

## NUMBERS

## CHAPTER ONE

**Name:**

*The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* says about the title: "The LXX title Arithmoi (numbers) was rendered Liber Numeri in the Vulg., which appears in English as the book of Numbers or simply Numbers. The book is so designated because it makes a double reference to taking a census of the Jewish people (chaps. 1-3 and chap. 26). As was usual, the Jews named the book from its opening word wayyedabber ('and He [Jehovah] said'), or more often from the fifth word bemidbar ('in the wilderness')."

**Synopsis of the book:**

We quote again from *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*: "The fourth book of the Pentateuch, continuing the redemptive history of Israel where Exodus leaves off. As Genesis is the book of origins, Exodus the book of redemption, and Leviticus the book of worship and fellowship, Numbers is the book of the service and walk of God's redeemed people."

Yet, the book of Numbers is basically a book of failure; failure of the people to reach the goal God had set with them; failure to be what they ought to have been and failure to be where God wanted them to be. It is the book in which we read how a great nation that left Egypt as a triumphant army, is reduced to a bunch of roaming Bedouins, condemned to trek around in the desert for forty years until every single one of them has died. The greatest failure was the failure to take seriously God's revelation of Himself and God's promises for them.

The book starts out with God's speaking to His people in the desert and preparing them for the conquest, both militarily and spiritually. The numbering of the people, from which the book received its name in our English versions, is for recruitment in the army and for the service and care of the tabernacle.

The people, however, are unwilling to pay a price for their freedom and dignity. They cast their vote in favor of the slavery from which they had been delivered, because of the fish they ate and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. They argue that this food was free, conveniently forgetting that they paid for it with back breaking slave labor and that it was at the cost of their male babies, who were drowned in the river Nile, that they ate those things. A rebellion starts in Moses' own family, initiated by his sister Miriam and brother Aaron. And later a large scale rebellion is started by Korah, a Levite and certain Reubenites: Dathan and Abiram, who challenge Moses' authority. But the greatest failure occurs when the twelve spies, who had penetrated the promised land, return with the report that the land devours those living in it, that Israel does not have a chance to conquer it and that the enemy they will face are "Nephilim." This is a reference to the cryptic account of the creatures that inhabited the earth in the period before the flood.<sup>1</sup>

One of the saddest accounts is the one in which Moses and Aaron lose their temper and fail to give glory to God, when Moses strikes the rock instead of speaking to it.<sup>2</sup> This personal failure of the greatest man in the Old Testament makes us realize how great the damage is that sin has incurred upon the human race. From a human viewpoint there is no hope for man. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."<sup>3</sup> Disobedience has robbed life of its value and purpose. For forty years Israel roamed about in the desert, with nothing to hope for but death. Moses gave expression to this spirit of hopelessness in his beautiful psalm:

"You turn men back to dust, saying, 'Return to dust, O sons of men.'

For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning--

though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered.

We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation.

You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.

All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan.

The length of our days is seventy years-- or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

<sup>1</sup> See Gen.6:1-4

<sup>2</sup> ch. 20:1-13

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 3:23

Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.

Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Relent, O LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants.”<sup>4</sup>

But, although this tragedy occupies the center of this book, it is not its only message. The last ten chapters, which open with a new census of the younger generation, most of whom were not born yet when their parents left Egypt, is prepared to enter the land of promise. The disobedience of one man does not annul the promises of God. God remains faithful to Himself and to His Word and everyone who puts his trust in Him will not be put to shame.

#### Quotes from commentaries:

In his PREFACE TO THE BOOK OF NUMBERS, *Adam Clarke* writes: “This, which is the fourth book in order of the Pentateuch, has been called NUMBERS, from its containing an account of the numbering and marshalling the Israelites in their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Its ENGLISH name is derived from the title it bears in the VULGATE Latin, Numeri, which is a literal translation of the Greek word Arithmoi, its title in the SEPTUAGINT; and from both, our SAXON ancestors called it ‘numeration.’ Why? ‘because in this the children of Israel were numbered,’ This title, however, does not properly apply to more than the first three chapters, and the 26th chapter. This book, like the preceding, takes its name among the HEBREWS from a distinguishing word in the commencement. It is frequently called WAY<sup>a</sup> DABEER, ‘and he spoke,’ from its initial word; but in most Hebrew Bibles its running title is B<sup>a</sup> MIDBAR ‘in the wilderness,’ which is the fifth word in the first verse.”

*Nelson’s Bible Dictionary* gives the following outline of the book:

#### **Part One: The Preparation of the Old Generation to Inherit the Promised Land** (1:1-10:10)

- I. *The Organization of Israel* 1:1-4:49
  - A. Organization of the People 1:1-2:34
  - B. Organization of the Priests 3:1-4:49
- II. *Sanctification of Israel* 5:1-10:10
  - A. Sanctification through Separation 5:1-31
  - B. Sanctification through the Nazirite Vow 6:1-27
  - C. Sanctification through Worship 7:1-9:14
  - D. Sanctification through Divine Guidance 9:15-10:10

#### **Part Two: The Failure of the Old Generation to Inherit the Promised Land** (10:11-25:18)

- I. *The Failure of Israel En Route to Kadesh* 10:11-12:16
  - A. Israel Departs Mount Sinai 10:11-36
  - B. Failure of the People 11:1-9
  - C. Failure of Moses 11:10-15
  - D. God Provides for Moses 11:16-30
  - E. God Provides for the People 11:31-35
  - F. Failure of Miriam and Aaron 12:1-16
- II. *The Climactic Failure of Israel at Kadesh* 13:1-14:45
  - A. Investigation of the Promised Land 13:1-33
  - B. Israel Rebels against God 14:1-10
  - C. Moses Intercedes 14:11-19
  - D. God Judges Israel 14:20-38

