



Good News  
**Bible Reading Program**

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, *an International Association*

**— June 2002 —**

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1 June	Tending the menorah; Showbread; Penalty for blasphemy	Leviticus 24
2 June	Sabbatical and Jubilee years	Leviticus 25
3 June	Promise of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience	Leviticus 26
4 June	Redeeming what is dedicated to God	Leviticus 27
5 June	Israel's first census; Organization of the families	Numbers 1–2
6 June	Levites chosen for God's service and numbered	Numbers 3
7 June	Service of the Levite clans of Kohath, Gershon and Merari	Numbers 4
8 June	Isolation of unclean; Restitution for trespass; Trial of jealousy	Numbers 5
9 June	Nazirite vow; Priestly blessing	Numbers 6
10 June	Dedication offering for the tabernacle	Numbers 7
11 June	Lamps arranged; Separating the Levites for God's service	Numbers 8
12 June	Passover and the Second Passover; Pillar of Cloud and Fire	Numbers 9
13 June	Silver trumpets; People depart & complain; 70 elders; quail & plague	Numbers 10–11
14 June	Miriam and Aaron's dissension; Spies sent into Canaan	Numbers 12–13
15 June	Refusal to enter Canaan; Punishment decreed; Futile entry attempt	Numbers 14
16 June	Offerings; Unintentional & deliberate sin; Sabbath breaking; tassels	Numbers 15
17 June	Korah's rebellion	Numbers 16
18 June	Aaron's rod buds	Numbers 17
19 June	Duties of priests and Levites; Tithes and offerings to support them	Numbers 18
20 June	Red heifer for purification	Numbers 19
21 June	Miriam dies; Moses errs; Edom refuses passage; Death of Aaron	Numbers 20
22 June	Battle with Arad; Bronze serpent; Kings Sihon and Og defeated	Numbers 21
23 June	Balak sends for Balaam; Balaam's donkey	Numbers 22:1-40
24 June	Balaam's first and second oracles	Numbers 22:41- -23:26
25 June	Balaam's third through seventh oracles; Israel's harlotry in Moab	Numbers 23:27–25:18
26 June	Israel's second census	Numbers 26
27 June	Laws of inheritance; Joshua to succeed Moses	Numbers 27
28 June	Daily, Sabbath, monthly and Festival offerings	Numbers 28
29 June	Festival offerings continued	Numbers 29
30 June	Laws regarding vows	Numbers 30

## Highlights to Think About from This Month's Reading

### Keep the Fire Burning; Eye for an Eye (Leviticus 24)

**June 1**

The lamps of the menorah were to be lit and kept burning every day (verse 2; Exodus 27:20; 30:7-8). This was symbolic of God's Spirit and His laws. Each day, we must have the light of God burning in us through His Spirit and living by His Word. David prayed to God, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). Echoing this, Solomon wrote: "For the commandment is a lamp, and the law a light; reproofs and instruction are the way of life" (Proverbs 6:23). When people see us, they should see God shining *through* us. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Just as with the tabernacle lamps, this requires attentiveness and vigilance.

The phrase "from evening until morning indicates tending the lamps twice a day, not tending them throughout the night" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Leviticus 24:2-4). Similarly, we must seek God when we awake each day and before we go to sleep each night to make sure that our spiritual "oil" is renewed (compare Matthew 25:4; 2 Corinthians 4:16)—allowing us to shine every day.

In verses 19-20 of Leviticus 24, we come to the "eye-for-an-eye" principle, mentioned earlier in Exodus 21:23-25. We stated in our highlights on that passage that this was apparently not generally meant to be a literal requirement in meting out justice—that just recompense was the concern. The judges of Israel might have required death or beating with a certain number of stripes. And that would have been literal. But we have no evidence that the judges ever *required* a hand to be cut off or other bodily mutilation (although it is possible that they did since there is no way at present to really know).

It may be that they would *allow* the offended party to exact that penalty from someone who had cut *his* hand off (similar to God's allowance for the nearest of kin to a murder victim to act as an avenger of blood). As mentioned in the highlights for Exodus 21, a big reason for the principle was not just so that the punishment would fit the crime but so that the punishment would not go *beyond* the crime. *The Nelson Study Bible* notes on Leviticus 24:19-20: "Its purpose was not to *require* the injured party to inflict *equal* bodily harm on the one who had injured him, but to *forbid* him from inflicting *greater* bodily harm."

Of course, while God's system may have allowed justice to be measured out in kind as described, His desire was for mercy in the face of remorse—and also for restitution and care for the victim. If someone cut another person's hand off, the person who lost his hand would be wiser to *not* cut the offender's hand off. The judges would perhaps order a beating for pain and suffering and that the offender work (maybe for the rest of his life) to provide the lost livelihood to the one who lost his hand and was no longer able to work. (If the offender's hand was cut off too, he could not work to help the victim. So it would not seem to really help matters—except in giving some sense of justice and providing a deterrent in the society.)

The same goes for blinding an offender if he has blinded someone else. This would create two needy beggars instead of just one. It seems wiser to demand that the seeing criminal be indebted and perhaps indentured to the victim.

### Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land (Leviticus 25)

**June 2**

These words of verse 10 are engraved on the American Liberty Bell, a traditional symbol of U.S. freedom that sits outside Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. While it was first rung on July 8, 1776, to celebrate the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence, it was actually commissioned by the Pennsylvania Provincial Assembly in 1751 to proclaim the Jubilee year. (Ironically, the bell was first cast in London.) In any event, it was seen by Revolutionary America as a symbol of freedom from tyranny. And the verse quoted is quite fitting in that regard.

In actuality, the proclamation of "liberty" in the 50th year specifically referred to the fact that all debts were canceled, all Israelites who had sold themselves into slavery were freed, and all land went back to its original owners. The phrase "proclaim liberty" also occurs in Isaiah 61:1, where it is proclaimed to the "captives," along with "the opening of the prison to those who are bound." To whom is this referring? Those who are in "the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:26), i.e., the world at large. This is also seen as proclaiming "the acceptable year of the LORD" (Isaiah 61:2), another name for the Jubilee. When Christ began His earthly ministry, He explained that He was fulfilling these very verses in Isaiah (Luke 4:16-21). We

should easily see how this relates to the issue of debt and servitude. The penalty earned for sin is compared to debt in the Scriptures. And in Romans 6, the apostle Paul explains that the way of sin is actually a form of bondage or slavery. It is the debt of sin that has separated mankind from his intended inheritance.

Land, in this picture, is quite important. Notice this from *The Nelson Study Bible* on “Redeeming the Land”: “An ancient Israelite was in desperate straits if he had to sell his family’s land. Both food and income came from the proceeds of the land. Dispossessed family members would quickly become someone else’s servants. Most people would work hard to avoid such a situation. However, illness, crop failure, or other misfortunes could force a person into debt to the point that his only alternative was to sell his land. Even in this distressing situation there was hope. A dispossessed family could be saved from poverty and hardship:

“First, a redeeming relative could redeem (or buy back) the land (Lev. 25:25). From the proceeds, the man could pay off his creditors. The land stayed in the extended family; the poor family stayed on their land; and eventually the redeemer was repaid. The redeemer was the nearest male relative. If he could not fulfill this privilege and obligation, it passed down the kinship line until someone could. This is the scenario of Ruth 4: Boaz acted as a kinsman-redeemer and bought Naomi’s field.

“If a man did not have any relative who would redeem his land, he could save enough to buy it back himself. The purchase price would be prorated according to the number of years left until the next Jubilee year, the fiftieth year (25:26, 27). A man might have to wait until the Jubilee year to reclaim the land of his inheritance (25:28). Even in this most desperate situation there was the hope and promise that at the Jubilee year the family would be able to return debt-free to their land and make a fresh start.

“The law of redemption and the law of the Jubilee year are vivid symbols of what Jesus Christ did on the Cross for every person [1 Corinthians 6:20; Ephesians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:18-19]. What our first father and mother lost in the Garden [i.e., man’s dwelling in the paradise of God and opportunity to eat from the Tree of Life], we cannot retrieve by any means [on our own]. We cannot go back to Eden [of ourselves]. Yet Jesus Christ, our elder Brother, redeemed it for us. We have been evicted from our inheritance, but in the Year of Jubilee, we will be allowed to return (cf. Is. 51:3; Ezek. 36:33-35; Rev. 2:7; 22:1-2, 14). We will live with Jesus in Paradise.” Moreover, we will at last inherit the whole universe with Him (Romans 8:16-19; Hebrews 2:8-9; Revelation 21:7), which was God’s intent for mankind from the beginning (compare Deuteronomy 4:19). What a glorious redemption—of both us and our heritage.

### **Blessings and Curses (Leviticus 26)**

**June 3**

God had made promises of national greatness to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph that were unconditional—He committed Himself to bestow them on their descendants to remain true to His Word. However, God had not as yet bound Himself to any time frame in this regard except that the national greatness had to occur in this age in order for the Israelites to possess the “gate of their enemies” (see Genesis 22:17). Since Israel was not even a nation until the time of Moses in the mid-15th century B.C., this allowed a nearly 3,500-year window until this end time for the birthright blessings of national greatness to be poured out. So would God bestow the blessings at the beginning of that window—that is, to the newly formed nation of Israel here heading toward the Promised Land? It appears that He *would* have—if Israel had met the condition of continued obedience as outlined in this chapter, Leviticus 26, and its parallel passage, Deuteronomy 28. (Again, the blessings themselves were *unconditional*, but God was free to attach conditions as to the *time* in which He would give them.)

Right up front in Leviticus 26, God stresses prohibitions against idolatry and Sabbath breaking, the very sins for which Israel would be punished by national captivity under the Assyrians more than 700 years later (compare Ezekiel 20:18-24). Then the Eternal lays forth the *conditions* that had to be met in order for them to begin receiving the birthright blessings right away: “If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, *then* I will give you...” (verse 3). Perfect weather and soil conditions would yield one bumper crop after another. They would have so much that they would have to get rid of their vast surplus to make room for the next incredible harvest (verses 4-5). Their country would not be overrun by deadly snakes, swarms of locusts or disease-bearing tse-tse flies, which plague the African continent. Savage lions and tigers would not ravage small villages, terrifying and devouring their inhabitants, as happens in some areas of Africa and India today. And the Israelites would dwell in continuous peace at home, with no fear of invasion by enemy

armies (verse 6). Blessed in natural resources and with power to repel all military aggression (verses 7-8), they would soon constitute the most powerful and prestigious nation in the world. This was the birthright that Israel had been promised!

