayers of Moses not by relieving him of command and taking him to heaven, but by giving him help in the form of wise and Godly men.

V18-23

Just as a frustrated parent needing to discipline an unruly child, God needed to deal with the Israelites. God promised them meat. They would be provided so much meat that they wouldn't know what to do with it. They would grow sick of it!

Even Moses questioned if this could be done right to God's very presence. God promised Moses a show.

V24-30

Why would the elders only prophesy once?

Both the elders and the witnesses to this event needed to know that God was upon them. Prophesying would fulfill that need. However, the elders weren't called to be prophets. They were called to serve the people.

This passage is unclear on what “prophecy” was given or how the people knew it was prophecy, but whatever it was served to show the power of the Holy Spirit. This passage also shows that the power of the Spirit wasn't limited to any one area. Even the men who were supposed to be there but weren't there for whatever reason received the Spirit over them.

Joshua had become a trusted friend to Moses after the battle against the Amalekites (Exodus 33:7-11). Here, Joshua is concerned that the leadership of Moses would be questioned if these elders found God's favor. Moses saw this for what it was, though, and welcomed the assistance to lead the Jews.

V31-35

Quail fell to the ground less than a day's travel on either side of the camp. And not just some quail. Such a vast number of quail appeared that they could be caught by hand simply walking through their midst.

Even in modern times, it has been recorded that Arabs traveling through the Sinai wilderness can catch well over a million quail during the autumn migration simply using nets.

There is some vagueness to this passage, just as there was at the beginning of the chapter. It doesn't say exactly who or how many were struck with this plague, but the plague occurred and there were many witnesses to it. It is also unclear what kind of plague God used to punish those that were so greedy for meat, but it was quick and effective. They hadn't even finished eating before they died.

The site was then named Kibroth Hattaavah, which means "Graves of the Craving." This would be a stark reminder that sometimes our own desires can be the death of us.

Chapter 12

V1-3

This chapter details the complaints of Miriam and Aaron against their brother Moses. This chapter is believed to have been scribed by someone other than Moses, possibly Joshua, since verse 3 would not have been written by Moses himself.

It is also interesting to note that the original Hebrew context puts Miriam before Aaron which would make her the primary leader of this particular accusation. It would also explain why she was the one to receive the punishment (verse 10). Aaron is mentioned, but it is most likely that he was following his sister's lead.

It is possible that this wife is from a fairly recent marriage and may not be Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro. Chapter 10:29-32 mentions Hobab as the father-in-law of Moses. Since neither Miriam nor Aaron had a complaint about Moses' wife prior to this encounter, it is believed that this is a different wife.

This passage does not specify what the complaint against Moses' wife was other than that she was Ethiopian. Many scholars speculate that this may have been a racial prejudice of Miriam and Aaron.

The tone of the complaint from Miriam seems to spark from jealousy as Moses was the God-appointed head of Israel. Miriam and Aaron may have been seeking more power and trying to usurp Moses in any fashion they could.

Whatever the reason for the complaint, God was listening.

V4-9

Why does God deal with this situation instantly?

Sometimes, the judgement of the Lord can take time. This is one instance of God wasting no time in dealing with an insurrection. The people were already growing restless as seen in chapter 11. God didn't want any further reason for rebellion to spread through the camp, especially from the leadership of the high priest.

Miriam and Aaron wanted to know why Moses was the sole leader of the Israelites. God answered them. God called them all to the tabernacle and addressed this issue in person. He laid out the reasons why He had chosen Moses and left no doubt as to who was in charge. And then God left. The three of them stood at the tabernacle alone.

V10-15

As soon as God departed the tabernacle, Aaron turned to Miriam and saw that she had become diseased to a severe, advanced state. The Hebrew phrasing seems to indicate that Miriam didn't even realize what had happened until Aaron pointed it out.

Aaron's reaction is also highly indicative of his personality. Aaron immediately turns to Moses and calls him "lord" after rebuking him for marrying an Ethiopian woman just moments ago. Aaron seems easily swayed by the momentum of the situation around him. This might also just be a matter of self-preservation since he didn't want to suffer the same fate as Miriam.

This passage is also the first recorded instance of Moses speaking during this whole ordeal. Whether he had previously said anything or not is up for debate, but Moses asks God to heal his sister in spite of her jealous accusations.

God does heal Miriam, but not without a rebuke. Miriam was treated like a leper and was cast out of the camp for seven days. This would give her plenty of time for self-examination and, hopefully, prayers of forgiveness.

V16

Once Miriam returned to camp, Israel set out on their journey again.

Chapter 13

V1-16

After what is supposedly a short march from Mt Sinai to the outskirts of the land of Canaan, Moses sends a reconnaissance team into the promised land. This would be the land that Israel would claim in the name of the Lord.

One member from each tribe would be sent to scope out Canaan and report back to Moses. Verse 16 ends with Moses calling Hoshea, which means, "salvation" Joshua, which means, "God is salvation." It is not specified plainly in this passage, but Joshua would be the leader of this mission.

The book of Deuteronomy chapter 1 provides further details into the account from this chapter.

V17-20

Moses asked for specific observations to be made from the chosen men.

- What is the land like?
- Are the people strong?
- How many people are there?
- Is the land easy to navigate or is it rocky terrain?
- Are the people scattered or are they in fortified cities?
- Is the land fertile?
- Are there trees or is it barren?
- Bring back some fruit to be inspected.

V21-24

This passage recounts the path that the assigned men took into Canaan and records some of the fruits they brought back with them. One cluster of grapes was so large and luscious that it took two men to carry it on a pole between them.

Why is Hebron and Zoan mentioned in verse 22?

The city of Hebron is first mentioned in Genesis as the location where Abraham buried his wife, Sarah. It is mentioned here to show the age of the city, that it belongs to Abraham and his descendants, and it verifies that this truly is God's promised land to the Israelites. Incidentally, Zoan is one of the oldest cities in Egypt and is more commonly known as Tanis. If this name sounds familiar, it's because it was mentioned in the movie "Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark" as the archeological resting place of the Ark of the Covenant.

V25-29

After forty days, the spies returned to Moses with their report. The report given was both positive and negative, but it should have only been positive. The men showed Moses the fruit they returned with accompanied with reports of amazingly fertile lands. But it is also inhabited by large, strong men in fortified cities. Verse 28 starts with the word "nevertheless" which is more accurately translated as "despite." There was nothing wrong with their report except this word. This word showed the doubt of the Israelites that God could keep His promise.

V30-33

Caleb is the only man who stood up to the rest of the group of men on behalf of God. Caleb also saw the size of the men in Canaan, but he believed God was stronger. This is a strong testament to the faith of Caleb while the remainder of the men all wallowed in self-pity at their weakness.

It should be noted that Joshua is also believed to have stood on behalf of the Lord, but it is speculated that the reason he is not mentioned is because he is the author of this section, and he did not want to seem self-serving. There will be more on Joshua in chapter 14.