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<sup>4</sup> Ps. 90:3-13

- E. Israel Rebels against the Judgment of God 14:39-45
- III. *The Failure of Israel in the Wilderness* 15:1-19:22
  - A. Review of the Offerings 15:1-41
  - B. Rebellion of Korah 16:1-40
  - C. Rebellion of Israel against Moses and Aaron 16:41-50
  - D. Role of the Priesthood 17:1-19:22
- IV. *The Failure of Israel En Route to Moab* 20:1-25:18
  - A. Miriam Dies 20:1
  - B. Moses and Aaron Fail 20:2-13
  - C. Edom Refuses Passage 20:14-21
  - D. Aaron Dies 20:22-29
  - E. Israel's Victory over the Canaanites 21:1-3
  - F. The Failure of Israel 21:4-9
  - G. Journey to Moab 21:10-20
  - H. Israel's Victory over Sihon 21:21-32
  - I. Israel's Victory over Bashan 21:33-35
  - J. Failure with the Moabites 22:1-25:18

**Part Three: The Preparation of the New Generation (26:1-36:13)**

- I. *The Reorganization of Israel* 26:1-27:23
  - A. The Second Census 26:1-51
  - B. Method for Dividing the Land 26:52-56
  - C. Exceptions for Dividing the Land 26:57-27:11
  - D. Appointment for Israel's New Leader 27:12-23
- II. *The Regulations of Offerings and Vows* 28:1-30:16
  - A. The Regulations of Sacrifices 28:1-29:40
  - B. The Regulations of Vows 30:1-16
- III. *The Conquest and Division of Israel* 31:1-36:13
  - A. Victory over Midian 31:1-54
  - B. Division of the Land East of Jordan 32:1-42
  - C. The Summary of Israel's Journeys 33:1-49
  - D. Division of the Land West of Jordan 33:50-34:29
  - E. Special Cities in Canaan 35:1-34
  - F. Special Problems of Inheritance in Canaan 36:1-13

*Unger's New Bible Dictionary* says, basically, the same in its introduction to the book of Numbers, as *Adam Clarke's Commentary*. The book continues "the redemptive history of Israel where Exodus leaves off. As Genesis is the book of origins, Exodus the book of redemption, and Leviticus the book of worship and fellowship, Numbers is the book of the service and walk of God's redeemed people." As for the purpose of the book, Unger says: "Numbers continues the journey commenced in the book of Exodus, beginning with the events of the second month of the second year <Num. 10:11> and ending with the eleventh month of the fortieth year <Deut. 1:3>. The thirty-eight years of wandering deal with the failure of the redeemed people in the face of every divine provision for their welfare and success. The book is typically significant in warning against the dangers of unbelief. The people disobeyed at Kadesh-barnea <Num. 14> and suffered repeated defeat and eventual death in the desert (20:1-33:49)." An interesting

observation on the way Higher Criticism approaches the book, reads: "Critics who deny Mosaic authorship divide Numbers into P (Priestly Code) and JE (Jehovistic-Elohistic narrative). Chapters 1:1-10:28 are supposedly a long extract from P, while JE is interwoven in the book. This criticism of Numbers, of a piece with Pentateuchal higher criticism in general, is based upon the same erroneous philosophic, literary, and religious presuppositions. It is a product of rationalistic skepticism that attempted to reconcile prevailing modes of thinking of the nineteenth century with the testimony of the Mosaic books."

## **Part One: The Preparation of the Old Generation to Inherit the Promised Land** (1:1-10:10)

### *I. The Organization of Israel* 1:1-4:49

#### *A. Organization of the People* 1:1-2:34

The book of Numbers begins with God's revelation of Himself. The opening verse reads: "The LORD spoke to Moses in the Tent of Meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt." This is the second book of the Pentateuch in which Israel is found in the desert. The book of Leviticus opened with the words: "The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting." The Tent of Meeting in Leviticus may not have been the same as the one in Numbers. We suppose that, at the opening of Leviticus, the Tabernacle had not been constructed yet, so the tent mentioned there was probably the one Moses had erected outside the camp.<sup>5</sup> It seems probable, however, that the tent mentioned in the book of Numbers was the actual Tabernacle in which the ark was placed. God addressed Moses one month after the completion of the Tabernacle, shortly after the first anniversary of the Exodus.

God spoke to Moses in the desert. Deserts were not part of God's original creation. There were no deserts when God finished creating the earth and pronounced it very good.<sup>6</sup> This desert was the place Moses described as: "the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions."<sup>7</sup> God had never intended man to live in a desert. The desert means death, and death is the wages of sin. Yet, God speaks to man in the desert. Man may have brought death upon himself and upon God's creation, but God does not leave him there; He speaks to man. "He is There and He is Not Silent."<sup>8</sup>

The fact that God pitched His tent in the desert and spoke to man is typical of all of God's revelation. John says: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."<sup>9</sup> The phrase "made his dwelling" in Greek is *eskeénoosen*, which is derived from the word *skenoo*, meaning "to tent or encamp." This world may not be fit to live in for human beings who were created in the image of God, but as we trek through this desert place to the land of God's promise, He treks with us. He has pitched his tent among us, right in the center. As long as He occupies the central place of our life, our pilgrimage will end in glory. "They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion."<sup>10</sup> The opening words of the book of Numbers indicate how relevant its message is for our time.

The first order issued in this book is for a census to be taken of those among the Israelites who are able to serve in the army; that is "all the men in Israel twenty years old or more."