Disobedience, however, would bring a different result—for a time, at least. The Israelites would be victims of sickness and disease, drought, crop failures, famine and pestilence. They would be invaded, defeated, plundered and, as they had been in Egypt, enslaved. Sadly, these exact kinds of curses came on them time after time during the period of the judges. Yet they failed to learn their lesson. The period of the divided monarchy saw Israel wallowing ever more in the worship of Baal and other false gods. And finally, the rest of the curses of Leviticus 26 befell them, including national captivity and a 2,520-year delay in receiving the birthright blessings (see “Birthright Blessings Delayed for 2,520 Years” at [www.ucg.org/brp/materials](http://www.ucg.org/brp/materials)).

At last, God did bestow the birthright of national greatness on the modern descendants of Israel as He had promised—and the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, other British-descended areas and, to a lesser extent, the other northwest European nations have been tremendously blessed as a result (for details, request or download the free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*). But the timing is still in His hands. He is not required to continue the blessings indefinitely in this age. Indeed, many prophecies make it clear that the curses of Leviticus 26 are again going to befall the modern-day descendants of Israel—in a worse way than ever before. “Indeed all the nations will wonder, ‘Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused this great display of anger?’ They will conclude, ‘It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their ancestors’” (Deuteronomy 29:24-25, New Revised Standard Version).

Some conclude that because God divorced ancient Israel and because the Sinai marriage covenant ended with the death of Christ, God no longer deals with His physical people based on the principles of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Yet, while the Husband/wife relationship based on the Sinai covenant *has* ended between God and physical Israel, the God/*people* relationship, based on much *earlier* promises to Abraham as well as other covenants God made with Israel *besides* the Old Covenant marriage, has certainly *not* ended.

Indeed, when Leviticus 26 was given, the Old Covenant marriage was already in existence—making the blessings and curses distinct from it. This becomes even clearer when we consider that immediately following virtually the same terms in Deuteronomy 28, we are told, “These are the words of the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, *besides* the covenant which He made with them in Horeb” (29:1). The principles delineated in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, then, are still in force.

We should also consider that many of God’s laws are *self-enforcing*, meaning that breaking them brings about punishing consequences: “Your own wickedness will correct you, and your backslidings will reprove you” (Jeremiah 2:19). For example, earlier in Leviticus we read of God’s instructions about which animal flesh is suitable for human consumption. Eating those animals God designates as “unclean” and unfit for eating can bring about any number of diseases and other health problems on those who disregard His instructions (you can read what several medical doctors and nutritionists say in our free booklet *What Does the Bible Teach About Clean and Unclean Meats?*).

Similarly, flaunting God’s laws regarding marriage and sexual relationships can lead to crippling and deadly epidemics such as AIDS and other sexually transmissible diseases along with other consequences like fatherless homes and resulting increases in poverty, crime, child abuse and substance abuse. Furthermore, we can’t ignore the fact that a drop in moral standards weakens the very fabric of any society and, if not reversed, makes a people or nation a tempting target for military attack and conquest—as has happened repeatedly throughout history. Whenever we’re tempted to think God’s laws don’t apply to us or are no longer in force, we should consider their benefit and the possible unforeseen consequences of violating them. This is certainly part of the warning inherent in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

### **Redeeming Dedicated Persons and Property (Leviticus 27)**

**June 4**

Based on the redemption amounts, some might think God is sexist and ageist. But God does not play favorites. The amounts here have only to do with a practical valuation of how useful the various classes of people would be in carrying out the heavy work of the tabernacle.

Certain dedicated property could be redeemed through paying the valuation plus an additional one fifth. This could even be done with tithes of produce (verses 30-31), but not with the tithe of livestock (verses 32-33). “Every tenth animal was part of the tithe that belonged to God. The owner

was not allowed to adjust this procedure so that the animal for the tithe was small, weak, or sickly, nor could he substitute a poor animal for a better one” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verses 32-33).

Some today have taken the verses regarding the redeeming of tithes to mean that it is permissible to borrow from their monetary tithes and pay them back by adding a fifth. Yet this is not at all what is meant here. The regulation is about *exchanging*, not *borrowing*. Tithes were owed directly to God as the firstfruits of increase. It was not permissible to borrow from them. God said in Exodus 22:29 that the people were not to delay in turning over their firstfruits to Him. Consider that if someone owed some carrots as a tithe, he could redeem them by adding one fifth to their evaluation and paying that in cash. But he could not simply eat the carrots and later grow new carrots to replace them, giving the new ones plus one fifth. That was not allowed. And it would still be wrong today. (To learn more about the subject of tithing, download or send for our free booklet *What Does the Bible Teach About Tithing?*)

### **Introduction to Numbers; A Census in the Wilderness (Numbers 1–2)**

**June 5**

Numbers doesn't sound like an interesting name for a book of the Bible. But don't let that fool you. The name of the book, translated from its title in the Greek Septuagint, comes from the first counting or numbering of Israel, which takes place 13 months after the Exodus from Egypt. “Take a census of all the congregation of all the children of Israel” (verse 2). Yet Numbers is not filled with endless genealogies, as one might expect. Quite the contrary, it contains a great deal of interesting information on the people of Israel as God leads them out into the “wilderness,” i.e., a wild, uninhabited land. Indeed, the Hebrew name for the book is *Bemidbar*, taken from the first words in the book, translated into English as “In the Wilderness.” Herein they are taught principles, lessons and even doctrine. Moreover, the book of Numbers reports on many of God's miraculous acts that are mentioned nowhere else. Furthermore, it is filled with many parallels, pictures or symbolic representations of Jesus Christ. The priesthood and tabernacle service anticipates His ministry.

The focus is on the wilderness because previous revelations of the LORD had been given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Book of Numbers covers the remaining 39 years of the 40-year history of the Israelites in the wilderness. Only 11 of the tribes of Israel were numbered—a total of 603,550 men who were able to go to war. The numbering, or census, was conducted by tribal leaders, each head of the house of his father's tribe. Because of their tabernacle duties, the Levites were not included in this numbering for battle (verse 47). The Levites were instructed to make camp near and around the tabernacle, and all others were to keep their distance on pain of death.

### **Organization of the Families (Numbers 1–2)**

**June 5 Cont'd**

In chapter 2 we find the organization of the tribes of Israel. God made it clear to Moses that every Israelite was personally responsible for pitching his camp with his tribe. There was a recognizable standard—akin to the national flags of more modern times—that bore the emblem or ensign of each tribe and marked the area of encampment. A leader was chosen for each tribe, the same man who had been charged with taking the tribe's census.

In the center of all the camps were the Levites, surrounded by the 12 other tribes. The 12 tribes were sorted into four main assemblies. First in the order of procession of this great body of people was Judah on the east with Issachar and Zebulun. On the south side of the camp, Reuben was accompanied by Simeon and Gad. The tribe of Ephraim was in the west with the tribes of Manasseh and Benjamin. Dan took the northernmost camp with Asher and Naphtali. Not only did all Israel camp in this fashion, they traveled in this order, all 603,550 men with their wives and children, in addition to the Levites in the center of the formation with the tabernacle.

The four main standards surrounding the tabernacle, those of Ephraim, Judah, Reuben and Dan, probably carried the emblems of a bull, a lion, a man and an eagle respectively. This is fascinating when we discover that these are the respective faces of the four living creatures surrounding God's throne in heaven (Revelation 4:7)—and that cherubim have all these faces (Ezekiel 1:10).

### **Numbering the Children of Levi (Numbers 3)**

**June 6**

Though God had chosen the family of Aaron to serve as the priesthood of Israel, He had also earlier mentioned that the firstborn of all the tribes of Israel were to be His—and therefore directly in His service, evidently to support the work of Aaron's family in caring for the tabernacle and instructing the people in God's ways. But the incident with the golden calf demonstrated the general unworthiness of the people as a whole. Yet at that time, the tribe of Levi, to which Moses and Aaron belonged, stood with Moses “on the LORD's side” (Exodus 32:26). And this stand for God was

apparently part of the reason that God determined to choose the entire tribe of Levi as His direct servants. They were to, in this sense, replace the firstborn (verses 11-13).

As we have already read, the tribe of Levi was to encamp around the tabernacle, take care of it and administer all the sacrifices and rites (Numbers 1:50-53). The Aaronic priesthood was a subset of the general Levitical priesthood—albeit the *leading* subset. Aaron and his sons were to be the priests, while the *rest* of the Levites were divided into family groups to serve in the physical areas, such as setting up and taking down the tabernacle and as ushers, porters, teachers, scribes, musicians, officers and judges, etc. (see 1 Chronicles 23).

It is interesting to note in Numbers 3 the different method of numbering used to count the Levites. Whereas the count for the rest of the Israelites was according to men 20 years and up, the Levites were counted even as male infants one month old—and still the Levites were the smallest of all the tribes at only 22,000 men and boys (verse 39). So small, in fact, that there weren't enough Levites to redeem merely the firstborn males a month and older of the other Israelite tribes (verses 40-43). Therefore, the Israelites of other tribes had to make up the difference in money (verse 49).

### **The Service of the Sons of Kohath (Numbers 4)**

**June 7**

Who was Kohath? In this chapter we see a lot of him. When Jacob (Israel) traveled down into Egypt with his sons and grandsons, Kohath, the son of Levi, was among them—along with his brothers Gershon and Merari. God had promised Jacob that in Egypt He would make of him a great nation (Genesis 46:3, 11). And with the passage of time, Kohath's family grew large in Egypt, as did the families of his brothers. Now, while the descendants of Gershon and Merari are given different Levitical responsibilities, the Lord gives the charge of the ark, the table of showbread, the menorah, the altars, the veil, the utensils of the sanctuary, the screen and all the work related to them to the sons of Kohath (3:30-31).

In reading through this section of Scripture, we again see some of the artful creations and beautiful objects associated with the service of the tabernacle: the blue and purple coverings, the badger skins, the golden instruments and the golden menorah must have been magnificent to behold. Yet most of the sons of Kohath, though they were responsible for carrying these things, were not allowed to actually touch them or look upon them (verse 15; 1 Chronicles 13:9). Only one group of Kohathites was allowed to do that—the family of Aaron! Yes, the priests were descendants of Kohath. Perhaps this is even one of the reasons that the Kohathites were given charge of the sacred articles.