Chapter 14

V1-4

This chapter is an immediate continuation of the previous chapter. Here begins the people's reaction to the report from the spies.

In just over a year, the people went from praising God for being rescued from Egypt to lamenting the armies of men found in Canaan. It is presumed that this is just a matter of weeks or months since the grumbling of the people in chapter 11:1-6. The Israelites still had not learned their lesson. If anything, they are worse. They insist on killing Moses and Aaron (verse 10), finding new leadership, and returning to Egypt. They even blame God for leading them to Canaan to die at the hands of infidels!

V5-10

In this passage, both Caleb and Joshua try to convince the Israelites that nothing in Canaan is bigger than God. Moses and Aaron both fall to the floor in prayer to God. They know the assembly isn't listening to them.

Just as the people are ready to revolt and stone the four of them, something miraculous happens: God appears. The passage is vague on what “the glory of the Lord” is, but it must have been a sight to behold. It stopped everyone in their tracks.

V11-12

God wastes no time calling out the faithlessness and cowardice of the Israelites. His patience was short in chapter 11. Here, God’s wrath is overwhelming. Just as with the world of Noah, God is ready to start over again with Moses. This offer was made to Moses once before in Exodus 32:7-14. Moses was able to convince God to spare His people. Here, they would not be as lucky.

V13-19

Just as Abraham tried (unsuccessfully) to intercede on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:22-33), Moses intercedes on behalf of the Israelites. It is interesting the tactic that Moses uses here. Some might see this as playing to God’s “ego.” In reality, Moses is trying to convince God to spare the Israelites for the sake of the world around them, if not for the Israelites themselves. The view of God in the eyes of the rest of the world could be tainted if the Israelites were to be wiped out. Moses wanted the world to see the merciful, forgiving, and compassionate side of God.

Most scholars believe that this was God’s plan all along. The Israelites would see Moses appeal to God on their behalf, thereby setting an example of faith for the Israelites to follow. Although God’s wrath is powerful, His desire for faithful followers is stronger.

V20-25

God’s response to Moses is welcome. Mercy came just as swiftly as wrath. However, there are still consequences for disobedience and faithlessness. The punishment would be to wander the desert and not enter Canaan. Caleb is called out specifically as being one of the few of this generation who will be rewarded with entering Canaan.

V26-38

God had offered these people the Promised Land and they had rejected it with doubt and rebellion. Therefore, God told them they would not have the Promised Land. Only their children would be allowed to enter. For each of the forty days that the spies observed Canaan, a year would be added to their exile. The Israelites would spend the next forty years wandering the desert between Egypt and Canaan.

The exception to this exile would be Joshua and Caleb who would live to see Canaan from the inside and the other ten spies who died immediately in front of God and Israel.

V39-45

Moses reiterates his conversation with God to all of Israel. The Israelites mourned at God’s judgement. And, still, they didn’t learn. It is not made clear here how many decided to try to enter Canaan, but it is believed to be a majority. Faced with exile in the desert or taking their chances with the armies of Canaan, they decided to try their luck at war. They were driven out of Canaan almost as quickly as they entered.

Chapter 15

V1-12

This chapter seems to be a stark contrast to the previous chapter, but it shows the character of God. God promised Canaan to the Israelites. Even though this generation would not enter, future generations would inhabit the land. The instructions for those that would first enter are given here at the beginning of the desert exile. It would be a reminder that God does what He says.

The requirements upon entering Canaan were a burnt offering with grain and wine. The burnt offering could be a lamb, ram, or bull. This would be mandatory for anyone who entered and wished to stay in Canaan once God allowed the Jews in.

V13-16

This section specifies that there will be no difference in the offering between those of the Jewish race and those not born a Jew. Following God is a *choice*. Just as with Christianity, our choices are what gives us a relationship with God. The Jews of the pre-Christian era had much more stringent rules to follow than modern day Christians, though, since the ultimate sin offering had not yet been made.

V17-21

Another requirement for entering the Promised Land would be a Heave offering of bread or cake.

V22-29

Can you sin unintentionally?

There is much debate on the unintentional sin, especially among non-believers. How can one commit a crime if one doesn't know the law? Hence, the age-old adage of "ignorance of the law is no excuse." One can sin against God by worshipping another god that their family raised them to believe in and to trust in. They have the best of intentions, but it is still a sin. The established Jewish religion of Exodus and Leviticus is one of the oldest in the world. God existed before all religions, but the practicing Jews weren't established until the time of Moses. This means that there are other religions that predate Judaism, but God has proven over and over again that He is the true God and provided many opportunities for everyone in the world to know Him and come to Him.

This passage provides the means to atone for the unintentional sins. It was the same for everyone, regardless of who they were or what the sin was.

V30-31

In contrast, a person who deliberately flaunts their sin and shows no remorse is to be exiled immediately. The purposeful and arrogant sin can spread like a cancer and cannot be tolerated.

V32-36

This passage is an example of the previous two verses in action. It is not made clear here, but it is presumed that this man was making a show of working on the Sabbath. No motive or attitude is provided, but this is probably also intentional on behalf of the author. This was a clear violation of one of the ten commandments, which were a little over a year old at this point, and this had to be dealt with swiftly and clearly.

V37-41

Clothing was an important symbol of the era, even more so than it is in the modern world. Status, religion, nationality, time of life, and even mood were all reflected in how people clothed themselves. Here, God is telling the Jews to add Him to their clothing.

Should this be followed to the letter of the word or is this God telling people to find a way to remind themselves of who they are and who He is?

There are many takes on this even in modern Christianity. The Jews took this as a command from God (as they should) and they stood out compared to their pagan counterparts of the time. Although this is not observed by many modern Christians, there are still many ways people adorn themselves to remind them who they belong to. Christian jewelry, Christian apparel, and even tattoo's have become ways in which people identify themselves as children of Christ.

Chapter 16

V1-3

One of the reasons that Korah's lineage is given in longer detail is that this identifies Korah as a second cousin to Moses. This rebellion against Moses and Aaron is led by a family member.

What is the reason behind this revolt?

The book of Numbers does not identify what authority Korah held as a Levite, but he was of the tribe meant to carry the holy articles of the temple. The best guess behind the revolt is jealousy and ego. The Levites were already given stature among the tribes and being in charge of the gold and silver articles was an important task. Korah and his followers felt they deserved to be higher than Moses and Aaron. Korah's attack is divisive in nature as he claims a central leader is not needed. All are holy and are God's people, so leadership isn't necessary. The problem with this is that if Korah truly knew God's intentions, he would never have questioned God's chosen leader.

V4-7

Why does Moses fall on his face in verse 4?

Although not stated plainly in the Hebrew text, and not the first time this has happened, every Jew would know what was meant by this statement. Moses began to pray. It is not known what the prayer consisted of, how long it was, or what it was about. Once he finished praying, he addressed Korah.