Unger's Bible Dictionary says about this census: "This census was taken for a double purpose: (a) To ascertain the number of fighting men from the age of twenty to fifty. (b) To ascertain the amount of the redemption offering due on account of all the firstborn, both of persons and cattle. The Levites, whose numbers amounted to 22,000, were taken in lieu of the firstborn males of the rest of Israel, whose numbers were 22,273, and for the surplus of 273, a money payment of 1,365 shekels, or five shekels each, was made to Aaron and his sons <3:39,51>. (3) Thirty-eight years afterward, previous to the entrance into Canaan, when the total number, excepting the Levites, amounted to 601,730 males, showing a decrease of 1,870 <26:51>." There is no indication in this text, however, that people over fifty years of age were no longer required to serve in the army.

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 33:7

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 1:31

<sup>7</sup> Deut. 8:15

<sup>8</sup> Title of a book by Francis Schaefer.

<sup>9</sup> John 1:14

<sup>10</sup> Ps. 84:7

Evidently, the desert was not Israel's only enemy. The people would be attacked by other nations and they would have to attack other nations. But most of all, behind all human animosity is the power of Satan. The ultimate enemy is the devil. Paul's words are as true today as they were centuries ago: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."<sup>11</sup> The life of a child of God is not only threatened by his living conditions, but also by the hatred Satan has instilled in our fellow creatures, who have been made in the image of God, just as we are. Not only do we live in a place that is not fit for us to live in, we live we people with whom it is not fit to live. God counts His children, because He wants them to be aware of this and He does not want us to be defenseless.

As Unger's Bible Dictionary says, the census was not merely for the purpose of conscripting people into the army. It was a rather complicated affair, that served as a call to arms, but also ensured the relationship of the tribe and the individual to the tabernacle and to God Himself. The census did not give people a number, but an identity. It made them know who they were and where they belonged. God did not only count them, but they counted for God. The apostle Paul says: "The man who loves God is known by God."

It is also true that the Kingdom of God does not only consist of men of age twenty and over. There are, probably, more women than men in God's army and, according to Jesus' words, the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to little children. When the disciples tried to keep children away from Jesus, thinking He was too busy to bother with them, He said: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."<sup>12</sup> The point of this census, therefore, is not to exclude the weaker sex, or certain age groups, but to emphasize the features of watchfulness and warfare in the Kingdom.

We should also not think that demonstration of power always has to be met with the same kind of power. Although the census was, in a sense a conscription into the army, the battle never belonged to man, but to the Lord. The conquest of Canaan was not made by the power of the Israelite army. The report of the great campaign says: "All these kings and their lands Joshua conquered in one campaign, because the LORD, the God of Israel, fought for Israel."<sup>13</sup> And Joshua's conclusion at the end of the war was: "You yourselves have seen everything the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the LORD your God who fought for you."<sup>14</sup> The general principle that procures victory for God's army is, in Zechariah's words: " 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty."<sup>15</sup> And, finally, Jesus sums up our position in facing the enemy, with the words: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."<sup>16</sup> So, although the census was partly meant to be a conscription into the army, it did not imply that God wants us to fight the enemy with his own weapons. Paul says: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."<sup>17</sup>

The first census is taken under the direction of Moses and Aaron, but the counting of each individual in every tribe is delegated to one person in each tribe, who is responsible to report back to Moses and Aaron. We may suppose that the actual counting was entrusted to people under each of the leaders of the tribes. Vs. 5-15 give the names of the persons responsible in each tribe. The order of the tribes is in the order of the birth of Jacob's sons, first from Leah and then from Rachel. Dan was the son of Bilhah and Asher the son of Zilpah. Gad, again, was Zilpah's son and Naphtali was Bilhah's second son. Very little can be said about the names of these men. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* remarks about vs. 14, regarding "from Gad, Eliasaph son of Deuel": "This person is called Reuel, <Num. 2:14>. Since the dalet ("d") is very much like the resh ("r") in Hebrew, it was easy to mistake the one for the other. The Septuagint and the Syriac have Reuel in this chapter; and in <Num. 2:14>, the Vulgate, the Samaritan, and the Arabic have Deuel instead of Reuel, with which reading a vast number of MSS. concur and this reading is supported by <Num. 10:20>, we may safely conclude therefore that D<sup>a</sup> `uw'eel ..., not R<sup>a</sup> `uw'eel ..., was the original reading. See Kennicott. An ancient Jewish rabbi pretends to solve every difficulty by saying that 'Eliasaph was a proselyte. That before he embraced the true faith he was called the son of Reuel, but that after his

<sup>11</sup> Eph. 6:12

<sup>12</sup> Matt. 19:14

<sup>13</sup> Josh. 10:42

<sup>14</sup> Josh. 23:3

<sup>15</sup> Zech. 4:6

<sup>16</sup> Matt. 10:16

<sup>17</sup> Rom. 12:21

conversion he was called the son of Deuel.' Since Reuel may be translated the breach of God, and Deuel the knowledge of God, I suppose the rabbi grounded his supposition on the different meanings of the two words." The men were, obviously, recognized as leaders in the tribes by the people, even before being chosen by God. They are called in vs. 16 "the leaders of their ancestral tribes." The KJV calls them: "princes of the tribes of their fathers."

The number of eligible people counted is recorded for each tribe, with the exception of the Levites.

Vs. 46 tells us that the total number was 603,550. Most of these men will have been married and have children, which means that the total number of Israelites must have been close to 3,000,000 or maybe even more. To imagine that such a mass of people would cross the desert and even spend 40 years there, is mind boggling.

The way the count is reported seems redundantly repetitious to our modern mind. With the mention of every tribe the same formula is used: "All the men twenty years old or more who were able to serve in the army were counted and listed by name, one by one, according to the records of their clans and families." The phrase expresses, however, the personal and loving interest the Lord has in every individual. The census is not for the purpose of obtaining accurate statistics, but in order to make soldiers out of men who had never fought a battle in their lives. God wants every person to become mature and able to defend himself in the strength and power He provides.