The age range of those in this service to be counted in the census was 30 to 50 years of age, a span of 20 years. The taking down, transporting and setting up of the tabernacle was difficult work. It demanded concentration and precision. Part of the reason for starting their official duties at 30 years of age, then, seems to be that the work of this office took not just strength but, more importantly, training and maturity. Interestingly, God later selected this age for certain ministerial careers to commence. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ both began their ministries at around this same age.

### **The Trial of Jealousy (Numbers 5)**

**June 8**

The offering of jealousy can seem to be one of the strangest offerings in all the Bible, offered by a jealous husband who suspects his wife of infidelity. Stranger yet, perhaps, is the awful ritual the wife is required to undergo. But there is a purpose to everything God commands. *The Nelson Study Bible* notes, "This text can be read as an exceptionally harsh judgment on an unfaithful wife [or even a faithful one!]. But there is a sense in which this law ameliorated the harsh realities for a woman in this time period. A woman could be divorced in the ancient world on the mere suspicion of unfaithfulness [thus leaving her destitute]. Without the limitations of laws such as this, a woman might even have been murdered by a jealous husband just on the suspicion of unfaithfulness. Here at least there was an opportunity for the woman to prove her innocence before an enraged husband" (note on 5:11-31).

Still, to some this whole proceeding might conjure up images of witch trials from medieval to colonial times, in which women were dunked in water to see if they drowned. A survivor was considered a witch and burned at the stake, leaving drowning as the only proof of innocence. Yet there are major differences here. For one, the faithful wife did not die but was exonerated in childbirth, and her unjustly jealous husband made to look the fool for his unfounded accusation.

Yet there is another, even more important difference. Whereas God never commanded and had no part in the completely absurd witch trials just described, He directly commanded and was an

integral part of the trial of jealousy. Notice: “Bitter water that brings a curse was not a ‘magic potion,’ nor was there some hidden ingredient in the water. The addition of dust from the floor of the tabernacle to a vessel of holy water and the scrapings from the bill of indictment (verse 23) were signs of a *spiritual reality*. Holy water and dust from the holy place symbolized that *God* was the One who determined the innocence or guilt of the woman who had come before the priest” (note on 5:18)—not freak happenstance or the reasoning of ignorant people.

### **The Nazirite Vow (Numbers 6)**

**June 9**

We usually think only of men as Nazirites, as John the Baptist apparently was (compare Luke 1:15). But, surprisingly, women too could take the vow of a Nazirite (Numbers 6:2). However, in the case of the woman, her husband or father could disallow the vow and God would not hold her to it (30:5). Nazirites neither drank wine or strong drink, and stayed away from grapes altogether for the duration of the vow. They were to let their hair grow long, and bring special offerings to the tabernacle. The vow was for a set time, at the end of which they were to be purified for seven days (compare 6:9; Acts 21:27), cut their hair and burn it, and partake of certain offerings, including unleavened bread and oil. When the vow was fulfilled they could, once again, drink wine and eat grapes. The vow was usually voluntarily taken for the purpose of making a special request of God, to give thanks to God, or to dedicate themselves to some other such purpose. There are biblical examples of the vow being a lifelong one (Judges 13:5). A vow was often made in thanksgiving to God; it was not something to replace weakness of character in the sense of someone needing the vow and its visibility to others in order to be kept in line with God’s way.

Incidentally, we should not confuse the words Nazirite and Nazarene. The word Nazirite comes from the root *nazir*, meaning to “separate” or “keep away from,” while Nazarene denotes a resident of Nazareth. Confusing the words, some have argued that Jesus Christ was under a Nazirite vow, and they employ this reasoning to argue for Him having had long hair. But Jesus was not a Nazirite, for He drank wine (Matthew 11:18-19) and on at least one occasion touched a dead body (Luke 8:51-54). And thus, He would not have had long hair (compare 1 Corinthians 11:14). The apostle Paul actually did take a Nazirite vow, not cutting his hair until the vow’s completion (Acts 18:18). And he later paid for and shared in the purification rites of four others completing a Nazirite vow (Acts 21:23-27).

Interestingly, since “Nazirite” means “separated one,” Christ and all Christians are Nazirites in a spiritual sense—our lives being consecrated to God. The Nazirite vow is one of a number of Old Testament actions or rites that can be viewed as parallels to the Christian’s commitment to God at baptism.

### **Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6)**

**June 9 Cont’d**

“In 1979 the Israeli archaeologist Gabriel Barkay was excavating some ancient burial caves overlooking the Hinnom Valley, just to the south-west of the Old City of Jerusalem, when to his surprise he found one that was undisturbed. It contained the bones of at least ninety-five people, some with pottery, arrowheads, pieces of gold and silver jewellery buried alongside them. But Barkay’s most spectacular find in this cave was a pair of small cylindrical scrolls made of pure silver. Although insignificant-looking when first found, the largest no more than 4 inches long, they were both found to bear eighteen lines of Palaeo-Hebrew script when unrolled, including the words:

*“May Yahweh bless you and keep you*

*“May Yahweh cause his face to shine upon you and grant you peace.*

“As palaeographic specialists are generally agreed, the date when these words were incised on the scrolls can be no later than the 7th century BC, i.e. the time of [the prophet] Jeremiah. Since they are none other than the ‘priestly blessing’ of Numbers 6:24-26, still used in both Jewish and Christian liturgies, they are by far the oldest portion of Biblical text yet discovered” (Ian Wilson, *The Bible Is History*, 1999, p. 173).

This discovery was a major blow to those scholars and other Bible critics who claim that the books of Moses were actually not written until the Hellenistic period in the third century B.C.

### **The Dedication of the Tabernacle (Numbers 7)**

**June 10**

In Exodus 40 we read of the dedication of the tabernacle on the first day of the first month and the glory of the LORD filling the tabernacle. The first day of the first month, spoken of here as the day Moses had fully set up the tabernacle, is a significant day, as there are other historical occurrences of this date mentioned in Scripture: when Hezekiah cleaned up the temple and restored it (2 Chronicles 29:17); the day Ezra left Babylon (Ezra 7:9); and the day Ezra had the returned

captives put away their foreign wives (10:17). And after Jesus Christ returns, we will witness the cleansing of the sanctuary once again on this first day of the first month (Ezekiel 45:18).

In Numbers 7 we also read some of the details of the tremendous offerings of the leaders of Israel that were brought on that day to the temple to dedicate the altar in the day when it was anointed (verse 84). In chapter 1 we saw that the census was conducted by these leaders, each head of the house of his father's tribe. Now we see their offerings, literally by the wagonloads, of precious gifts brought to the tabernacle. Note, however, that the sons of Kohath had no wagons, as the holy things of the sanctuary, such as the Ark of the Covenant, were to be carried by poles on their shoulders (verse 9). The order of the names of the leaders, with their offerings, varies from chapter 1, yet they are the same men. The leaders of Israel brought their offerings "before the LORD"—yet actually presenting them to Moses, who gave them to the Levites (verses 3, 5).

### **Separating the Levites for Tabernacle Duty (Numbers 8)**

**June 11**

The system of sacrifices and offerings in the Old Testament often seems too complicated for us to grasp. Yet in this chapter another dimension is added—we see the Levites themselves being offered to God by Aaron as a wave offering—as if he lifts them up to present them to God for His acceptance. Indeed, waving overhead was the typical way of presenting something to God, who dwells above in heaven (compare Exodus 29:24, 26, 27; Leviticus 7:30, 34; 8:27, 29). We see that God does accept the Levites, stating that they are now His (Numbers 8:14).

Interestingly, the High Priest today, Jesus Christ, also "lifts" His servants—His priesthood the Church (see 1 Peter 2:5, 9)—to present them before God the Father as if a wave offering. We find this in Ephesians 2:4-7: "God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and *raised us up together* [out of spiritual death and into God's presence], and made us sit together in the *heavenly places* in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (emphasis added).

Of course, "the ages to come" is what we are really waiting for, when we will be perfected and sinless and given God's Kingdom. But we are "raised up" and "waved" before God for Him to accept us right now. And He does—thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that covers our sins. We find this portrayed in the ceremony that took place in ancient Israel on the Feast of Pentecost, when two leavened loaves of the firstfruits of the wheat harvest were waved before God. These "wave loaves" represented God's converted followers of Old and New Testament times, the "firstfruits" in God's plan of salvation (compare Romans 8:23; James 1:18; Revelation 14:1-4; Hebrews 12:23). The leaven shows that these firstfruits are not yet perfect and still beset with sin (see Leviticus 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; and highlights covering the grain offering in Leviticus 2). Yet the loaves were accepted because a sin offering was waved *with* them (see Leviticus 23:16-20). The same is true today. When Christ presents His followers before the Father, His perfect sacrifice is presented with them—and they are accepted.

Returning to the Levites, there was a training period of five years, a sort of apprenticeship, for them before they assumed their full duties at age 30 (verse 24; 4:3). After age 50, it seems they went into a kind of semi-retirement with limited duties (8:25-26; 4:3).

The purpose of the laying on of hands, mentioned here, is to set someone apart for a specific purpose such as in ordinations and healings. The first mention of laying on of hands in the Scriptures is when Israel (Jacob) placed his blessing and name on Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48:13). In this case of the Levites, we see representatives of all Israel laying on their hands to set the Levites apart for the special service of the tabernacle (verse 10). The laying on of hands, according to the book of Hebrews, is one of the basic doctrines of the Bible (6:1-2).

### **Observing the Passover (Numbers 9)**

**June 12**

In Exodus 12 we received the original instructions for the Passover. Now, however, because some men had become defiled by coming into contact with dead bodies, thus becoming ceremonially unclean, they would have to miss the Passover. They appealed to Moses because they really didn't want to miss out entirely on this divinely commanded feast (Leviticus 23:5).

God reveals Himself in encounters like this one. He isn't the harsh, heavy-handed, unreasonable God some would make Him out to be. This event gives us a glimpse at how compassionate and understanding He actually is in making it possible for us to follow Him. He is giving and serving, not willing that any should perish, but that all mankind should ultimately be in His Kingdom. Thus, He

establishes the second Passover for those who, for reasons beyond their control, miss the first Passover.

It isn't usually published on sacred calendars, so how can you tell when to keep the second Passover? There is an easy rule of thumb to use so as not to get confused. Just add four weeks and two days to the first Passover. For example, if the first Passover was on a Tuesday night the second Passover will be on a Thursday night.