Moses presents Korah with a test before God. The last statement of verse 7 indicates that Moses was certain of the outcome of this test.

V8-11

This passage is Moses calling Korah and his followers out. The Levites have already been given a special place among the followers of the One True God. But Korah's group is ungrateful and are seeking more. This would be their undoing.

V12-14

Who are Dathan and Abiram?

It is not specified in this passage, but it is inferred that these two are co-conspirators with Korah. Moses is trying to reconcile with some of the rebellion, but these men will have nothing to do with Moses. They have either been convinced of the “goodness of Egypt” by Korah or have come up with that fantasy on their own. Either way, they chose *not* to follow Moses, Aaron, or God.

V15-19

Moses becomes angry that he can’t get through to any of these men. Instead of letting his anger get the best of him, he leaves the situation.

What are the censers that Moses uses in this test?

This is the first time this word is used in the NASB and NKJV translations, but it is not the first appearance of the article itself. Leviticus 16:12 talks of a pan that is used to transfer coals from the altar to the inner sanctuary before the ark of the covenant. Only priests called by God were allowed to handle the censers. Even the Levites in charge of carrying them had to handle them while they were wrapped.

If Korah was correct, then he and his 250 followers had nothing to fear from carrying a censer and approaching the Holy of Holies.

The test was ready. And God appeared.

V20-24

God wasted no time in making His intentions clear. He politely and firmly asks Moses and Aaron to step aside so that the rebellion can be squelched. God’s initial reaction is to wipe out the Jews. Moses and Aaron both intercede on behalf of the people. Even with their anger, they still wished for mercy upon the Israelites. God is pleased with both Moses and Aaron and listens to their prayers. Only the people involved in the rebellion are to suffer the consequences.

V25-35

In Numbers 10, God appointed elders to assist Moses with the responsibilities of leadership. These elders obeyed Moses here and had each of their congregations pull away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

Moses had some idea of what was to come, but he was uncertain of the form God’s judgement would take against these men. He uses the term “new thing” (verse 30) to describe the coming sentence. Indeed, the leaders of the rebellion were swallowed in an apparent earthquake. The rest of the rebellion burned.

Does it seem just for God to destroy the families of the rebellious men?

This is a harsh judgement, but it is not uncommon to see just people fall during the punishment of the unjust in the Bible. God is letting everyone know that there are consequences for sinful actions. Not just for you, but for those around you, as well. Maybe there were some family members who tried to dissuade this revolt but failed. Their actions would be judged by God in the afterlife.

V36-40

The priests had the misfortune of having to dig through the charred remains of those who were burned to recover the censers. They would serve as a reminder to the people that only God’s chosen priests could offer incense to the Lord. They would be used as plating for the altar for all to see.

V41-45

If the chapter ended with verse 40, it would be a brutal lesson on its own. However, it doesn't end there. The next day, Moses and Aaron must listen to the Israelites blame them for God's judgement upon the rebels.

There is no discussion or negotiation this time. God simply comes to the tabernacle and let's His presence be known to all. This appears to stop all blaming as Moses and Aaron approach the tabernacle to meet with God. The response this time is the same as it was the day before. God's patience has run thin with the Israelites.

Why does God threaten to kill the Israelites so many times?

It should be noted that this is at least the third time that God has threatened to wipe out the Israelites under the leadership of Moses. Many scholars point to this as not so much God's desire to kill the Israelites as it is to have Moses grow closer to both God and the people. Moses interceding on behalf of the Israelites would grant him respect from the congregation while also establishing a relationship of trust between Moses and God. God is showing the Jews that He *listens* to Moses.

V46-50

Moses has Aaron offer up incense to God on behalf of the Israelites. As the high priest, Aaron could make atonement for the sins of the people. Aaron hurried in his role as time was of the essence. Even as he walked among the entire encampment, he could see that a plague had fallen over the people. Aaron did his best to act on behalf of everyone, but he is only human. Over fourteen thousand people died of the plague that day.

Chapter 17

V1-7

In this era, a rod was a symbol of authority. A shepherd used a rod to guide his flock. A person used a rod as a symbol to lead his people. God used Moses' rod to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 4) and to part the sea that the Israelites would pass through (Exodus 14).

God was using these rods as a symbol to the heads of the clans of who God had chosen to act on behalf of God. This was a direct result of chapter 16 where rebellion was stirring. God would use yet another miracle to show the Israelites who was in charge and who God had chosen to commune with.

V8-11

The miracle that took place could have simply stopped with leaves growing from a dead stick. Instead, God went the distance. The rod of Aaron sprouted leaves, buds, and even produced ripe almonds ready to eat off the limb. All this took place overnight, no less. Aaron's staff was to be added to the contents of the ark of the covenant. So far, the broken tablets of the ten commandments, and pieces of manna that God provided an ungrateful nation were kept there. Now, a symbol declaring the end of a rebellion would join these articles.

V12-13

The closing of this chapter shows the heads of the clans admitting their sin and rebellious nature before God. They are almost hysterical in their fear of what God will do to punish them.

Chapter 18

V1-7

As with most rebellions, those that sought to overthrow Moses and Aaron wanted the power they held. Here, God shows what it means to have that power. Aaron and the priests were held accountable to God. God held the priesthood to a higher standard than the rest of Israel. The priests were responsible for more than the Levites, but they would suffer greater consequences for straying from the commandments of God. Aaron had already lost two sons because they didn't respect the priesthood like they were supposed to (Leviticus 10:1-7).

V8-19

This passage reiterates much of what has been previously covered in both Exodus and Leviticus. A portion of the heave offerings, grain offerings, sin offerings, trespass offerings, and first fruit offerings went to the priests. Whenever a first born was brought to the tabernacle, it also belonged to the priests.

What is a "covenant of salt" (verse 19)?

The verbiage here is used to imply this is a holy and pure covenant. According to ancient custom, eating salt together was meant to establish life-long friendships between two people. This covenant was meant to endure as long as there was a need for priests. This covenant was no longer needed once the Messiah was sacrificed.

V20

While the priests received much from the people, they were not allowed an inheritance of land. The priests belonged to God and God would provide for them. They had no need for land.

V21-24

The tithe given to God was used to support the Levites and priests. There are many political implications here since the Israelites in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers are literally establishing the Jewish religion and nation. There are also some today who see tithing as unnecessary since this is tied to the 'old covenant.' However, a tithe shouldn't be looked upon as supporting your local clergy, although there are many churches that use tithes for that purpose. Giving to God was established in Genesis before the Jewish religion came about and the New Testament speaks of giving to the church (1 Corinthians 9:7-15, for one example). Just as the Old Testament instructs and Jesus confirms, our hearts are what God is after. Our giving should come from a desire to please God.