Stripped of all repetitions the list looks as follows:

Reuben -	46,500.
Simeon -	59,300.
Gad -	45,650.
Judah -	74,600.
Issachar -	54,400.
Zebulun-	57,400.
Ephraim -	40,500.
Manasseh -	32,200.
Benjamin -	35,400.
Dan -	62,700.
Asher-	41,500.
Naphtali -	53,400.
Total	603,550.

Judah is the largest contributor to the army. Even if we count Ephraim and Manasseh as one tribe as the sons of Joseph, we come only up with a total of 72,700, which is 1,900 less than Judah. We cannot compare this to the tribe of Levi, since none of the Levites were conscripted in the army and in the count of their tribe the age limits are set differently.

In vs. 49-54 God, not only, instructs Moses not to count the Levites in this part of the census, but He also indicates that the Levites will occupy a different position in the placement of the tribes in relation to the tabernacle. The twelve tribes were each assigned a specific place which is specified in the next chapter. The point here is that the Levites are assigned to form a living wall around the tabernacle. They are the only one who are entitled to camp directly around the tent that hold the symbols of God's revelation in this world. We could say that the task of guarding God's revelation was entrusted to them. "Anyone else who goes near it shall be put to death," says vs. 51. This charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony to the Levites included, taking it down when it was to be moved, carrying it and setting it back up and encamp around it.

There is no doubt as to where the center of the Israelite camp is: it is the Tabernacle with the ark of the Covenant. As far as we know, the Israelites were not familiar with electric energy. The presence of the Lord could be compare to a magnetic field of infinitely high voltage. We know that every living being operates on a low voltage. The dynamo of God's presence produces an energy that is life threatening to unprotected human beings. John says about the throne of God, which he sees in the book of Revelation: "From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder."<sup>18</sup> When we read that other people than the Levites may not come close to the tent "so that wrath will not fall on the Israelite community," it could be taken as the danger of the magnetic field.

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<sup>18</sup> Rev. 4:5

We have to remember, at the same time, that what we know as electricity is only an image of the real thing. It is an expression in material substance of a spiritual reality. Just as the light we know is a visible expression of the character of God, of which John says: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."<sup>19</sup> In reality the ark was much more dangerous to human life than the highest electrical charge. The Levites formed a living insulation to protect the people from a divine radiation that would be fatal to the unprotected person. Their consecration did not make them immune; not even the priest or high priest were immune, but with the necessary precautions, they were better equipped than the non-consecrated person. But their lives were continuously in danger. The words "so that he will not die," or "so that they will not incur guilt and die," occur five time in the book of Exodus alone, in connection with the service of the priests and Levites.

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<sup>19</sup> I John 1:5

## CHAPTER TWO

### A. Organization of the People (continued) 1:1-2:34

*Adam Clarke Commentary* quotes Scheuchzer's Description and Plan of the Encampments of the Israelites in the Wilderness in connection with vs. 2. He says: "The Israelitish army was divided into three principal divisions. The first, which was the least in extent, but the strongest and the most powerful, occupied the center of the army: this was the throne of God, i. e., the TABERNACLE. The second, which was composed of the priests and Levites, surrounded the first. The third, and the furthest from the center, took in all the other tribes of Israel, who were at least about a mile from the tabernacle. For it appears from Josephus, iii. 4, that the nearest approach they dared make to the ark, except during the time of worship, was a distance of 2,000 cubits. The reverence due to the Divine Majesty, the numerous army of the Israelites, composed of 600,000 soldiers, with their families, which made about 3,000,000 souls, naturally demanded a considerable extent of ground. We are not to imagine that all these families pitched their tents pell mell, without order, like beasts, or as the troops of Tartary, and the eastern armies; on the contrary, their camp was divided according to the most exact rules. And we cannot even doubt that their camp was laid out, and the place of every division and tribe exactly assigned by some engineers, or geometricians, before the army stopped to encamp, in order that every person might immediately find his own quarter, and the road he ought to take to reach the other tents."

This gives us an impression of the efficiency of the organization of the people. Each tribe knew its exact place in relationship to the tabernacle and the exact distance at which to pitch their tents. They also knew the marching order when they broke up camp. Nobody rushed around in confusion, trying to find a random place. Each tribe had a standard with the banner of the tribe to which each member of the tribe rallied. Not much is known about the banners of the different tribes. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* says on this point: "Many of the modern Jews think there was some coat of arms painted in each standard, which had reference to the blessing of that tribe by Jacob. Judah bore a lion, Dan a serpent, Naphtali a hind, Benjamin a wolf, etc. Some of them say the four principal standards were, Judah a lion, Reuben a man, Joseph an ox, and Dan an eagle, making the appearances in Ezekiel's vision to allude it. Others say the name of each tribe was written in its standard. Whatever it was, no doubt it gave a certain direction." The allusion to Jacob's last word spoken to his sons before his death, in Gen. 49, is a plausible one.

Judah's position is the first one mentioned, which means that they were the first ones to break up and follow immediately after the ark and the tabernacle. All translations agree that the tribe's place was "on the east, toward the sunrise." It may seem nit-picking, but this phrase does not automatically imply that the sun actually rose from the east in the time Israel trekked through the desert. The Hebrew words are *Qeed<sup>a</sup>maah mizraachaah*, which, according to Strong's definition means: *qedem*, "the front, of place (absolutely, therefore part, relatively the East)" and *mizrach*, "sunrise i.e.: the east." So, literally it only says: "In front toward the east." The reason we mention this a book by Emanuel Veliskovsky, *Worlds in Collision*, in which he advances the theory that the rotation of the earth was reversed around the time of the Exodus by the coming of Venus into our solar system as a comet. The book gives some very interesting explanations about some of the extraordinary phenomena recorded in Joshua, like the standing still of the sun.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the author does not bring any Christian bias or any inclination to lean toward inspiration of the Scriptures into his hypothesis, add a good deal of weight to his arguments. We only want to indicate that the Hebrew text of Num. 2:3 does not necessarily prove him wrong.