Of course, we must never purposely skip the first Passover. God the Father literally gave up His Son Jesus Christ so that Christ could come to earth and die to take away our sin. Passover pictures this aspect of God's incredible plan of salvation. By God's good graces some have been called to be a part of that plan at this time. Moses explained that those who disregarded the Passover would be cut off and bear their sin. It is the same for us today. To skip, or treat the Passover lightly, is to say to our Savior, "Thanks, but no thanks." We would remain in our sin (verse 13). Let us never drift down such a dangerous spiritual path. (To better understand the significance of the Passover, see "The Passover: Why Did Jesus Christ Have to Die?," *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*, pp. 10-19.)

### **Two Silver Trumpets (Numbers 10–11)**

**June 13**

The two silver trumpets (Hebrew *chatsotserah*) are not to be confused with the more traditional trumpet (Hebrew *shofar*), an animal's horn that was also blown on the Feast of Trumpets. The two silver trumpets were used to signal the entire encampment. We can imagine their use as similar to modern army buglers sounding an assembly or charge. The sound must have carried over the heads of the Israelites for miles. The new month and feast days were marked, various assemblies could be called, alarms sounded to move forward, or even to go to war, depending on the signal given, not unlike the system still used on naval vessels today. One trumpet blown (Hebrew *teru'ah*) a *prolonged blowing*, called the leaders of Israel to Moses (verse 4).

Eleazar and Ithamar, sons of Aaron, were to blow the two silver trumpets as an ordinance forever (verse 8). Of course, there is no functioning Levitical priesthood today to carry out this ordinance. These trumpets were a type or a picture of the heavenly trumpets that will sound at the return of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). During the time of Solomon (whose peaceful kingdom pictured the coming Kingdom of God), the Levites created a beautiful choir and orchestra with an astonishing 120 priests playing trumpets! (2 Chronicles 5:12).

### **Graves of Lust (Numbers 10–11)**

**June 13 Cont'd**

The second part of chapter 10 sees Israel departing from Mount Sinai in great drama and pageantry—just a month and a half after first setting up the tabernacle. Preparing to leave, Moses appeals to his brother-in-law Hobab to go with them. Hobab declines because he wants to return to his native land and people. But Moses persists, and it appears that Hobab continued with the Israelites (see Judges 1:16).

The people were setting out for the Promised Land with high hopes and expectations. It is interesting to compare this episode with the departure of the Israelites from their great deliverance from Egypt at the Red Sea. Only three days' journey into the wilderness from that point, the people turned to murmuring against God for lack of water (Exodus 15:22-24). And here, too, it is only three days from leaving Mount Sinai (Numbers 10:33) that the people again turn to complaining (11:1-3).

Again we see just how wrong it is to be ungrateful. After all God had done for them, they griped and complained. To teach them how sorely displeased He was, God struck the outskirts of the camp with fire, possibly lightning, as a lesson to those who would be unappreciative. That lesson was meant for us today as well, for God hasn't changed the way He views things like ingratitude and rebellion. But despite the warning, ingratitude increased—to the point of the people weeping for what they didn't have (thus showing little regard for the extent to which God had incredibly blessed them). Amazingly, they even said they wanted to be back in Egypt, where they had been whipped and beaten as slave laborers!

The insanely needless moaning and crying takes its toll on Moses. Not only is he helpless to deal with the situation himself, but the people hold him personally responsible for the predicament they are in. It all gets to be more than Moses can deal with, so he pleads to God. He didn't father all these people; he doesn't have food for them; why does he have all the responsibility? Just to get a feel for the burden Moses thought he was carrying, consider the size of this encampment of people. For Moses to give every Israelite a quarter-pounder, just one hamburger each, it would have required 375 *tons* of fresh ground meat! Moses asked to be put out of his misery.

Indeed, Moses was so upset that he was actually blaming God of evildoing. The King James and New King James Versions, however, give only a hint of this—in verse 11, where Moses asks God, “Why have you afflicted your servant?,” and in the first words of verse 15, “If you treat me like this....” This shows that Moses considered God responsible for His plight but not that Moses actually thought God morally wrong because of it. Yet of great interest in this regard are the last words of Moses in verse 15—“my wretchedness.” This should literally be translated “my evil” (J.P. Green, *The Interlinear Bible*). Yet Moses is certainly not confessing His own faults in this passage. Rather, what he must be saying is, “the evil of my situation” or “the evil that has come upon me,” which, in either case, by direct implication, means “the evil that You [God] are doing to me.” To see this more clearly, notice how *The New English Bible* translates verse 15: “But if I have won thy favour, let me suffer this trouble at thy hands no longer.” And even more poignantly, notice the same verse in the *Good News Bible*: “If you are going to treat me like this, have pity on me and kill me, so that I won’t have to endure your cruelty any longer.” So Moses was actually accusing God of evil—of deliberate cruelty.

Yet God, who knows the heart, was merciful to Moses. Remember always that God has promised that He will put no burden on us we can’t bear (compare 1 Corinthians 10:13). In His lovingkindness, God responded to Moses’ plea by calling for the appointment of 70 elders to help carry the burden of the people—men who would be helped by God’s Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, God was sorely displeased with the ungrateful attitude of the people who were saying it was better back in Egypt. Did they consider it a small thing that God was giving them manna enough for all their needs? Evidently. And rather than be content with that—or at least pray to God to supply the desires of their hearts—the people just moaned and bellyached for the meat they didn’t have. Moses had doubted whether it was possible to find enough meat for the whole congregation. To carry the previous analogy a little further, two Big Macs a day, for a month, would come to more than 30,000 tons of meat altogether! We can’t imagine that much meat—and neither could Moses. Are there that many fish in the sea? Yet God was able to provide—and did. But angered by the voracious lust of such rebellious ingrates, God smote the people with a great plague, killing many. The place where this happened, now named Kibroth Hataavah or “Graves of Lust,” was a vast graveyard of needlessly ravenous, ungrateful people. (For more information about this miracle, see “Archaeology and the Book of Exodus: Exit From Egypt,” *The Good News*, May–June 1997, pp. 22–24.)

### **Miriam’s Leprosy (Numbers 12–13)**

**June 14**

Resisting God-ordained authority has been as common a temptation as presuming to *speak* for God when not appointed to do so. Often in the case of sedition and rebellion, we see both. And in chapter 12, we find *Miriam and Aaron* doing both. Moses was the most humble man on the face of the earth (verse 3)—a note probably inserted by Joshua or a later biblical editor to put the challenge against Moses in perspective. And this humble man patiently waited on the LORD to intervene and uphold him. He did nothing to refute his sister and brother.

People who are jealous of someone will often run them down, which is what Miriam and Aaron proceed to do. They start by attacking him over “the Ethiopian [or Cushite] woman whom he had married” (verse 1). Many have built theories on this accusation. We have no other record in Scripture of the woman mentioned here, for the only wife we do know of, Zipporah, was a Midianite. Thus, we cannot know for sure when Moses married this woman. It is possible that he married her decades earlier while a prince in Egypt, after winning a victory against Ethiopia, as this is what Josephus records. This first-century Jewish historian refers to her as Tharbis, daughter of the king of Ethiopia (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 2, chap. 10). Moses may have retrieved her when he returned to Egypt to free the Israelites—we simply do not know. In any case, there is no record of God issuing any criticism of Moses in this circumstance. Indeed, God exonerates Moses as being faithful in all His house (verse 7).

But do not Miriam and Aaron also speak for God? Is not their disapproval sanctioned by Him? The question is even raised as to whether Moses was unique in his role as the one through whom God communicated. At the very least, Miriam and Aaron wanted to have an equal say with Moses. Perhaps it was jealousy, perhaps it was pride, perhaps a family argument. They convinced themselves that they had a valid claim—after all, Miriam was a prophetess (Exodus 15:20) and God spoke to Aaron, too (Leviticus 10:8; 11:1; 13:1; Exodus 6:13; 12:1; etc.). God does, then, speak to all three of them. Yet, while exonerating Moses, He comes down hard on Miriam and Aaron. Miriam, it appears, may have been the instigator of the criticisms of Moses, as her name is mentioned first (verse 1) and

the principal punishment befalls her (verses 10, 14). Remarkably, Moses' wonderful character shines through as he intercedes for his brother and sister despite the personal betrayal he must have felt.

**Supplementary Reading:** "Miriam: A Lifetime of Faith," *The Good News*, May–June 1997, pp. 25-27.

### Two Witnesses Against an Evil Report (Numbers 12–13)

June 14 Cont'd

While we see God here telling Moses to send men to spy out the land (13:1-2), Deuteronomy 1:21-23 shows that this idea was initially brought to Moses by the people. The idea pleased Moses, who evidently took it to God for approval—which God gave with more details here in Numbers 13. (It is, of course, likely that God intended this plan all along—perhaps inspiring the people to come up with it.) Twelve men, one from each tribe, were chosen to spy out the land. They were to check out the soil, trees, people, cities, everything, and then report back. These 12 men are different leaders of Israel than those we saw in chapters 1 and 7. Only two of these men brought a favorable report, Caleb and Joshua. Caleb said, evidently because of his faith in God, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it" (verse 30).



*(Borders and country names are modern.)*

No doubt God inspired the decision to send these two who He already knew to be faithful—ensuring that there would be at least two faithful witnesses among this generally faithless group to fulfill His requirement that we are to accept something on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Interestingly, in the end time, after the organized work of God is publicly silenced, there will still be two witnesses (Revelation 11:3) who will give a faithful report on the nature of the future promised land, the Kingdom of God. Yet, as before, the vast majority of those reporting on God's Kingdom will be false witnesses—as is the case even now.

Another important factor to consider is that even if everything the evil witnesses said were actually true, the omnipotent God was easily able to defeat obstacles like giants and massive fortresses—a fact that should already have been evident from the plagues upon Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea. God had, after all, brought low the most powerful kingdom on earth—the Egyptian empire—right before their eyes, and the city-states of Canaan were much weaker in comparison.

Besides not expanding fears about the dangers of the land beyond all proportion, Joshua and Caleb knew—had the faith—that God would deliver on His promise. They were the ones the Israelites should have listened to. Sadly, however, this was not to be.