V25-32

The priests were also not exempt from tithing. God commands them the same way He commands all of Israel. Everyone should be grateful for the blessing they have and rely on the Lord. Just because the Levites and priests were held to a higher standard did not mean they were exempt from having a grateful heart.

Chapter 19

V1-10

What is a heifer?

A heifer is a cow which has never produced offspring and cannot yet give milk. It is believed that a red heifer would have been uncommon during this era. Cows that were born with a reddish hue and no visible defects would have been reserved for this purpose.

It is not made immediately clear in this passage, but this sacrifice would be for the purposes of purification from sin (verse 9). One of the main differences between this sacrifice and other types of burnt offerings is that this sacrifice would also include the burning of the blood. This is the only sacrifice in the Bible where this is required. The ashes of the carcass, the cedar, the hyssop, and the fabric would all be used in the water which would be sprinkled over the person needing to be purified.

V11-13

This passage describes the purification ceremony for someone who has come in contact with a dead body. This person would not be committing a sin, but they would be ceremonially unclean. However, a person who refused to go through the ritual cleansing would be excommunicated.

V14-16

Similar measures to this passage were presented in Leviticus. There is no clear reason given for why being around a dead body was bad, but most scholars agree this was two-fold. First, death is the result of sin. The ritual cleansing would be a reminder of this to the Jews. Second, the health benefits, although not known at the time, would allow the Israelites to proliferate rapidly.

V17-19

Many commentaries point out that the ashes of the sacrificed heifer represent the sacrifice of Jesus while the water represents the Bible, the Holy Spirit, or both. The new covenant would remove the need for this cleansing sacrifice, as it would many of the requirements of the Levitical law.

V20-22

The closing of this chapter offers a stark warning for those unwilling to adhere to ceremonial cleanliness. Those not willing to adhere to the commands of God would be excommunicated. Likewise, the person performing the cleansing ritual must also be clean. An unclean person cannot be cleaned by an unclean person.

Chapter 20

V1

The Israelites had returned to Kadesh, the place where Moses sent spies into the land of Canaan and God told them to wander the desert for forty years for their disbelief. This would be the place where Miriam, the sister of Moses, would die and be buried. Her legacy is complex as she was the one to rescue her newborn brother Moses in the Nile River, lead the people in praise after they had crossed the sea on dry land to escape Egypt, and then to try and overthrow her brother in the tabernacle.

V2-5

The Israelites once again complained about their circumstances even though they were brought on by their own actions. The record in this passage is similar to earlier complaints where they would rather be enslaved in Egypt with food and water than wander the desert a free people with God leading the way.

V6-8

Moses and Aaron seek the counsel of God, the only ones among the Israelites who appear to do so. God gave Moses specific instructions to take his rod and speak to a nearby rock commanding the rock to bring forth water. This is similar to Exodus 17:6 where God tell Moses to strike a rock for water to spring out.

V9-13

Moses takes a few liberties with his actions, presumably out of frustration with his fellow Jews. Moses gives a short but blunt rebuke to the people and then strikes the rock twice with his rod. The verbiage he uses is also notable because he leaves God out of the equation and states that he and Aaron will provide the water.

Despite the ill manner that Moses did what God asked, God still provided water for the Israelites. God's issue wasn't with the people, but with Moses. As the leader of the chosen people, Moses' attitude reflected poorly on a God willing to provide for His creation. God was not pleased. Moses was told that he would not enter Canaan, either. He would die in the desert with the rest of his generation.

Why would God judge Moses so harshly with just this one instance?

As a chosen leader, God expected more of Moses. Just as the modern church expects pastors to be sin free, Moses was to lead by example. With great power comes great responsibility.

V14-21

It should be noted that many scholars believe this passage, starting with verse 14, to be towards the end of the 40 years of wandering the desert.

According to ancient maps and geography, Edom was a border nation of Canaan. Passing through Edom would take the Israelites close to the borders of Canaan that they had not seen yet. The Edomites are the descendants of Esau. This may have played a role in the king refusing entry to the land. It could also have been simply out of self-preservation on behalf of the Edomites that they refused Israel entry. Israel was a large nation at this point and could be a formidable foe.

There is also no mention of retribution on behalf of God or the Israelites on this refusal to allow passage. In fact, Deuteronomy 23:7 instructs Israel to treat the Edomites like their brothers. There is no reason provided for God not punishing the Edomites for not letting Israel through.

V22-29

Although not mentioned here, Numbers 33:38 tells us that Aaron died in the fortieth year after Israel had left Egypt. Aaron was one of the last of the generation barred from entering Canaan.

The Torah spends nearly fifty chapters on the single year at Mount Sinai. Yet less than six chapters are spent on the thirty-eight years marching through the desert. The book of Numbers takes a great leap forward in time in chapters 19 and 20. This could also be an indicator of how monotonous and boring wandering the desert was for that amount of time.

Numbers records the death of Aaron as a marker in their history. The first high priest of Israel passed away. It is not made clear here, but the pending death of Aaron must have been obvious and imminent to Moses and the priesthood as provisions were made to pass on the role of high priest to Eleazar.

Chapter 21

V1-3

This chapter is towards the end of the forty-year exile of the Israelites from entering Canaan. They are marching back towards Canaan as a new generation takes the reigns of leading Israel to the Promised Land. Their first encounter with an army of Canaanites ends with some of the Israelites being captured and held as prisoners in the kingdom of Arad.

Why do the Israelites vow to destroy the city and people?

In this era, established cities and settlements were targets. Most cities of any significance were usually strategically situated near waterways, trade routes, fertile ground for establishing farms, or close to mines with valuable mineral resources. This is why most important cities of the day were heavily fortified and surrounded by walls.

Instead of claiming the city for themselves, the Israelites vowed to raze it to the ground as a sacrifice for God. This would be a highly unusual act as most battles occurred to claim a city, not destroy it. Rescuing their fellow Israelites from captivity and honoring God were more important than claiming a single city.

Hormah is the same location in 14:39-45 where the Israelites first tried to enter Canaan after being exiled to the desert.

V4-9

The next generation of Israel seems to suffer from the same attitude as the previous generation. Even after a successful victory against king Arad, the whining and complaining persist. However, one of the reasons for their complaints was that they had to go a great distance out of their way to avoid the land of Edom (verse 4). Still, this should not have been a reason to grumble against God, especially when the end of the forty-year exile was so close!

What does the term 'fiery serpent' mean (verse 6)?

It is unclear what the original Hebrew means by describing the snakes in this way. It may have been a red coloring that made the snakes look fiery or it could have been that the venom burned as it entered its victim. This description is still a mystery.

Almost as quickly as they turned against God and Moses, the Israelites turn back to God and ask Moses to intervene. God gives them a way out but notice He doesn't remove the plague. He simply provides a cure for it. Their grumbling still has consequences despite their repentance.

It should also be noted that the Israelites still had a part to play in their healing. Once bitten, the victim had to look at the bronze serpent on the pole. This is what saved them. Just as Jesus offers us salvation, we still must accept it.