The closest distance a tribe was to be from the tabernacle, according to Josephus was 2000 cubits. A cubit being approximately 18 inches, this would be about 3000 foot, or 900 meters.

In the light of the history of salvation as a whole, it is not amazing that Judah was the first tribe to lead the army. Judah was God's chosen tribe for the purpose of bringing our Savior into the world. Jacob had prophesied about Judah: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."<sup>21</sup> In Jacob's words addressed to Judah, he is compared to a lion. In Revelation our Lord Jesus Christ is called "the Lion of the tribe of Judah."<sup>22</sup> And, although Judah followed the tribe of Levi who carried the ark and the tabernacle, the Lion of Judah becomes the leader when the images are replaced with the reality. The epistle to the Hebrews

<sup>20</sup> Josh. 10:12-14

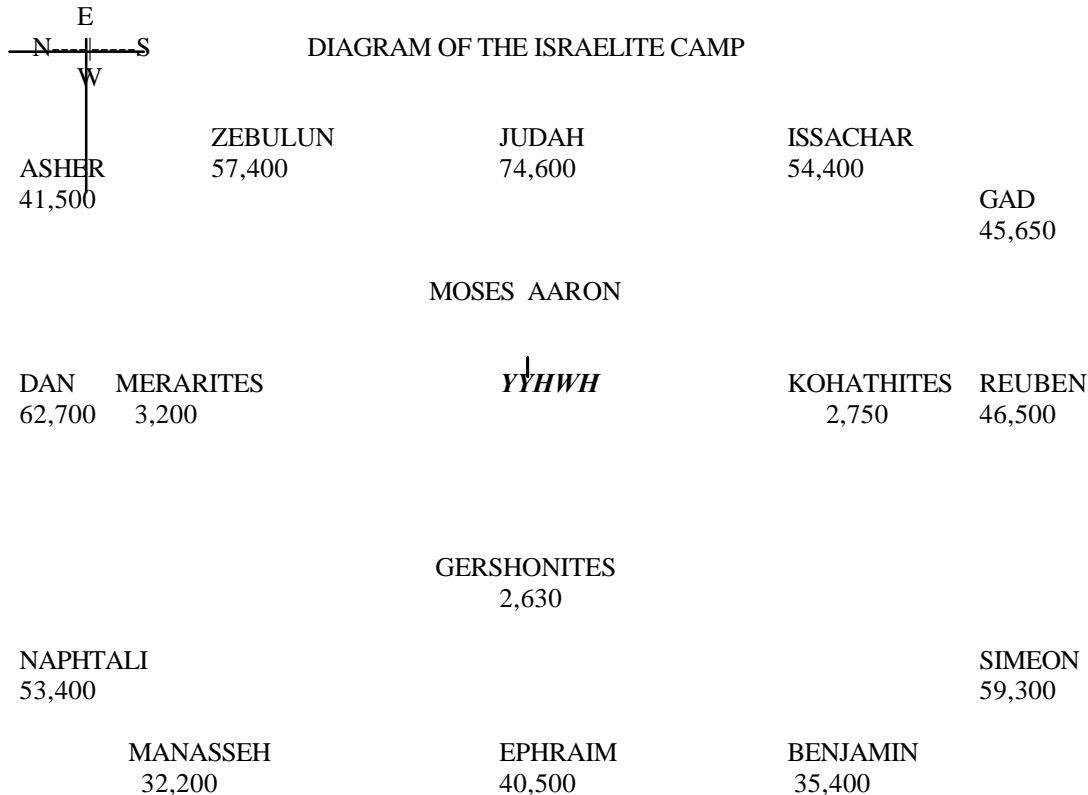
<sup>21</sup> Gen. 49:10

<sup>22</sup> Rev. 5:5



speaks about a change in priesthood. We read: "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests."<sup>23</sup>

For the purpose of our study it is of little use to go into detail as to the placement of the various tribes in their relation to the tabernacle. Adam Clarke draws a comprehensive diagram in his Commentary, which gives the position of each tribe and the number of conscripted men. I have been unable to copy it directly from the bible program to my word processor. It looks approximately like this:



This diagram gives us an impression of the imposing spectacle the Israelite army must have presented in the desert.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* has some interesting observations about the stations of the several tribes: "We have here the particular distribution of the twelve tribes into four squadrons, three tribes in a squadron, one of which was to lead the other two.

Those tribes were placed together under the same standard that were nearest of kin to each other; Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, were the three younger sons of Leah, and they were put together; and Issachar and Zebulun would not grudge to be under Judah, since they were his younger brethren. Reuben and Simeon would not have been content in their place. Therefore Reuben, Jacob's eldest son, is made chief of the next squadron; Simeon, no doubt, is willing to be under him, and Gad, the son of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid, is fitly added to them in Levi's room: Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin, are all the posterity of Rachel. Dan, the eldest son of Bilhah, is made a leading tribe, though the son of a concubine, that more abundant honour might be bestowed on that which lacked; and it was said, Dan should judge his people, and to him were added two younger sons of the handmaids. Thus unexceptionable was the order in which they were placed.

The tribe of Judah was in the first post of honour, encamped towards the rising sun, and in their marches led the van, not only because it was the most numerous tribe, but chiefly because from that tribe Christ was to come, who is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and was to descend from the loins of him who was now nominated chief captain of that tribe. Nahshon is reckoned among the ancestors of Christ, <Mt.