**“You Shall Know My Rejection” (Numbers 14)****June 15**

The Israelites, it appears, had come to the point where they could have immediately possessed the Promised Land. But a lack of faith would keep them out of this land that flowed with milk and honey for several more decades—making their time in the wilderness a total of 40 years.

Discouragement set in as a result of the evil report of the 10 faithless spies, and once again the children of Israel speak against Moses and Aaron. They begin by wishing they had already died in Egypt or the wilderness rather than face the “dangers” of the land of Canaan (verse 2). But the complaining doesn’t stop there. They accuse God of intentionally putting them and their families in harm’s way to kill them (verse 3). And then an even more incredible thing happens. They decide that it would be much better to return to Egypt, so they actually call for the selection of a new leader to lead them back to the land of their enslavement.

At this point Moses and Aaron “hit the deck,” as it were (verse 5), probably to intercede for the people and perhaps to “dodge the bullets” of God’s wrath that would surely follow such outrage. Indeed, how out of touch with reality can people be? Of course, we probably consider ourselves impervious to such a frame of mind. Yet discouragement can also cause *us* to want to give up and go back into the world. Egypt, a type of sin, for us represents those things we believe and do before the Father calls us and grants us repentance and faith. We must, then, never look back.

But again, the people were not merely *looking* back—they had already determined to actually *go* back. They were picking a leader for this rebellion when Joshua and Caleb step forward in utter grief. They encourage the people to go forward toward the Promised Land. In 13:16, we see that Moses has changed the name of Hoshea (Hebrew “Salvation” or “May the Eternal Save”) to Joshua (Hebrew “The Eternal Saves”)—thus providing an “answer” to the “request” in the former name. The Latinized Greek form of Joshua is Jesus. Indeed, Joshua was a type of Jesus Christ in many respects. Joshua’s encouragement gives us a picture of Jesus, our Savior, our Deliverer, our Captain, cheering us on and helping us into His Kingdom (verse 8). With Caleb, he exhorts the people, “Don’t rebel, don’t fear our enemies, we’ll eat them alive, they will fall apart” (compare verse 9). Like Joshua, Caleb was appropriately named, as his name carries the sense of being “Bold” or “Wholehearted” in Hebrew.

Clearly, to not follow God’s lead, to refuse His promises, is rebellion. But the Israelites’ rebellion is further magnified when their response to the faithful witnesses is a call to stone them to death. Then the thing that Israel should have truly feared happens—God’s presence is manifested before them in the shekinah glory (verse 10), and He is furious. God again considers wiping Israel out altogether, and starting over with Moses. Notice, however, that Moses doesn’t seek preeminence for himself. Rather, he is primarily concerned with God’s reputation. He reminds the LORD that the nations are watching (verses 13-16). Furthermore, despite the rebellion of the people and their threats against him personally, Moses loves them and seeks their welfare. In coming to their aid, he appeals to God’s patience and mercy (verses 17-19). Moses is very obviously, then, a type of Christ in obtaining pardon for the people.

But for the Israelites it is only a *temporary* pardon—because they will not repent. And ultimately, the very thing that they wished for, that they had fallen dead in the wilderness (verse 2), *will* come upon them (verses 28-29, 32, 35). Of the older generation, only Joshua and Caleb will enter the Promised Land (verses 24, 30). And rather than God placing the Israelites’ children in jeopardy as the people had accused, the children would be the only ones spared: “Your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised” (verse 31). Yet for 40 years, the nation will be rejected from entering the Promised Land. Incredibly, as severe as this might sound, it actually displays the tremendous mercy of God that He would still make it possible for a purged Israel to enter the land.

But now we come to an amazing tendency of human nature. When God says, “Do,” the carnal mind wants to *not do*. And when God says, “Don’t,” the carnal mind wants to *do* (compare Romans 8:7; 7:8). Now that God says they can’t enter the Promised Land, the people suddenly want to—and attempt to do just that. They do acknowledge their prior sin, but they do not see that by seeking what God has now forbidden by His judgment, they are guilty of the sin of rebellion just the same. Though Moses warns them, they mount a futile invasion attempt of the land. But it is, of course, doomed to failure from the start because God is not with them (verses 42-45).

Consider then: As a result of the fear and lack of faith of 10 cowardly men, and the people’s response to it, the Israelites would have to die in the wilderness. They hardened their hearts, and God made up His mind that they would not enter His rest (Psalm 95:8-11)—that is, the Promised Land.

They refused to follow God, though He was visibly with them in the cloud and the fire. We must take warning from all this. God's Word states that the Israelites falling in the wilderness should serve as a powerful example to us (1 Corinthians 10:1-12). They took their eyes off the goal, a mistake we are repeatedly warned not to make. Let us therefore fear, we who have the promise of entering into God's future rest, His millennial Kingdom, lest any of us should come short of it. We can miss out just as assuredly as they did, and for the same reason—a lack of faith. And yet, like the children of Israel, we are so close to entering in (Hebrews 3:8-4:11).

### **Remaining Faithful (Numbers 15)**

**June 16**

This chapter starts off on a positive, encouraging note. God says, "When you have come into the land you are to inhabit..." (verse 2). This might seem odd on the heels of the last chapter. But remember that despite what had happened, God had stated that the younger generation *would* eventually enter Canaan. And in giving various commands regarding the making of grain and drink offerings in the land, He was also reaffirming that promise.

Verse 19 refers to a "heave" offering, a term that may sound strange to our ears. The word heave means "to lift up." It is thus the same as a wave offering. Here it is explained that the Israelites were to heave the first of each grain harvest. "Right at the beginning of the harvest, the harvester had to acknowledge that his produce was a gift from God. By holding up the very first produce from a harvest or the first cake made from the first grain of the season, the worshiper thanked God as the giver of all good gifts" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 17-21).

The chapter then moves on to the subject of sin. When someone got mixed up or forgot to perform a particular duty, such a sin of ignorance could be readily remedied. But deliberate sins, or sinning "presumptuously" (literally, "with a high hand")—in essence, defiantly shaking one's fist in God's face—was another matter entirely. It merited a severe penalty. Following in the chapter is an example of just such a situation—that of a man deliberately working on the Sabbath. The people didn't know how to deal with such a willful breaking of the commandment, so they temporarily incarcerated him until they could get instructions. The law already stated that he should die (Exodus 31:15), but not the means of death. God told Moses the man should die outside the camp of Israel at the hands of the people by stoning. This way all Israel would participate in and realize the severity of the punishment and the absoluteness of God's commandments. Today, no one is executed for Sabbath breaking. But God has already shown us His decreed penalty and exactly how He feels about the need to obey His laws. Indeed, the penalty for all sin is ultimately death (Romans 6:23).

Man is not to seek after the things of his own heart, or his own eyes, or the pride of life, because those things are of the world (verse 39; 1 John 2:16). Rather, we must forsake the spiritual harlotry of our old, sinful nature and set ourselves apart to follow only the true God (verses 40-41). We do not need to use tassels today as memory devices to remember all of God's laws, as God told the Israelites. Instead, God's Spirit writes His laws on our hearts and minds (Hebrews 8:10), helping us to remember all of His commands (John 14:26).

### **Korah's Rebellion (Numbers 16)**

**June 17**

Korah, a first cousin to Moses, and 250 leaders of the assembly arose in self-exaltation against Moses and Aaron with claims that they were superseding their authority. These men hypocritically accused Moses and Aaron, saying, "You exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD" (verse 3). There is within sinners the proclivity to accuse others of the same sin they are committing (verse 7; Romans 2:1). These men wanted a piece of the action, to appoint themselves as leaders and teachers over the congregation. They took too much upon *themselves*, speaking evil of things they did not understand (compare Jude 10-11). They were refusing to recognize that God was working in a special way with Moses and Aaron, and they hadn't learned anything from Miriam and Aaron's misjudgment in a similar way regarding Moses.

Moses told Korah and the 250 to bring bronze censers (devices for burning incense, each made of a bowl with a colander on top, swung on a chain). Why? Because besides the contention over judging the nation, these men were also disputing Aaron's position over the priesthood. They were not priests, and the burning of incense was a priestly duty these men were trying to usurp (Numbers 16:40). Again, they had apparently not learned anything from the terrible mistake of Nadab and Abihu, who had died because they offered strange fire before the LORD (3:4; Leviticus 10:1-2).

Because God is the One who put Moses and Aaron in their respective offices, the rebellious action of the men led by Korah was actually against God (Numbers 16:11, 30). Moreover, as the sons of Levi, they had already been appointed to very respected positions in the service of His tabernacle.

And yet they weren't satisfied—they wanted the judgeship and priesthood also (verses 9-10). “The men who were seeking a higher position were in fact being contemptuous of the place to which God had appointed them. Moses' response was condescending and scathing: ‘Is it a small thing to you?’ The dissenters should have realized how gracious God had been in giving them the life work He had provided. They were not unlike people who complain about the gifts God has given them” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 16:9-11).

These men rejected Moses' authority, claiming that he was lording authority over them like some worldly prince—which is utterly ridiculous given the humility of Moses and His many intercessions for the Israelites, including his offer to give up His own eternal salvation to save them. Dathan and Abiram, two allies of Korah, even praised Egypt as the land of milk and honey (verse 13), accused Moses of wrongdoing for leading them out of that land, and absurdly blamed him for the fact that the Israelites had been denied entrance to the Promised Land (verse 14). It may be that many were beginning to be swayed by these accusations, since God once again stands ready to blast the entire nation from existence—though He relents from this course at the intercession of Moses and Aaron. Nevertheless, the principal evildoers come to a dramatic end.

It is easily overlooked here, but, thankfully, not all of Korah's family followed him in this rebellion (26:11). Indeed, Korah's descendants were later prominent among the Levites (see 2 Chronicles 20:19), serving as gatekeepers at the temple (1 Chronicles 26) and as musicians, contributing many psalms for temple worship (see Psalm 42; 44-49; 84-85; 87-88). There is a natural human tendency to support those within our families. But this becomes a problem when the family member being supported is engaging in wrongdoing. There is a similar sin in the supporting of those in leadership positions when they are leading sinful lives (verse 26). The scriptures are clear that God disqualifies leaders who refuse to repent of overt sin in their lives. We can never condone sin. To just say, “I'll put it in God's hands,” when we have an obligation to stand up and be counted, is the same as temporarily approving of a sinful situation—and that is always wrong. That's why Moses drew that proverbial “line in the sand,” asking people to show where they stood by backing away from the rebels.