V10-20

There is not much recorded on this passage other than these are the places Israel marched through on their way to the Promised Land. However, their travels inspired songs of poetry.

What is the Book of the Wars of the Lord (verse 14)?

The Book of the Wars of Yahweh is an ancient book of Israel lost long ago. It is believed to have been a collection of poems and songs of Jewish victories, but that assumption comes with the caveat that Jewish tradition dictates that the name of a volume comes from the first few words at the beginning of the volume. This book may have started with a victory of God and the Jews, but it is impossible to know what the rest of the collection contained.

V21-26

Just like the Edomites in chapter 20, the Amorites also refuse passage to the Israelites. But they don't stop with just a refusal. The Amorites set out to attack the traveling Jews. But the time of exile for the Israelites is almost over and God grants Israel not only a victory, but the land of the Amorites now belongs to the Jews.

Deuteronomy 2:30 gives a little more insight into this battle. God hardened the heart of king Sihon, just as He did to Pharaoh in Egypt. God wanted this battle to occur. It would give confidence to the new generation of Israelites, it would show them that God truly is on their side, and it would expand the nation of Israel.

V27-30

The Israelites recorded this victory over the Amorites with song. This was the first of many victories this generation of Israelites would experience.

V31-35

The closing of this chapter does not go into detail, but it marks subsequent victories as the Israelites gain confidence in God and in themselves. They are acquiring more land to add to their inheritance.

Chapter 22

Chapters 22-24 record one of the most famous stories in the Bible. The prophet Balaam responds to his talking donkey. It is unclear how this account was made available to Moses, Joshua, or any other scribe of the book of Numbers since it does not record any members of Israel being present for these events. This allows skeptics to wonder if this account is real or simply a story. However, it is likely that the Israelites heard it from associates of Balaam if not Balaam himself as indicated in chapter 31.

V1-6

Immediately following the events in chapter 21, the surrounding nations took notice. Balak, king of Moab was no exception. He became worried that the Israelites were growing powerful and would soon conquer his lands.

Who is Balaam?

There is no account of Balaam other than what appears in the Torah. Balaam appears to be at least aware of the Hebrew God, if not a follower. This puts him in the same vein as Melchizedek from Genesis 14 and even Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses in Exodus 18. The Jews are the chosen people, but this does not make God exclusive to just them. God is still the Ruler of All. Regardless of his loyalties and faith, Balaam is apparently a well-known prophet-for-hire with a solid reputation. So much so, that Balak calls upon the prophet to curse Israel before they can invade Moab.

V7-14

The account here reveals clues as to who Balaam truly is. One, he takes “fees” for his work as a prophet. This indicates that he wasn’t following the One True God exclusively, if at all. God does not charge for His prophecies. This would also seem to indicate that Balaam does perform services for other gods, depending on which nation he is prophesying for, although this is not known for certain.

It is not made clear the motivation behind having the representatives of Balak stay the night with Balaam. Most biblical scholars tend to think that this would give Balaam time to consider the offer of the king and find a way to profit from it. It is possible that this would be his normal mode of operation, maybe even putting on some sort of show in the evening for those requesting his services. What is made clear in this passage is that God responds to Balaam. Balaam obeys the voice of God, albeit reluctantly, and sends the representatives away. The verbiage used in verse 13 indicates that Balaam was willing to go, but he could not because God wouldn’t let him. The king of Moab would try again, though.

V15-21

Balak wastes no time in sending not just representatives, but dignitaries of higher status and the authority to pay higher fees to Balaam. This speaks to the reputation that Balaam held. Whatever services he had performed in the past obviously worked.

Verse 18 speaks to the reality of Balaam as a prophet. He refers to the Hebrew God in a personal way, “...the Lord *my* God.” This is no mistake or show. Balaam knows who God is. However, in the verse immediately following this, Balaam allows the dignitaries to stay the night again so that he may consult with God more, even though he has already been told directly by God what the answer is.

Why does God appear to change His mind in verse 20?

God is playing the involved parent with Balaam in this verse. God has already told Balaam no. But Balaam doesn’t like that answer. God isn’t changing His mind. God is going to teach Balaam a lesson. Much like a young child to a parent, Balaam will learn there are consequences for not listening the first time.

V22-27

It is important to understand the motives of God in this passage. God did not want Balaam to curse Israel. He didn’t even want Balaam to leave with the Moabite entourage. But Balaam wanted to go and insisted that God should let him. God is Holy. God is omniscient. And God knows what’s best for us. God needed to clarify those points with Balaam.

Why was the donkey able to see God and not the prophet or his servants?

It is not made clear here why the donkey is the only entity aware of the presence of God. Some scholars think the men did not want to see God, yet the donkey acknowledged its creator. Others think God may have concealed Himself from the men in some way as part of the lesson to Balaam. Whatever the reason, the donkey is the only one to acknowledge God.

One commentary pointed out the example the donkey provides to all followers of God. The donkey was reverent and obedient, even being beaten by others for doing so. Sometimes it costs us to follow Jesus.

V28-30

How does the donkey speak?

These three verses record one of the biggest miracles in the Bible. Not since Genesis has an animal spoken to a human. When the serpent spoke to Eve in the garden of Eden, it is believed that the animal was being possessed by Satan himself. This example is used to imply that God inhabited the donkey and spoke for her. Still, it is not beyond the realm of possibility (while referencing a talking donkey!) that God simply gave the donkey the gift of cognitive speech temporarily and the text here seems to indicate that this is exactly what happened.

Another unbelievable aspect to this section is that Balaam carries on the conversation! The Bible doesn't record what Balaam's initial reaction to this miracle was or if there even was a reaction other than replying to the question presented by the donkey. He is so angered that he simply continues as if this was normal!

There is also no record of what the two traveling companions thought of this interaction. The logical guess would be confusion and bewilderment. But they are all but forgotten in this passage.

V31-35

God is finally revealed to Balaam. In whatever way Balaam knew God before this has been replaced with what Balaam knows in this moment. His outlook on the God of the Jews has been forever altered.

The will of God is laid out before Balaam. Again, just as a parent deals with a child, God says to Balaam in no uncertain terms, "I told you 'No!'"

There are also more clues to Balaam's true nature in his response to God. "If it displeases You, I will turn back." Balaam already knew he wasn't supposed to be going. God was standing in the road in front of him, sword in hand ready to strike him down. He *knew* this displeased God. Balaam is another example of people in this world. Unlike the donkey who is obedient to God and is beaten for it, Balaam believes in God and is still seeking to do his own will.

Even so, God allows Balaam to go on his own way. God can use even a disobedient prophet.

V36-41

Balaam gets his way and is allowed to proceed to Moab. Balak greets him with curiosity. Did he not offer Balaam enough tribute? Balaam is greedy and wishes for payment, but he confesses to Balak that he can't do what is being asked of him because of his encounter with God. In this regard, Balaam is at least being honest.