<sup>23</sup> Heb. 7:12-14

1:4>. So that, when he went before them, Christ himself went before them in effect, as their leader. Judah was the first of the twelve sons of Jacob that was blessed. Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, were censured by their dying father; he therefore being first in blessing, though not in birth, is put first, to teach children how to value the smiles of their godly parents and dread their frowns.

The camp of Dan (and so that tribe is called long after their settlement in Canaan <Judg. 13:25>, because celebrated for their military prowess), though posted in the left wing when they encamped, was ordered in their march to bring up the rear, v. 31. They were the most numerous, next to Judah, and therefore were ordered into a post which, next to the front, required the most strength, for as the strength is so shall the day be. Lastly, The children of Israel observed the orders given them, and did as the Lord commanded Moses, v. 34. They put themselves in the posts assigned them, without murmuring or disputing, and, as it was their safety, so it was their beauty; Balaam was charmed with the sight of it: How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob! <Num 24:5>.”

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* remarks about the space that would be occupied by such a mass of people: “If we examine and compare the camp of Israel with that of our most numerous armies which in these days are composed of 100,000 or of 150,000 men, we cannot but consider it of vast extent. The Jews say it was twelve miles in circumference; this is not at all improbable, and consequently the front of each wing must be three miles in extent. But taking in the tents, the soldiers and their numerous families, the beasts of burden, the cattle, and the goods it certainly must have formed a very considerable inclosure, much more than twelve miles.” And according to Josephus, “It was, says, like a well appointed market where everything was ready for sale in due order, and all sorts of artificers kept their shops, so that this camp might be considered a movable city.” We can hardly overestimate the impression this encampment must have made upon Israel's enemies, both human and spiritual. Satan must have observed with fear and trembling the column of cloud and fire that formed the visible center of the camp, symbolizing the presence of God Himself. And we get a little idea of what it must have looked like from the viewpoint of Balaam, of whom Clarke says: “Balaam was charmed with the sight of it.” This must be considered an understatement.

When we compare the nation of Israel, as we see it in the desert, with the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, we realize the differences and the similarity. It has been said that the church is not an organization but an organism. As born again believers we are members of the body of Christ. The Israelites were born into the nation of Israel, but what bound them together was more a bond of blood than a common spiritual experience. The fact that the Lord was in their midst was more a life threatening experience than a source of joy and life for them. All the components of a spiritual reality were present, but for the majority of the nation this had not brought about an inner change. Even as we see them here, with the ark of the covenant and the presence of God in their midst, lined up around the center according to the tribes and banners, they are more a well organized band of rebels than the army of the Lord.

Jesus says about the church: “I am the vine; you are the branches.”<sup>24</sup> This picture may be idyllic, but yet it is the essence of the church. Unless we are united by an inner spiritual life to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, we do not belong to the church. There is a tendency to see a contradiction between this truth and any form of human organization. In spite of the fact that there is a tensed relationship between human organization and spiritual life, there has to be order. Like the tribes were given their exact place in relationship to the tabernacle and each knew the distance to observer in their settling down and breaking up, so the dominion of the Holy Spirit in the church creates order. Paul says: “The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.”<sup>25</sup> Peace is not just a state of mind, but the result of an orderly arrangement in which each individual and group knows its place.

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<sup>24</sup> John 15:5

<sup>25</sup> I Cor. 14:32,33

## CHAPTER THREE

**B. Organization of the Priests** 3:1-4:49

This section is more complicated than appears on the surface. We are drawn back here from the larger circle of the tribes encamped around the tabernacle, to the inner circle of the Levites and priests.

The NIV reads here: "This is the account of the family of Aaron and Moses at the time the LORD talked with Moses on Mount Sinai." The KJV says: "These also are the generations of Aaron and Moses in the day that the LORD spake with Moses in mount Sinai." *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks on this verse: "The word 'generations' (*toledoth*) is used here in a peculiar and, so to speak, technical sense, with reference to what follows, as in Gen. ii. 4; vi. 9. It marks a new departure, looking *down*, not *up*, the course of history. Moses and Aaron were a beginning in themselves as the chosen heads of the chosen tribe: Moses having the higher office, but one entirely personal to himself; Aaron being the first of a long and eminent line of priests. The actual genealogy, therefore, is that of Aaron, and he is placed first."

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* is even a little more elucidating on the subject. He says: "[The generations of Aaron and Moses] Though Aaron and Moses are both mentioned here, yet the family of Aaron alone appears in the list; hence, some have thought that the word Moses was not originally in the text. Others think that the words *w<sup>a</sup>eeleh towl<sup>a</sup>dot*, 'these are the generations,' should be rendered these are the acts, or transactions, or the history of the lives as the same phrase may be understood in <Gen. 2:4; 6:9>. However this may be, it is evident that in this genealogy the family of Aaron are alone mentioned, probably because these belonged to the priesthood. Moses passes by his own family, or immediate descendants; he gave no rank or privilege to them during his life, and left nothing to them at his death. They became incorporated with the Levites, from or amongst whom they are never distinguished. What a strong proof is this of the celestial origin of his religion! Had it been of man, it must have had the gratification of some impure passion for its object; lust, ambition, or avarice: but none of these ever appear during the whole of his administration amongst the Israelites, though he had it constantly in his power to have gratified each. *What an essential difference between the religion of the Pentateuch and that of the Koran! The former is God's workmanship, the latter is a motley mixture of all bad crafts, with here and there a portion of heavenly fire, stolen from the divine altar in the Old and New Testaments, to give some vitality to the otherwise inert mass.*"<sup>26</sup> (Quite an astute analysis of the Koran!)