The people of the congregation do back away and witness the incredible event of the earth swallowing up the leading rebels with their families and fire consuming the unauthorized incense offerers. But astonishingly, the congregation complains against Moses and Aaron the next day, blaming them for killing God's people. God is understandably infuriated, and again—only the next day!—He tells Moses and Aaron to get out of the way so that He can destroy the nation (verses 44-45). In His wrath God sends a terrible plague. But again, Moses desires to save the people and orders Aaron to quickly make atonement for them. Aaron, as a clear type of Christ—a mediator, a savior, a deliverer—intercedes for the congregation, standing between life and death to stop the plague, which had already slain nearly 15,000 people (verses 48-49).

### **Aaron's Rod Buds (Numbers 17)**

**June 18**

In the rebellion of Korah, the heresy that just any Israelite could serve in God's priesthood had spread throughout the camp. And even though the instigators of this idea had been removed, the idea itself persisted among the people. Indeed, it was evident from the people's response following God's execution of the rebels—blaming Moses and Aaron—that they did not really understand why God had done this. So He would make it very clear to them that only Aaron and His descendants were to serve as the priests of His physical nation—and that any violation of this rule would merit death, as they had already witnessed.

God asked Moses for each family tribe to get a staff, a rod, and whittle the name of the family's leader onto the stick. Aaron's name was to be on the rod of the family of the Levites. If the name “Levi” had been on the rod of the Levites, all the Levites would have an equal claim to the priesthood. But as we know, that was not the case (remember, even Korah and his family were Levites). Moses was then to lay these 12 rods side by side before God in the tabernacle. God would settle the matter, hopefully once and for all, by miraculously causing the rod of the one He had chosen to blossom (verse 5). That would put a stop to any and all claims that the priesthood belonged to others. Moses did as God had instructed, and the next day Aaron's rod had buds, blossoms and almonds that had already ripened! Every tribe got their lifeless stick back, while Aaron's blossoming rod was laid up in the Most Holy Place to serve as a sign against any future attempts to usurp the priesthood (Hebrews 9:3-4).

Finally, the congregation seems to get the picture that God is more serious about preserving the sanctity of His holy things than about physical life and death. However, considering the context, it

appears that Numbers 17 ends with the Israelites falling into despair over the concern that they could be annihilated due to some random mistake or oversight at the tabernacle (see verses 12-13)—in which case, God basically answers their concern in the next chapter.

### **The Levites' Responsibility and Portion (Numbers 18)**

**June 19**

The congregation now seems to have a healthy reverence and respect for the holy things of God. The people are to generally keep their distance from the tabernacle. But as we glimpsed in yesterday's reading, they are apparently very concerned that they could be annihilated for some random mistake or oversight when they were required to approach the tabernacle, such as when bringing offerings. And indeed, God reveals that if mistakes happen at the tabernacle, someone will be called to account. But God lets it be known that the responsibility for ensuring the proper care and appropriate service of the tabernacle belongs to the priests and other Levites, and that *they* will be held individually accountable if anything goes awry.

The thought is expressed this way: "You and your sons and your father's house with you [i.e., all the Levites] shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons [i.e., just the priests] shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood" (verse 1). The word "iniquity" can throw us off a little. The word translated "iniquity" (Hebrew *'avon*) means "perverseness" and derives from a root meaning "to be bent or crooked." The English word "wrong," which originally connoted being "wrung out of course," gives us the same word picture (E.W. Bullinger, *Companion Bible*, appendix 44, sec. 4.) While it can mean deliberate evil, it can also simply mean that something is incorrect or not the way it is supposed to be for whatever reason. And if some aspect is out of kilter in the service of the priesthood or tabernacle due to slackness, incompetence, neglect or any such thing on the part of an individual who is supposed to be keeping watch over this aspect, that individual will be held guilty.

In reading through these passages, we should desire to understand the import they hold for us now. Leadership today, as in ancient Israel, carries great responsibility and accountability. Every consideration must be given to lead in a righteous way, using mature wisdom in following all the laws and principles of God. Those in God's Church are told not to take too much upon themselves. Just as the Levitical priesthood was not for all Israelites, so being ordained as a minister of Jesus Christ or appointed by the ministry to teach is not for all *spiritual* Israelites, i.e., true Christians. The apostle James wrote to fellow Christians, "Let not many of you become teachers [which was anciently the responsibility of the priests and Levites], knowing that we [teachers, as James was] shall receive a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). Leaders today will "bear the iniquity" if they misuse their offices.

To Aaron and his sons, and their families, belonged all the tabernacle offerings for their sustenance. This required Aaron and his sons to live by faith. Having no worldly jobs or income, they depended entirely on God. Aaron's family had no inheritance in the land and looked to God to be their inheritance. "I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel," God said (verse 20). The Levites would only have small lots of land for the purpose of keeping a few animals to provide their daily needs. So to the Levites went the tithes that were received of all Israel as their inheritance (verse 21). The Levites, in turn, then tithed on their income to Aaron the priest (verses 26-28). And now, as the book of Hebrews explains, God has directed that tithes and offerings go to different recipients—those who represent the Melchizedek priesthood (see Hebrews 7).

**Supplementary Reading:** "Chapter 1: Why Tithe in Today's World?," *What Does the Bible Teach About Tithing*, pp. 3-5.

### **A Red Heifer for Purification (Numbers 19)**

**June 20**

Here we have one of the most mysterious sacrifices in the Bible. According to author Grant Jeffrey: "The Talmud claims that the Red Heifer sacrifice was the only one of God's commands that King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, claimed he did not understand" (*The Signature of God*, 1996, pp. 152-153). And indeed, we still may not understand all of the symbolism in this most interesting offering. We do know that we are cleansed by the blood of the supreme sacrifice of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:7). And the book of Hebrews confirms that this is part of the symbolism here: "For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (9:13-14). But there is also the fact that the heifer was a representation of Israel in the Scriptures. Perhaps, then, as was mentioned in the discussion on the sin offering, there is some sense of this offering being fulfilled in the people putting to death their old natures. Indeed, that would

seem to tie in with having our consciences purged from dead works. Moreover, though there is not sufficient space to elaborate on it here, Christ stood in Israel's place in a number of respects.

In any event, besides the spiritual significance it certainly had, Jeffrey explains that there was a medical benefit to what God was prescribing here as well, just as there was with the laws for dealing with leprosy. In fact, there were clear similarities (compare Leviticus 14:4). Jeffrey states that "the water of purification described in Numbers 19 actually had the ability to destroy germs and infection. The resulting water of purification solution contained ashes from the Red Heifer sacrifice combined with cedar, hyssop and scarlet thread. This water of purification contained 'cedar' oil that came from a kind of juniper tree that grew in both Israel and the Sinai. This cedar oil would irritate the skin, encouraging the person to vigorously rub the solution into their hands. Most importantly, the hyssop tree—associated with mint, possibly marjoram—would produce hyssop oil. This hyssop oil is actually a very effective antiseptic and antibacterial agent. Hyssop oil contains 50 percent carvacrol which is an antifungal and antibacterial agent still used in medicine, according to the book *None of These Diseases*. When we note that the waters of purification from the Red Heifer Sacrifice were to be used to cleanse someone who had become defiled and unclean due to touching a dead body, we begin to understand that this law was an incredibly effective medical law as well as a spiritual law" (p. 153).

Of course, it is not clear how much of the cedar and hyssop oil would remain after burning in the fire. There was probably some. But perhaps God was interested more in the symbolism of cleansing agents here than their actual effectiveness. Burning is itself symbolic of purification.

Still, the discussion on open versus sealed containers in the area where someone died should convince any modern reader that God must have had germs in mind to some degree. And it is again worth noting, as in the highlights on leprosy, that there is no way Moses could have understood the need for such advanced medical precautions based on the available knowledge of the time. Divine inspiration is truly the only reasonable conclusion that can be reached.

### **The Rebellious Act of Moses and Aaron (Numbers 20)**

**June 21**

When the people arrive in Kadesh, decades have passed since the last chapter! Kadesh was the same location where Israel rebelled against entering the Promised Land. Back when the spies brought their evil report, God had told the Israelites they would be in the wilderness 40 years. These years have been long and bitter, with rebellion upon rebellion (compare Ezekiel 20:13-24). And now it is the 40th and final year of their wandering. Nearly all the people who were 20 years and older at the time of the exodus have died out. Miriam, at around the age of 130, dies as this final year begins (verse 1).

Sadly, those of the younger generation proved just as rebellious as their parents (Ezekiel 20:18-24). When they complained to Moses that they had no water, Moses and Aaron went to the tabernacle to ask God what to do. And God gave some straightforward instructions: Take the rod; gather the assembly; speak to the rock where the people can see. That shouldn't have been too hard to follow. But Moses had finally had it. He was, after all this time, completely fed up with the Israelites—"You rebels," he called them (verse 10). And while this was understandable, his anger got the better of him.

After so many years of being browbeaten by the people, Moses and Aaron, perhaps in a momentary lapse, became puffed up. Moses didn't say, "God will give you water." No, he said, "Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" (verse 10). And he *struck* the rock instead of speaking to it, just as he had done nearly 40 years before (see Exodus 17:6). Only this time, God had not told him to strike it. Nevertheless, he even struck it twice. God labeled this a lack of faith, saying, "You did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel" (verse 12). Apparently, then, it wasn't that Moses and Aaron didn't believe water would come out by merely speaking, but they didn't believe God's earlier warnings about the seriousness of following His instructions exactly. Or, perhaps more accurately, they didn't believe that these warnings applied to *them*—as if their closeness to God gave them some leeway. However, as they should have known, just the opposite is true. Those in leadership positions are held to *stricter* accountability—to set the right example for everyone else. Moses and Aaron called the people rebels. Yet they rebelled against God's words themselves (verse 24; Romans 2:1). Neither would enter the Promised Land. Aaron died above their next encampment on Mount Hor at the age of 123 (verses 25-28; 33:38-39).

There is a vital lesson here for us. We are never too old to be tested. None of us are ever so perfect that we don't have lessons to learn. And no matter who we are or what position we have, we are not excused from obeying God—a fact the Israelites desperately needed to know.

Verses 14-21 of chapter 20 record Moses' attempt to negotiate peaceful passage through Edom's territory. He even offered to pay Edom for any of the land's resources they used in route. But Edom rebuffed Moses' offer. This is one of several acts of antagonism Edom shows toward the descendants of Jacob. Old grudges die hard, and sometimes they never do unless God intervenes.