The chapter abruptly ends here but is immediately picked up in the following chapter.

Chapter 23

V1-6

Chapter 23 starts where 22 left off. Balaam is in Moab and prepares to speak on behalf of Jehovah, the God of Israel. He has been called to curse Israel by Balak the king. But God has already warned him not to do so.

Verse 4 indicates that Balaam built seven altars for God Jehovah but does not indicate why that number. Sacrificing a bull and a ram would be in keeping with the established Levitical tradition and even align with the tradition going as far back as the time of Abraham. This shows that Balaam had some knowledge of how to address and communicate with God.

Why would God use Balaam to speak His prophecy?

God has no issue using worldly things for His purpose and glory. God spoke through a donkey in the previous chapter. Balaam's heart may be in the wrong place, but physically he is exactly where God wants him at this moment.

V7-10

Recorded here is the prophecy that God put in Balaam's mouth. It is the opposite of what Balak wanted. Balaam seems to recognize the authority of Jehovah God with these words, despite being summoned and paid to curse the chosen Israelites.

V11-17

In this exchange, Balaam seems disappointed that he cannot please Balak. But Balaam, whether he wants to or not, is submitting to a higher authority.

Balak begs Balaam to try again. They set off to another area where they can view the Israelites from a distance. Seven more altars are built, and seven more bulls and rams are sacrificed. Balaam asks God for His prophecy.

V18-24

Not only does God bless Israel, but He calls out Balak by name. God will not allow His people to be cursed.

It should be noted that the original Hebrew uses the word "reem" in verse 22. Most translations convert this word to "wild ox" while others use the word "rhinoceros" or even "unicorn." This ancient Hebrew word can be literally translated as "one horn" or "mighty horn" but it is unclear what the original text is referring to here.

V25-30

Balak rebukes Balaam for once again providing a blessing over Israel. He essentially states, "If you can't say anything bad, don't say anything at all!"

The last paragraph of this chapter sets the stage for chapter 24 as Balak wants Balaam to try one last time.

Chapter 24

V1-2

Chapter 24 continues the story of the prophet Balaam and how he is only allowed to bless Israel through the Lord God instead of curse them as the Moabite king Balak wants him to do. This is the third time that Balaam has had Balak build seven altars and sacrifice seven bulls and rams. There are now a total of twenty-one altars spread across three locations in Moab with the intention of cursing Israel, but instead bless Israel.

Verse 1 indicates that Balaam *tried* to use sorcery to curse Israel as requested by Balak. But God would have none of it. On this third attempt, Balaam simply consults with God knowing that His commands will triumph.

V3-9

This passage records the third blessing Balaam offered over Israel in the name of God. The first time was not so much a blessing as a refusal to curse. The second prophecy was without a doubt a blessing. This third prophecy is not only a blessing but a curse against Balak.

V10-14

At this point, Balak is refusing to pay Balaam for his services. He has done the opposite of what he was tasked to do. This leaves Balaam nothing for his efforts. But there is one last prophecy that God offers through Balaam.

V15-24

This final prophecy is one of the coming Messiah! God uses Balaam to preach to a foreign nation about the Savior of the World, the Star of Jacob, the Scepter of Israel. The Messiah will provide a blessing to those who choose Him but will bring sorrow to those that reject Him. Here, God speaks directly to the Moabites, Edomites, Amalekites, and the Kenites.

V25

Balaam and Balak are both disappointed in the outcome. Balaam left with no reward for his services and Balak left without the spiritual defeat of the Jews. Balak was at least smart enough to not attack the Jews after this. The Hebrew God made an impression on both Balaam and Balak.

Chapter 25

V1-5

It is not clear how the two different people groups came to interact with each other in this passage, but chapter 31 indicates that Balaam enticed the two together. Since Balaam could not curse the Israelites, he found a way for them to curse themselves.

It is believed that this occurs very close to the end of the forty-year exile so this would be a new generation of Jews that hadn't seen firsthand the wrath of God against Egypt. However, God was still present and doing miracles among them, so their lack of faith is unfounded.

Baal was the fertility god of the Canaanites. He plays a recurring role in the fall of the Jews from faith in the One True God throughout the Old Testament.

In the previous chapter, God forbids and inhibits Balaam from cursing the Jews. Here, the Jews incur the wrath of God with their disobedience.

The penalty for placing an idol before God was death. A public, symbolic death, at that. God would use the sin of these people to be a lesson to others.

V6-9

There is reason to believe, albeit not confirmed, that the language used in the original Hebrew infers that the two who were found were having some sort of sexual relations. This would explain how the two were able to be pierced through the abdomen at the same time.

Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, performs his duties as a priest. The violators of the Levitical law are pierced through right where they were found. This action and adherence to the law ends the wrath of God on the Israelites. But only after twenty-four thousand died.

V10-13

God's words here speak to the heart of Phinehas. Phinehas wasn't just doing his duties; he was performing his duties out of a passion to please God. Rarely does the Bible record someone with such a heart for God. One of the best examples would be David as he kills Goliath for slandering God (1 Samuel 13:14). This passion would cause the priesthood to be passed down through the lineage of Phinehas.

V14-18

God's wrath still lingered, however, but it was focused on the Moabites. The chapter ends with God commanding the Israelites to go to battle with the Midianites. The Midianites were a nomadic tribe of Moabites. The woman that Phinehas killed was the daughter of the Midianite tribal leader.

Chapter 26

V1-4

Immediately following the plague from the previous chapter. The end of the forty-year exile is near, so God asks Moses to take another census. These would be the numbers of Israelites entering Canaan, the Promised Land.

V5-7

The family of Reuben came to 43,730. The first census had a count of 46,500 men, a loss of 2,770.

V8-11

An addendum to the family of Reuben is the rebellion of Korah where Dathan and Abiram participated in trying to overthrow Moses. This is a footnote for the tribe of Reuben which will forever follow them.

V12-14

The family of Simeon came to 22,200. The first census had a count of 59,300 men. This is a loss of 37,100.

V15-18

The family of Gad came to 40,500. The first census had a count of 45,650, a loss of 5,150.

V19-22

The family of Judah came to 76,500. The first census had a count of 74,600, a gain of 1,900.

V23-25

The family of Issachar came to 64,300. The first census had a count of 54,400, a gain of 9,900.

V26-27

The family of Zebulun came to 60,500. The first census had a count of 57,400, a gain of 3,100.

V28-34

The family of Manasseh, son of Joseph, came to 52,700. The first census had a count of 32,200, a gain of 20,500. The daughters of Zelophehad will play a significant role in Israeli politics in chapter 27.

V35-37

The family of Ephraim, son of Joseph, came to 32,500. The first census had a count of 40,500, a loss of 8,000.

V38-41

The family of Benjamin came to 45,600. The first census had a count of 35,400, a gain of 10,200.