The chapter opens in the vs. 1-4 with a brief summary of Aaron's family, mentioning in passing that two of Aaron's four sons died when they performed priestly duties in an unauthorized way. The reference is to the tragedy described in Lev. 10. Aaron and his sons form the beginning of the Old Testament priesthood. But the revelation regarding their position, duties and privileges is given to Moses, not to Aaron. Aaron, however, was the only person who was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. His two sons could never go farther than the first room of the tabernacle. This all speaks of the fact that fellowship with God was restricted; it was not abolished, but it was limited. Fellowship with God was by representation. Every Israelite could only approach God "in Aaron." Yet, the message of this whole chapter is that, in principle, fellowship with God was meant to be for all. God's claim upon all the firstborn seems to imply this.

The point of the first 4 verses of this chapter seems to be that there were only three priests: Aaron, the high priest and his two sons: Eleazar and Ithamar.

The following section brings the whole tribe of Levi into the inner circle. We read in vs. 6 and 9: "Bring the tribe of Levi and present them to Aaron the priest to assist him. Give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to him." In the last phrase the verb "to give" appears three times in the Hebrew text. "To be given wholly" is made emphatic by the repetition of the word *n<sup>a</sup>tuwnim*, which is a form of *nathan*, to give. God gave the tribe of Levi to Aaron in an irrevocable way; it was a gift that could never be taken back. As we have seen already before, the Levites were to form a living insulation around the tabernacle. With their own lives they protected the ark from the sinful pollution of the people and, at the same time, protected the people from the lethal radiation of God's holiness. Vs. 10 tell us: "Anyone else who approaches the sanctuary must be put to death."

In giving the reasons for the dedication of the Levites, God reveals a profound principle that should make a difference in the life of every living being. God had told Moses earlier about the whole nation of Israel: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my

<sup>26</sup> Italics are mine.

treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>27</sup> “The whole earth is Mine,” says the Lord. Satan may act as if he has the right of ownership, but in God’s choosing of Israel, God contests this right, not by taking all of it back, but by laying His hand upon what He wants. Taking a part of the whole, instead of insisting upon all of it, is often a much more effective proof of ownership than taking the whole. Satan knows that God can come to this earth and take what He wants and there is nothing he can do to prevent this. This makes the giving of the Levites to Aaron such an emphatic act. As if God wants to say: “I give them to you, never to take them back.”

The principle is shown in its deeper implications in vs. 13, where God says: “For all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether man or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD.” We can hear the blast of the trumpet in these last words: “I am the LORD!” During the night of the Passover, God proved that He had the right to every human life on earth. He gave His final answer to Pharaoh’s impertinent question: “Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go?”<sup>28</sup> God could have taken every single life in Egypt, every single life on earth. He took only one life in every family, in order to prove His right. He took the life of a lamb in Israel and the life of a human being in Egypt. He is the Lord and if we want to live we have to pay for our life, either by our own blood or someone else’s.

The principle is this: When man declared his independence, which he did when he took the forbidden fruit and ate it, he forfeited his life. One cannot take God’s fruit, not even one single one, and not pay for it. The only form of payment is death. Since God is the source of all life, separation from God means death. Man can only live on earth and live on eternally, if he pays for it, or is paid for. The Passover night in Egypt proved this. The Egyptians paid themselves, the Israelites were paid for. In the desert, after the construction of the tabernacle and at the inauguration of its service, this principle showed itself in practice. God had taken Israel in this world, to demonstrate that the earth is His; He had taken all the first born of Israel to demonstrate that the whole nation was His and now He takes the Levites to demonstrate what it means to be wholly His. The Levites were taken as a payment for the whole nation, which is the application of the principle of payment with one’s life. In a sense, God’s choice of the Levites meant the end of their lives; it was a form of death. But at the same time, having died in a sense, they protect the tabernacle, and the people, with their lives. In their service to the Lord, death daily played a prominent part. All the bloody sacrifices spoke of payments that were being made. They bought every draught of breath for the whole nation.

Their position was, at the same time, the saddest and most glorious possible. They stood between the living God and people who were dead in sin. They were part of both worlds. In this way, Jacob’s prophetic curse was fulfilled. On his deathbed, Jacob had said to Simeon and Levi: “I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.”<sup>29</sup> Levi was scattered in Israel, but their curse became the nation’s greatest blessing.

There is confusion regarding the report of the count of the Levites, in that the total of the individual clans does not add up correctly. A simple addition comes to 22,300 not 22,000 as vs. 39 says. From *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* we copy the following: “[All the males from a month old and upward, were twenty and two thousand.] This total does not agree with the particulars, for the Gershonites were 7,500, the Kohathites 8,600, the Merarites 6,200, total 22,300. Several methods of solving this difficulty have been proposed by learned men; Dr. Kennicott’s is the most simple. Formerly the numbers in the Hebrew Bible were expressed by letters, and not by words at full length; and if two nearly similar letters were mistaken for each other, many errors in the numbers must be the consequence. Now it is probable that an error has crept into the number of the Gershonites, verse 22, where, instead of 7,500, we should read 7,200, as *kaph* (“k”), 500, might have been easily mistaken for *resh* (“r”), 200, especially if the down stroke of the kaph had been a little shorter than ordinary, which is often the case in MSS. The extra 300 being taken off, the total is just 22,000, as mentioned in the 39th verse.”