### Fiery Serpents Among the People (Numbers 21)

June 22

The rest of the trip toward the Promised Land would be hard and difficult. First, the king of the Canaanite city of Arad picks a fight, and carries some Israelites away captive. God empowers the Israelites to "utterly destroy" the Aradites in a place that became known as Hormah, meaning "Utter Destruction." Interestingly, this first military victory against the Canaanites takes place in the same spot that, decades before, the Israelites had been defeated when they vainly tried to enter Canaan after God told them they would have to wait 40 years (compare 14:45).

Yet the victorious spirit does not carry them all the way. Going around Edom proves so difficult that the children of Israel become discouraged—which once again turns to bitter complaining. When their ingratitude leads them to declare that they detest the God-given manna sustaining them, calling it "worthless," God sends them deadly fiery serpents. In terror and agony, the people quickly repent, asking for Moses' prayers on their behalf. God's instruction then is remarkable—He tells Moses to make a bronze image of a serpent and set it up on a pole and to instruct the people to look upon it to be healed. Biblically, the serpent is a symbol for Satan (compare Genesis 3; Revelation 12:9). Yet the New Testament tells us that this raised bronze serpent is a type of Jesus Christ, who was lifted up in crucifixion—and that looking to His sacrifice gives us life (John 3:14-15).

So how could a seemingly Satanic symbol represent Christ? The devil, remember, was the original sinner—and the instigator of sin among our first human parents, Adam and Eve. That being so, we may view the serpent as a symbol of sin, or the sinful nature mankind has acquired from Satan (compare Ephesians 2:2; Romans 8:7). In sacrificing Himself for us, Christ bore our sin and its penalties (Isaiah 53:4-6). Indeed, the Bible says that He became "sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). And as sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), Christ could not be in the Father's perfect presence at the moment He bore our sins and endured its ultimate penalty of death (compare Matthew 27:46). Thus, in bearing our sin, Christ could properly be depicted with the image of a raised serpent. When we look upon Christ's death by crucifixion for our sins and His resurrection from that death into new life, we can have the penalty for sin removed from us and also be granted new life (Romans 5:9-10).

In later years, the Israelites will view the bronze serpent as a holy relic of veneration and begin worshiping it. For this reason, it will wisely be destroyed by righteous King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4).

Verse 14 of Numbers 21 mentions the "Book of the Wars of the LORD." *The Nelson Study Bible* says this "refers to an early collection of songs and writings known today only from this citation. The fact that Numbers draws upon other early Hebrew writings shows that the ancient Hebrew peoples had other literature in addition to Scripture." This book is not in existence today.

### Balak Sends for Balaam (Numbers 22:1-40)

June 23

In chapter 22 we meet some very strong personalities. The first is Balak, king of the Moabites, whose name means "Empty." Next is Balaam, a soothsayer (see Joshua 13:22) from Pethor, a city on the Euphrates in Mesopotamia (compare Deuteronomy 23:4). His name means "Destroyer of the People," and Balak hires him in an attempt to destroy the Israelites. Israel's armies had not confronted Moab as of yet, but Balak, aware of what had happened to his enemy Sihon, was terrified that he and his kingdom were next. The irony of all that follows is that Israel had no fight with Moab. They only wanted passage to the Promised Land. In fact, God had told the Israelites not to attack Moab (Deuteronomy 2:1-9). But Balak either didn't know this or didn't believe it. So he consulted with "the elders of Midian" with whom he may have had alliances. (Though Moses did have Midianite associations through dwelling with his wife's family for 40 years, it is likely that they were far removed from the clans these leaders represented—the Midianites being a widespread, nomadic people.) Yet Balak probably realized that a military campaign alone was not going to stop the Israelites and the supernatural power behind them. Rather, he needed to employ spiritual warfare—and thus the call for Balaam. *The Nelson Study Bible* explains:

"The Moabites believed that blessings and cursings from the gods could be manipulated by skilled agents, who presumed to be able to traffic with the gods. At the time, the most famous of these agents was Balaam of Mesopotamia. In 1967, a discovery was made in Jordan of an eighth-century B.C. inscription of prophecies of Balaam. This discovery in what was ancient Moab is stunning evidence of the renown of this prophet even hundreds of years after his death. Yet the Balaam of

Scripture is thoroughly reprehensible. In Scripture he becomes a paradigm of evil, a nearly satanic figure (see 31:8; Deut. 23:4, 5; Josh. 13:22; 24:9, 10; Neh. 13:2; Mic. 6:5; 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11; Rev. 2:14). Balaam was a prophet who specialized in animal divination. He would inspect the liver of a ritually slain animal to ascertain from its shapes and markings the will of the gods. Such prophets also observed the movements of animals and birds in order to ascertain certain signs from the gods. It was thought that such prophets could in some mysterious manner influence the gods by various rites. If Balaam could influence the ‘god’ of Israel (as Balak supposed), then he might reverse their blessing, bring them under a curse, and destroy them.... In v. 8, Balaam speaks of the LORD as though he were intimate with him. Because he was an internationally known soothsayer, it’s likely that he had heard enough about Israel from emissaries of Moab and Midian to have learned the name of the God of Israel. Indeed, the story of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt would have been widely known throughout the Middle East (see Deut. 2:25)” (notes on 22:5-8).

When the Moabite and Midianite leaders arrive with payment for Balaam, God informs Balaam, evidently in a night vision, that the Israelites are protected and that he is not to go with these men (Numbers 22:12). It is not that Balaam doesn’t want to go beyond what God says—he does. But he knows that he can’t. When a larger entourage appears with a “blank check” from Balak, we learn a little about Balaam’s sincerity in following God. Motivated by greed, rather than accepting the pronouncement God has already made, he goes to get a “new” word from Him. And God does give Balaam permission to go, with the restriction that he wait to be called upon by the princes and that he do only what God says.

Yet Balaam apparently doesn’t wait on the princes to call him, but heads out on his own to join them, contrary to God’s specific instructions, thus angering God. Then we have the colorful reversal of roles in Balaam’s arguing with the dumb donkey and the donkey using logic with him! (verses 22-31). Moreover, the donkey could see the angel with the drawn sword while Balaam could not. This was all rather ironic. “Balaam was supposed to have been able to communicate with the gods through animals. However, in this situation, the ‘seer’ was blind to the presence of the true God. It was the animal who was the seer, perceiving the true will of God in the Angel that blocked the path” (note on 22:22-30). Balaam’s insincere conversation with the angel shows the desires of his heart are not to please God.

When Balaam comes to Balak, he explains that he can only say what God will allow, though with all his heart he would love to get around God and curse Israel.

**Supplementary Reading:** “Archaeology and the Book of Exodus: Exit From Egypt,” *The Good News*, May–June 1997, pp. 22-24.

### **Balaam’s Prophecies (Numbers 22:41–23:26)**

**June 24**

Balak and Balaam look down on the children of Israel from a high vantage point, a “high place” for the worship of Baal (verses 38-41), a location supposedly imbued with spiritual power. At Balaam’s request, Balak builds seven new altars in this high place just for Balaam to sacrifice upon. Balaam sacrifices seven bulls and seven rams. False religion often counterfeits elements of true worship but in a superstitious way, its practitioners wrongly believing that God is primarily interested in rituals. Yet God is preparing a people who will one day be His children ruling in His Kingdom. Rituals such as animal sacrifices are not what He is really after—rather, the purpose behind them is what is important. For instance, animal sacrifices teach obedience and look to the need for the sacrifice of Christ. In many places in the Scriptures, we see this plainly stated: “Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them” (Hebrews 10:8; compare Matthew 12:7; Hosea 6:6; Psalm 40:6; 51:16-17). There is, of course, no power in rituals or locations themselves—a fact that was lost on the ancient Baal worshipers.

Balaam, supposedly the greatest prophet of the time drawing from the “power” of Baal’s high place, is still unable to curse Israel (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 4, chap. 6, sec. 2). Balaam cannot curse the children of Israel because the true God will not allow it. In fact, whenever Balaam prophesies, God has him pronounce blessing after blessing on Israel. Incidentally, seven prophecies of Balaam are recorded in all, each introduced with the words “he took up his oracle and said” (23:7, 18; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23). The blessings for Israel are so sublime that Balaam ends up uttering a prayer after the first one: “Let *me* die the death of the righteous, and let *my* end be like *his!*” (23:10). Balak is flabbergasted: “You didn’t curse them, you blessed them!” (compare verse 11). The petition of Balaam, however, who is still bent on Israel’s destruction, will not be granted.

Balak, undeterred, tries again. He takes Balaam to the top of Pisgah in the field of Zophim, as if going to another place will have some influence on God. They go through the seven-altar ritual again, and the result is the same (verses 14-16). This time Balaam explains to Balak that God is not like a human being who changes his mind in a fickle manner and whose word is not good (verse 19; compare Malachi 3:6). He goes on to proclaim how God viewed His people: “He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel” (Numbers 23:21). Yet with all that the children of Israel have done, how can this be true? It may be that God was comparing Israel to the pagan nations around them, since Israel was not yet involved in human sacrifice and the like. But perhaps more likely is the fact that God’s forgiveness and His plan are perfect. God prophesies of Israel, “For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:34). And “God calls those things which be not as though they were” (Romans 4:17, King James Version)—which in this case would mean He sees Israel’s redemption as essentially a “done deal” because He is able to bring it to pass.

Balaam is forced to admit that none of their “hocus-pocus” can work against the children of Israel (Numbers 23:23). And Balak realizes he has gotten in deeper than he wanted: “If you can’t curse them, at least don’t bless them,” he pleads (compare verse 25). By this, he might even have been saying, “I’ll pay you to just keep your mouth shut!” Nevertheless, he is prepared to simply try a better location.

### **A Star out of Jacob (Numbers 23:27–25:18)**

**June 25**

Balak is determined to have Israel cursed. He brings Balaam to a third mountaintop, Peor, to go through the seven-altar, seven-bull, seven-ram ritual again. And from Mount Peor, Balaam, intending curses, again issues beautiful blessings on the children of Israel (verses 1-9). It was, of course, God who turned the curses to blessings (Deuteronomy 23:5). Finally, Balak becomes outraged at Balaam and tells him to just go home (Numbers 24:11). Yet Balaam has more to say.