V42-43

The family of Dan came to 64,400. The first census had a count of 62,600, a gain of 1,700.

V44-47

The family of Asher came to 53,400. The first census had a count of 41,500, a gain of 11,900.

V48-50

The family of Naphtali came to 45,400. The first census had a count of 53,400, a loss of 8,000.

V51

The total number of Israelite men over the age of 20 came to 601,730. The first census counted 603,550 men. Over the forty years in the desert, Israel lost 1,820 men, less than one percent of their population.

V52-56

This passage has God dividing the future land among the tribes based on size. There should be enough room for everyone to spread out, at least at the outset of inhabiting Canaan.

V57-62

This is the account of the Levites. Just like the first census, the Levites are not counted in the second census. They were not to fight in the battles or inherit land, so there would be no need to count them. This tribe belonged to God.

V63-65

The second census shows that only Moses, Joshua, and Caleb remained from the previous generation. And Moses was approaching the end of his life. He would pass before Israel entered Canaan.

Chapter 27**V1-11**

This passage is a rare instance of women being treated as better than mere cattle in this era. Most cultures of the day treated women as property, and they were certainly not allowed to possess land.

This was also an act of faith on behalf of the daughters of Zelophehad. Israel had not yet entered Canaan, so these daughters were asking for an inheritance of the Promised Land.

V12-14

In chapter 20, Moses was told he would not live to see Israel enter Canaan. Moses knew the end of the exile was near, which meant his time was almost up. God lets Moses know that his passing is about to happen and to prepare his heart.

V15-23

With the passing of Moses, the leadership of the Israelites must be passed on. Some would rightly assume that the leadership role would fall on the priesthood. But God knew that Israel was not quite ready for that yet. God told Moses to pass the reigns to Joshua. Moses makes a public declaration of Joshua's responsibilities so there could be no doubt as to who Israel should follow.

Chapter 28

V1-8

This chapter describes the law for offerings. This first passage is for daily offerings, one in the morning and one in the evening. God is reminding Israel that they need to start and end their day honoring Him.

V9-10

On the Sabbath, an additional lamb was sacrificed during both the morning and evening offerings.

V11-15

This passage adds a monthly offering for Israel. Sadly, this monthly offering would be incorporated into New Moon festivals for the pagans in later generations of the Israelites (Isaiah 1:14).

V16-31

This passage reiterates the offerings for the Passover feast.

Chapter 29

V1-6

This passage describes the offerings at the Feast of Trumpets. The Feast of Trumpets is the fifth celebration in the Jewish calendar year (Leviticus 23:23-25).

V7-11

This passage describes the offerings on the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement, also called Yom Kippur, is the sixth celebration in the Jewish calendar year (Leviticus 23:26-32).

V12-16

The first day of the Feast of Tabernacles required an offering of thirteen bulls, two rams, and fourteen lambs.

V17-19

The second day of the Feast of Tabernacles required an offering of twelve bulls, two rams, and fourteen lambs.

V20-22

The third day of the Feast of Tabernacles required an offering of eleven bulls, two rams, and fourteen lambs.

V23-25

The fourth day of the Feast of Tabernacles required an offering of ten bulls, two rams, and fourteen lambs.

V26-28

The fifth day of the Feast of Tabernacles required an offering of nine bulls, two rams, and fourteen lambs.

V29-31

The sixth day of the Feast of Tabernacles required an offering of eight bulls, two rams, and fourteen lambs.

V32-34

The seventh day of the Feast of Tabernacles required an offering of seven bulls, two rams, and fourteen lambs.

V35-38

The eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles required an offering of one bull, one ram, and seven lambs. This day would also be a day of assembly and recognized as a day of rest.

V39-40

Although this seems like an elaborate expense with so many high-quality animals being sacrificed, this would be in keeping with the spirit of the Feast of Tabernacles celebration. This was supposed to be a happy, joyful party atmosphere that reminded the Jews of the riches that God has provided them.

In Numbers 28 and 29, God commands the Israelites to perform a large number of sacrifices. The cost in these two chapters would be 1086 lambs, 113 bulls, 32 rams, over a ton of flour, and roughly 1000 bottles of oil and wine.

Chapter 30**V1-2**

These commands were passed down from God to Moses, and then to the tribal leaders to be dispersed to all of Israel.

Swearing an oath before God was a serious matter. God did not want the Israelites to take their promises lightly.

What is the difference between this passage and Matthew 5:34-37 where Jesus tells His followers to not swear before God?

Jesus isn't saying to not make oaths or promises in Matthew 5. Jesus is simply saying that as followers of Jesus there should be no lie coming from their lips. They should be so trustworthy that taking an oath wouldn't be necessary.

V3-5

A woman taking a vow could be overruled by the head of household. In this passage, that head would be her father.

V6-8

In keeping with the previous passage, if a woman's husband was the head of household, then he could also overrule her vows.

V9

A previously married woman had no head of household, so she was responsible for her own vows.

V10-16

Since a woman who was held to an authority figure could have her vows nullified by that authority, the authority was also responsible for her keeping her vows. This meant that the head of household was responsible for providing a means for the woman to keep her vows that he approved of.

Chapter 31

V1-12

The Midianites were a nomadic group from the land of Moab. Being nomads, their culture was more inclusive than that of their Moabite relatives, but this typically meant they worshipped more gods than the Moabites.

It should be noted that God's vengeance is just. Here, God uses the Israelites as His instrument of vengeance. Most scholars are quick to point out that this is an Old Covenant characteristic only, and that God hasn't used the Israelites as a tool of vengeance since before the time of the Babylonian captivity during the time of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah.

The Jews went to war with the Midianites and killed all the men, as was the custom of this era. The women and children were considered "spoils of war."

Verse 8 mentions that Balaam the prophet was with the Midianites at this time for whatever reason. He was also killed as one of the conspirators against Israel (see verse 16).

V13-19

Why would Moses order the killing of the women and children?

Moses is upset with his army despite the victory. The reason for the plague in chapter 25 and the reason God was seeking vengeance on the Midianites was because of the pagan women. Only virgin women were allowed to live and settle with the Israelites.

The reason the boys were ordered to be killed is based mostly on the culture of the day. There was a hierarchical structure for most people that involved a duty to their family, clan, tribe, and nation. This was instilled in everyone at an early age. The boys would have no choice but to avenge their families when they were older. Moses meant to wipe the Midianites off the face of the earth.

V20-24

Even the materiel spoils had to be cleansed before being used by the Israelites. Metals would be refined in fire. Leather and fabrics would be washed and purified before being reused. Even the wood had to be washed. Moses wanted no trace of them to infiltrate the Jews.

V25-31

God reminds the Israelites that this victory was His. It was His vengeance that was gained in this battle. This sets the precedence for even tithing out of the spoils of war.

V32-47

This passage is a record of the spoils from the Midianites.

