

NUMBERS

INTRO – Scattered through the book is the story of Israel’s journey from Mt. Sinai to the eastern border of Canaan. However, all four sources (JEDP) are introduced by many authors and editors from various periods in Israel’s history, brought together during and after the exile in the early 6th century BCE. Also, several texts border on the bizarre: a talking donkey, copper healing snakes, Miriam turning temporarily leprous, etcetc! Moses had little or nothing to do with the writing. Locale; Sinai (Chapters 1-10:16), Kadesh (13-20), Moab (22-36). Themes: 1) Entire book set in the wilderness, showing God’s patience in the peoples’ transition from 400 years of slavery to a Promised Land. 2) Complex movement of the people toward fulfillment of God’s promises of the gift of land. 3) God’s promises to stay with them, dwelling in their midst. 4) Much of God’s word mediated through Moses, but not everything. 5) Forms of priestly leadership.

- 1) 1:1 – Israel prepares to leave Sinai for the promised land – one month after completion of the tabernacle.
- 2) 1:2-54 – The census – by tribes (listed) – and clans (not listed). Males over 20 only, and able to go to war. V, 46 – total: 604,550. The Levites are not listed here (see Ch 3), do not bear arms, encamp around the tabernacle to protect and maintain it – see 2:17.
- 3) 2:1-34 – The tribal arrangement and their duties.
- 4) 3:40 – Enrollment of all 1st-born males (22,273) – an impossibly low number.
- 5) 4:1-49 -- The census of Levite males by clan (vv 35-50) and their duties.
- 6) **Chapter 7** – Huge gifts brought to Moses in the tabernacle from each tribe by the son of the leader of the tribe – silver and gold plates, basins, dishes, etc. and livestock.. varied somewhat in quantity between tribes.
- 7) **Chapter 8** – Consecration of the Levites, the Lord saying, “the Levites shall be mine.”
- 8) 9:1-14 – Flashback to Moses celebrating the Passover.
- 9) 9:15-23 – Description of God’s cloud directing the rest or movement of the camp.
- 10) 10:1-10 – Two silver trumpets made, to be blown by the priests to announce upcoming events.
- 11) 10:11-28 – Departure from Sinai after 11 months. First stage ends in wilderness of Paran, the arid region straight south of Canaan. Order of march described.
- 12) 10:29-36 – (Jethro/Ruel confusion – see notes @ Exodus 3:1.) Moses convinces his father-in-law to remain with them as a guide.
- 13) 13:21 – Hebron – 20 miles south of Jerusalem. Lebo-hamath – 150 miles north of Hebron (actually in Syria, 40 miles north of Damascus).
- 14) 14:39-45 – JB: This doesn’t make sense. The people have repented of their sin and now want to cross over to their promised land. But Moses tells them that they are now **dis**-obeying the Lord by wanting to cross over.
- 15) 15:32-36 – An ugly example of God’s punishment for working on the Sabbath: Moses and his people are ordered to stone a man who was found collecting firewood on the Sabbath.
- 16) 16:31-35, 41-49 – another ugly punishment: Korah, Dathan, Abiron and their whole families are “swallowed by the earth” for defying Moses’s leadership. Then 25 men are “consumed by fire” for accusing God and Moses for the killing those families. **And**, 14,000 are killed by a plague for siding with the 25!