Notice the prophecy in which he states: “I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult. And Edom shall be a possession” (verses 17-18). As *The Nelson Study Bible* notes: “This poetic language clearly refers to the Messiah. The pagan Balaam had a vision of the coming of the Hebrew Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ! He was visible from afar. He was like a Star, radiant and beautiful. He was like a Scepter, majestic and powerful. And He is the victor over His enemies, including Moab—the nation that hired Balaam to curse Israel! All nations who resisted Israel and God’s work would come under the curse they unwittingly embraced. Among them was Edom, which rejected the request of Moses for safe passage (20:14-21). The One out of Jacob, the Messiah, will be victor over all His foes (see Ps. 2; 110; Rev. 19:11-21)” (note on Numbers 24:15-19).

The legitimacy of Balaam’s prophecy may be found in the fact that it is confirmed elsewhere in the Bible. Jesus Christ is represented as a “Star” (2 Peter 1:19; Revelation 22:16). The scepter, the symbol of kingship, which would abide in Judah (Genesis 49:10), was to go to the Messiah, Himself of the tribe of Judah, at His coming in power. Then there’s the prophecy about battering the brow of Moab and destroying the sons of tumult. The original King James leaves the word “tumult” untranslated as “Sheth.” Though some have seen here a reference to Adam’s son Seth, this would mean the Messiah would destroy all people living at His return (as everyone alive since Noah’s Flood is descended from Seth), and the Bible clearly explains that He will not do this. The word “tumult,” then, is correct—and a similar prophecy may be found in Jeremiah 48: “But a fire shall come out of Heshbon, a flame from the midst of Sihon, and shall devour the brow of Moab, the crown of the head of the sons of tumult. Woe to you, O Moab!” (verses 45-46). Indeed, numerous passages warn of destruction to befall Moab and Edom at the time of Christ’s return.

After proclaiming three more brief prophecies—dealing with the Amalekites, the Kenites (a Midianite tribe), the Assyrians, ships from the west, and the Hebrews—Balaam finally does head out for home. But, though not clear from this chapter alone, he does so only after explaining to Balak an effective way to hurt the Israelites. We will see the results of Balaam’s instructions in our next reading.

### **Harlotry and Idolatry of the Israelites (Numbers 23:27–25:18)**

**June 25 Cont’d**

Israel’s journey is basically over. They stand at Acacia Grove in Moab (25:1), just across the Jordan River from the city of Jericho (26:63). But what happens? Chapter 25 describes one of the most horrible episodes in the book of Numbers. How Israel here plunged headlong into such idolatry

and sinfulness is almost inexplicable without looking elsewhere in the Scriptures. But when we do look elsewhere, we find that Balaam advised Balak to set a trap of sin for the Israelites so that God would curse His people: “Balaam...taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality” (Revelation 2:14). And just how was this accomplished? In Numbers 31, we will see more of the advice that Balaam gave to Balak: “Look, these [Midianite] women caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD” (31:15-16).

Balaam’s plan worked. The women of Moab and its Midianite allies sexually enticed many of the Israelites to join with them in their sexually immoral idolatrous practices. This was likely presented as an offer of national friendship and perhaps even a new way to worship God. Yet it was, in fact, flagrant rebellion against the true God. No doubt, temple prostitutes seduced Israelite men into sexual rites linked with their religious sacrifices to Baal or Chemosh, also known as Molech. Such worship often included human sacrifice—the word “cannibal” actually being derived from *Cahna-Bal*, meaning “the priest of Baal” (Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, 1959, p. 232). Thus, when the Israelites ate of the Moabite sacrifices (25:2), they may have been participating in this ghastly practice. Psalm 106:28 says they ate “sacrifices offered to the dead,” but the original King James is more literal in rendering this “sacrifices of the dead”—which, again, may imply human sacrifices. In any event, “this was not just another time of trouble, this was the most serious challenge yet. The people had been seduced into joining the worship of Baal. And it was Baal worship that they had been sent to Canaan to eliminate!” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Numbers 25:4-5). God was infuriated, ordering Moses to execute every offender by hanging them in the sun till sunset (verse 4; Deuteronomy 21:23).

Zimri, an Israelite prince of Simeon, brazenly presented a princess of Midian, Cozbi, who was probably a temple prostitute, before Moses and the whole congregation. Although it is not entirely clear, it appears that they may have been performing their lewd rites in an open tent in full view of those at the door of the tabernacle of meeting! Aaron’s grandson Phinehas, in impassioned zeal for God and righteous indignation, took a spear and drove it through the two. Shamefully, the idolatrous worship must have been rather widespread as the plague was stopped only after 24,000 people died. In terms of the death toll, this was an even worse disaster than the rebellion of Korah, wherein 14,700 died. God was pleased with the zealotry of Phinehas in executing judgment (Numbers 25:11; Psalm 106:30) and gave the line of the priesthood to his descendants as an everlasting covenant of peace (verses 12-13).

Following this terrible incident, God gives Moses instructions to “harass” the Midianites, that is, to engage them in battle as His vengeance on them. And this battle, which will be Moses’ last, will be fought shortly—though it is not reported until chapter 31.

### **Israel Numbered on the Plains of Moab (Numbers 26)**

**June 26**

The terrible plague of the previous chapter marked a turning point for Israel. The first generation that had come out of Egypt is now gone and God requires another census, which Moses and Eleazar (Aaron’s son and successor) undertake: “But among these [whom they counted] there was not a man of those who were numbered by Moses and Aaron the priest when they numbered the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Sinai [in the first census]. For the LORD had said of them, ‘They shall surely die in the wilderness.’ So there was not left a man of them, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun” (verses 64-65).

The numbering is, in part, for inheritance purposes, as tribal inheritance will be according to the principle of “share, and share alike,” with every tribe receiving proportions commensurate with their numbers (verse 54). Since someone is sure to say one piece of land is better than another, it is to be divided up by the casting of lots (verses 55-56).

A comparison of this census with the first one at Sinai is rather interesting. When the Israelites were delivered from slavery, the tribe of Simeon comprised 59,300 men of fighting age (1:22-23). Yet 40 years later, when Israel is about to enter the Promised Land, the Simeonites have only 22,200 men (26:4, 14)—a 62.5 percent *drop* in population, in contrast with an average 6.5 percent *growth* for the rest of Israel (even though four other tribes had shrunk *slightly*). What had happened? Though there could be another explanation, it is possible, as many have surmised, that a great number of Simeonites (known for their fiery temperament), along with groups from other tribes, left the mass of the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering. If so, where would they have gone? Since Jacob had prophesied that Simeon would be “scattered” among the tribes of Israel (Genesis

49:5-7), these early emigrants would probably have gone to the same place that other Israelites would go much later—Northwest Europe—paving the way for subsequent migrations (see our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*).

Interestingly, before the Romans invaded Britain centuries later, there was a Celtic clan living in what is now southwest England and Wales known as the Simonii, a name that may derive from the Simeonites.

### **Inheritance Law; Joshua to Succeed Moses (Numbers 27)**

**June 27**

Zelophehad died in the wilderness, not having disqualified himself in the great sins of Korah, or the Moabites, or any such thing, without any sons to receive an inheritance. So his daughters make the unusual appeal recorded in this chapter. And though it is contrary to the social mores of the day for women to inherit land, their case makes sense, prompting Moses to take the matter before God. God's response is that Zelophehad's daughters are right—and He gives Moses an additional judgment, adding to the previous law. Thus, the daughters are to receive an inheritance. We will see more on this matter in chapter 36.

God then reaffirms to Moses that he will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land because he rebelled at God's command when he struck the rock to bring forth water (verse 14; compare 20:12). Moses, as so often before, thinks only of the people rather than himself. He says, "They are going to need a leader" (compare verse 17). So God commands Moses to ordain Joshua, a man with God's Spirit in him (verse 18). Though Joshua is to be "over the congregation" (verse 16) to lead them as a shepherd (verse 17), he is not to be a supreme one-man ruler with unlimited authority. He will not even have the degree of authority Moses has. Each time Joshua needs to know the will of God, he is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will seek God's answer "by the judgment of the Urim" (verse 21). Indeed, it should be noted that no other human figure of the Old Testament will be given the degree of authority Moses is invested with. As God's special prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15; Numbers 12:6-8), Israel's chief human "judge" (Acts 7:35; Exodus 18:13-26), and the mediator of the Old Covenant (compare Galatians 3:19-20), no one would truly fill his shoes until Jesus Christ Himself arrived (compare Deuteronomy 34:10; 18:15-19).

### **Daily, Sabbath, Monthly and Festival Offerings (Numbers 28; Numbers 29)**

**June 28-29**

Chapters 28 and 29 provide a review of laws regarding offerings to be made each day, on the Sabbath, on the new moon (the first day of the month), and during God's Feasts. Frequent repetition is a tool God uses often to emphasize important features of His laws.

In reading about the various offerings mentioned here, consider that we must demonstrate to God our devotion to Him every single day of our lives. But there are special occasions He has appointed for us to go beyond our normal devotion in spending more time reflecting on His will and more time honoring and serving Him.

### **Vows Are to Be Kept (Numbers 30)**

**June 30**

Vows and sworn oaths were not to be entered into lightly. They were to be kept. But there were certain circumstances in which they could be overruled. In ancient Israel, an unmarried woman was under the protection and supervision of her father. If she entered into some agreement or vow, this might have put her father, the one responsible for her, under an obligation that he was either unable or unwilling to fulfill. So it was up to him whether or not to overrule her or allow her vow to stand. The same law applied to married women, except that the one who decided whether or not to allow the agreement to stand was, of course, the husband. If the wife was already bound by some prior vow at the time of marriage, her new husband had the opportunity to overrule it as soon as he became aware of it. But if he let it stand beyond that, it would remain in force. In the case of a widow or divorced woman, her vow would automatically stand as it could not obligate a husband or father.

In the New Testament dispensation we make a vow or covenant with Christ. The Father calls and grants us repentance and faith. We agree to bury the old man of sin. God gives us His Spirit and we are no longer our own. Ours is an *eternal* vow or covenant. And, just as in the Old Testament, it is not to be entered into by the immature. Just the same, marriage is a solemn vow made to God and spouse. But as for swearing oaths in general, Christ has instructed that we not do so (Matthew 5:33-37). Rather, just giving our word should be enough and should serve just as well.