- 675000 sheep
- 72000 cattle
- 61000 donkeys
- 32000 virgin women

The spoils were divided into two separate but equal pots. One pot would be for all of Israel. The other pot would be just for the men who went to war. Out of those pots would come a tithe to be given to the temple. However, the tithe would come out of the warrior's pot. A different tribute would be taken out of the people's pot.

V48-54

It is unclear what is meant exactly by the phrase, "not a man of us is missing" (verse 49). It might mean that all men are accounted for, whether living or dead and no man is "missing in action." It might also mean that all 12000 men returned, and no one was lost during the battle. This would be a truly remarkable miracle! Either way, the army was grateful for the victory and gave above and beyond what was asked of them. A gift of gold was given to the temple to honor God for the victory.

Chapter 32

V1-5

This passage contains the negotiations of the tribes of Reuben and Gad to settle in the land of Gilead *outside* of the land of Canaan. Many theologians are quick to point out that these two tribes are settling for the land they can currently see rather than trust that God has a better plan for them. The exile in the desert is almost over and no one except Joshua and Caleb remain that have seen what Canaan looks like. The general consensus is that these tribes decided to take what they could while they could rather than wait and see if the journey into Canaan is worth it.

V6-15

Moses' response to the request is immediate fear that this generation will have the same fate as the previous generation. Moses does not want the Israelites to fail entering the promised land a second time. He's also afraid that this lack of faith will spread to the other ten tribes. A little doubt can spread very quickly.

V16-19

The two tribes are quick to offer their support for any military campaigns that need to be made for Israel to settle in Canaan. They simply want their inheritance first, outside of the promised land. Strategically, their logic is sound. But it isn't their logic that Moses is worried about. The lack of their trust in God shows the nature of their hearts.

V20-32

Moses is reluctant to agree to this, but a compromise is reached. As long as Reuben and Gad provide military support for Israel, they can have their inheritance outside of Canaan. Moses and the heads of each tribe agree to the terms of the tribes of Reuben and Gad.

V33-42

In verse 33, it is shown that the doubt of the Reubenites and Gaddites did spread, but not to the degree that Moses had worried about. Some of the tribe of Manasseh sided with Reuben and Gad and joined them in settling Gilead.

Chapter 33

V1-4

The majority of this chapter is a recount of the journey of the Israelites through the desert starting with their exodus from Egypt. This would record for posterity the long road taken through the desert for forty years before entering Canaan. It begins with the reminder that God defeated the Egyptians in such a fashion as to humiliate their deities and prove that none were greater.

V5-15

This section records the first couple of years after the exodus from Egypt where God records the ten commandments and Levitical law for the Israelites.

V16-37

This passage recalls almost 38 years in the desert up until the death of Aaron the high priest.

V38-39

This is a marker in the journey to record the passing of the first priest of Israel, Moses' brother, Aaron.

V40-49

This last recording of the journey is only a few months in length, just before Israel enters the promised land.

V50-56

Does this command to the Israelites from God seem harsh to wipe out the existence of a people from their land?

This is one of the passages that many non-believers point to as the God of the Bible being wrathful and vengeful. What many bible scholars point out and archaeology confirms is that the Canaanites were an extremely pagan-based culture that practiced many unholy rituals, including infant sacrifices. The land of Abraham had been overrun with godless people. God wanted to start over again in a much smaller capacity than flooding the planet. This would accomplish that goal. Unfortunately, as archaeology points out, the Israelites did not completely wipe out the inhabitants. Otherwise, there would be no record of them.

Chapter 34

V1-12

God tells Moses where the borders of the Promised Land will extend. The land east of the Jordan where the tribes of Reuben and Gad settled were not considered to be part of the Promised Land even though they still now belonged to Israel after being conquered in chapter 32.

There is still some debate as to where the exact locations of the ancient border lie since some of these markers either no longer exist or have been moved, but the variations are minor which provides a realistic overview of how large Israel was once they settled in Canaan.

V13-15

In this passage, God reiterates to Moses that the land shall be divided up among the nine and a half tribes based on their current size taken in the last census (chapter 26).

V16-29

Joshua and Eleazar the high priest would be given the task of dividing up the land, but this would be done with the cooperation of a designated leader from each of the tribes. All these leaders would be too young to remember the captivity in Egypt and the miracles God performed to remove them from slavery. These men were following in their fathers' footsteps and acting on faith that God would provide.

Chapter 35

V1-5

The Levites did not own land, but they still had to be provided for. Their land belonged to God and the Levites paid rent by performing the duties in the tabernacle. They would have cities in which their tribe would live, just like their fellow Jews. They would also be provided "common land" which they would share to let their livestock graze. This common land would be immediately outside of the city walls on all four sides.

V6-15

There were to be a total of 48 Levitical cities. This included 6 cities of refuge. These cities would come from the other tribes based on the tribes' size. This way, the Levites would be distributed among the tribes based on the need of the people. The larger the tribe, the more Levites lived among them.

The cities of refuge were a unique legal strategy of the era. Levitical law gave instructions on how to deal with a murderer. What has not been covered up to this point is what to do in a disputed death. The cities of refuge gave an option for those who had been involved in an accidental death to escape the immediate judgment of the family of the person who had died and allow the authorities, in this case the priesthood, to determine what needed to be done. The books of Deuteronomy and Joshua both discuss the location of the cities and that the cities had roads between them for easy access. They were evenly distributed across Israel. These cities of refuge were even open to visitors in Israel.

V16-21

This passage goes into detailed examples of the difference between murder and an accidental killing. As established in Leviticus and previously in this book, God is interested in what's in a person's heart, not the letter of the law.

V22-28

This passage covers what to do when a person is found innocent of murder, but still involved in the death of another. Manslaughter still had consequences, but death at the hand of an avenging relative was not among them. Those that were innocent of murder, but guilty of manslaughter had to remain in

the city of refuge until the death of the high priest. Only inside the walls of the city would they be safe from vengeance.

V29-34

The closing of this chapter discusses the legality of determining whether someone was guilty of murder. At least two witnesses must be provided to find someone guilty of murder. And murder carried an immediate death sentence with no chance of being ransomed or purchased out of the sentence. Death is the result of sin and sin must be paid for properly.

Chapter 36

V1-4

The closing of the book of Numbers is anti-climactic in that it deals with yet another legal issue that was brought about by chapter 27. The daughters of Zelophehad were to keep the land of their father so their tribe would not disappear. This problem is brought about by the remaining brothers of Zelophehad.

V5-12

The solution is for the immediate daughters of Zelophehad to marry their cousins. This would keep the land inside the tribal inheritance.

V13

The closing of the book of Numbers gives the location of where this book was finished. The book opens with the Israelites in the wilderness after fleeing Egypt. It closes with the Israelites camped in Moab by the Jordan river, just outside Canaan, the city of Jericho sitting on the other side of the river.

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