- 17) 17:8 -- When the temple elders were choosing a husband for Mary about 1500 year later, each prospect brought a staff. From Joseph's staff flew a dove which landed on his head, confirming the choice. (Infancy Gospel of James, Ch 9).
- 18) **Chapter 18** – A detailed recapitulation of the duties of the Aaronite priests and Levites, plus instructions to give them from the people's offering what they needed to live, since they were allotted no land. They got the *very best* of everything!
- 19) 19:1-10 – Ritual with a red heifer to produce cleansing ashes (vv 1-10) for one who has touched a corpse (vv 11-22).
- 20) 20:1 – Arrival at Kadesh. Death of Miriam. Vv 2-13 – Moses rings water out of a rock. Vv 14-21 – Unsuccessful attempt to pass through Edom, which will leave a lasting memory. Vv 22-29 –From Kadesh to Mt. Hor, where Aaron dies and is succeeded by his son Eleazar.
- 21) 21:1-25 – Traces the bloody route from the Negeb to Amon, killing everyone en route, arriving in Bashan, where they kill King Sihon, his sons, and all his people and take possession of the land (v 35).
- 22) **Chapters 22-24** – A bizarre story, its significance obscure to me. Summary from the footnotes of my Bible (The New Annotated Oxford Bible – NRSV): Balaam, a non-Israelite, a seer whom God uses to bless Israel (whatever that means), has three encounters with God. Balak, king of Moab, fearing the Israelites still encamped in his territory, tries twice to pay Balaam to curse them, but he blesses them instead (what else could he do?). Balak tries again and this time God allows the meeting but instructs Balaam to obey his word. Balaam sets out on his donkey, incurring (unexplainedly) God's wrath, and sends an angel with a sword to stop him. Twice the angel stands in front of the donkey with drawn sword. Balaam doesn't see him but the donkey does and turns off the track. Both times Balaam beats him back onto the path. But the third time the donkey objects and asks why he was beaten, not knowing that Balaam can't see the angel. Then God opens Balaam's eyes, but when Balaam asks forgiveness he tells him to go on to Balak, who three times builds seven altars in different places, which only results in Balaam's oracles cursing Moab and most of the other countries in the area. They go their different ways! /// Vv 24:17-24 may be a "double prophecy": messianic, or David's conquest of Moab after he unifies Israel and Judah (2 Samuel 8:2).
- 23) **Chapter 25** – V1 – Shittim – Abel-Shittim in 33:49 – in Moab northeast of the Dead Sea, probably close to Nebo – across the Jordan from Jericho. Vv 2-18 – The final rebellion before the census taken by Moses (Ch 26) to decide who should cross the Jordan. The jealousy of the Lord, due to Israelite men taking Moabite women and bowing to their Baal, is assuaged by a plague that kills 24,000 people, and by Phinehas (Eleazar's son), who follows an Israelite man into a special ritual tent and runs a spear through him and the Moabite woman he is having sex with. (JB: When the Lord loses his temper, he loses his mind! And the spearing incident is totally unexplainable; if we knew the details we might find it rational, but as it stands...?)
- 24) 27:1-11 – Moses formulates a **new law**: when the Israelite Zelophehad died, his daughters inherited his property, a startling concept at the time. Moses then declared the law to be permanent.
- 25) 27:12-23 – In a ceremony on Nebo, God instructs Moses how to turn over his authority to Caleb and Joshua.
- 26) 28:1-29:40 – Extremely complicated instructions for rituals to be performed *forever* by the

Israelites, beginning with their entry into the Promised Land. **Festivals** of Weeks, Harvest, and Pentecost. **Rosh Hashanah** and **Yom Kippur**. **Tabernacle:** Booths, Sukkot, and Ingathering.

- 27) **Chapter 31** -- A holy war against the Midianites. (Midian is in the far northwest corner of present-day Saudi Arabia – across the Gulf of Aqaba from the Sinai Peninsula. Edna and I lived there for two years, 1983-85.) The reason is unclear to me – the only insult is related in 25:17-18. They seem to have been included in the massacre of the Moabites but detailed here separately. This included all males, all non-virgin women, and even Balaam, the diviner. The booty was huge; i. e. 337,000 sheep and goats, 36,000 oxen, 16,000 persons, etcetcetc.
- 28) **Chapter 32** – The tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh settled in Gilea and Moab. Moses recalled God’s anger when forty years earlier the Israelites refused to enter Canaan from the south, and he now questions their motives in not crossing the Jordan to Canaan. But they come to an agreement with Moses (and God).
- 29) – 33:1-38 – Recaps journey from Egypt to Mt. Horb. Vv 39 56 --Then from Horeb to Abel-Shittim.
- 30) – 34:1-15 – Boundaries of the Promised Land, NESW. Vv. 16-29 – names the men who will receive the apportionment in the name of their tribe.
- 31) **Chapter 35** – Instructions first re: cities and pastures given to the Levites by each tribe, then six “cities of refuge” for unintentional murders. Then detailed rules for handling different kind of killings. (For a detailed discussion of refuge cities and how they functioned, see footnotes for chapter 35 in an NRSV bible.)
- 32) **Chapter 36** – A more detailed discussion than found in chapter 27:1-11 of the problem of Zelophehad’s daughters.