Whereas in ch. 1:3 both Moses and Aaron were ordered to count all the men to be conscripted into the army, the counting of the Levites is specifically entrusted to Moses alone. The fact that they were to be a gift from the Lord to Aaron would make it awkward for him to participate in the counting. We may suppose, however, that Moses was allowed assistance from others in this count. Levi had three sons: Gershon, Kohath and Merari, which formed the major division into the clans of the tribe. We find the first

<sup>27</sup> Ex. 19:5,6

<sup>28</sup> Ex. 5:2

<sup>29</sup> Gen. 49:7

mention of Levi's sons when Jacob sets out with his sons to go to Egypt: "The sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath and Merari."<sup>30</sup> From these the tribe is divided into the Gershonites, the Kohathites and the Merarites. The Gershonite clan was subdivided into the clans of Libni and Shimei; the Kohathite clan into four sub-clans of Amram, Izhar, Hebron and Uzziel, and the Merarites into two sub-clans of Mahli and Mushi. Moses and Aaron were the sons of Amram, so they belonged to the Kohathites. It was in the count of the Gershonite clan that, supposedly, the transcription error may have slipped and that they added up to 7,200 instead of the 7,500 our text mentions.

*The Pulpit Commentary* adds here: "The four families of the Kohathites, of which that of Amram was one, must have contained about 18,000 souls. Moses and Aaron were sons of Amram, and they seem to have had but two sons apiece at this time. If, therefore, the family of the Amramites was at all equal in numbers to the other three, they must have had more than 4000 brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces. It is urged in reply that Amram lived 137 years, and may have had many other children, and that the variations in comparative rates of increase are so great and so unaccountable that it is useless to speculate upon them. There is, however, a more serious difficulty connected with the genealogy of Moses and Aaron, as given here and elsewhere. If they were the great-grandchildren of Levi on their father's side, and his grandchildren on their mother's side, it is impossible to maintain the obvious meaning of Exod. xii, 40. Either the genealogy must be lengthened, or the time must be very much shortened for the sojourning in Egypt. The known and undoubted habit of the sacred writers to omit names in their genealogies, even in those which seem most precise, lessens the difficulty of the first alternative, whereas every consideration of numbers, including those in this passage, increases the difficulty of the second. To endeavor to avoid either alternative, and to force the apparent statements of Scripture into accord by assuming a multiplicity of unrecorded and improbable miracles at every turn (as, e.g., that Jochebed, the mother of Moses, was restored to youth and beauty at an extreme old age), is to expose the holy writings to contempt. It is much more reverent to believe, either that the genealogies are very imperfect, or that the numbers in the text have been very considerably altered. Every consideration of particular examples, still more the general impression left by the whole narrative, favours the former as against the latter alternative."

As the clans are counted, their place of encampment in relation to the tabernacle is indicated, and responsibility they would have in the tabernacle service, as well as the name of the leader of the whole clan. The leader of the Gershonites was Eliasaph son of Lael and they were responsible for the care of the tabernacle and tent, its coverings, the curtain at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the curtains of the courtyard, the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle and altar, and the ropes--and everything related to their use.

The leader of the Kohathite clan was Elizaphan son of Uzziel; their position was on the south side of the tabernacle and they were responsible for the care of the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the articles of the sanctuary used in ministering, the curtain, and everything related to their use. So theirs was the greatest responsibility.

The head of the Merarite clans was Zuriel son of Abihail. Their place was on the north side of the tabernacle and their responsibility was to take care of the frames of the tabernacle, its crossbars, posts, bases, all its equipment, and everything related to their use, as well as the posts of the surrounding courtyard with their bases, tent pegs and ropes. They were the bolts and nuts committee.

In fulfilling their task, the Levites did what, in principle the whole nation of Israel should have done. We read in vs. 8: "They are to take care of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting, fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle." This principle was implied in the appointment of the priests also. God had told Israel that He intended them to be "a kingdom of priests."<sup>31</sup> But as long as the propitiation was done by substitution, that is with animal blood, the tribe of Levi substituted for the whole nation and the priests for the whole tribe. It wasn't until the picture became reality and the precious blood of Jesus Christ was poured out instead of animal blood, that all reconciled men became priests.<sup>32</sup>

After the census of the Levites had been taken, all the first born Israelite males, one month old and above, were to be counted. It is supposed that the first born among the Levites were excluded from this. The total first born males came to 22,273, which was 273 short of the total of all the male Levites in that age bracket. The difference was to be settled in a payment to Aaron of ransom money of five shekel per

<sup>30</sup> Gen. 46:11

<sup>31</sup> See Ex. 19:5

<sup>32</sup> See Rev. 1:5<sup>b</sup>, 6; 5:9

person, bringing the total to 1365 shekel. TLB translates this as five dollar, which is probably an arbitrary rendering to make the transaction readable to modern readers. We are not told, where this money came from. *Adam Clarke* rejects the notion that there was a drawing of straws to determine who would be the unfortunate ones who had to pay. He supposes that the money came from a "general fund."

An interesting feature in all this is that, not only did the Levites substitute for all the first born males among the humans, but also their livestock took the place of that of the people. We read in vs. 41: "Take the Levites for me in place of all the firstborn of the Israelites, and the livestock of the Levites in place of all the firstborn of the livestock of the Israelites. I am the LORD." We are not given any account of the total of livestock and if any discrepancy occurred between the number of animals of the people and of the ones belonging to the Levites.

*The Pulpit Commentary* has an interest note on the relatively small number of first born in such a large nation. We copy: **"Twenty and two thousand two hundred and threescore and thirteen.** These were the first-born of the twelve tribes; but who were included under the designation 'first-born' is a matter of grave dispute. The smallness of their number (not much above one percent, of the whole population) has given rise to several conflicting theories, all of which seem to be artificial, arbitrary, and therefore unsatisfactory. ... One [other] explanation strives to satisfy the arithmetical condition of the problem by assuming that the whole of the Divine legislation in this matter was in reality directed against the worship of Moloch, and was designed to prevent the offering of first-born to him by redeeming them unto himself. As the rites of Moloch only demanded young children of tender age, only such were counted in this census. It may, indeed be very probably concluded that their heavenly Father *did* claim these first-born, partly in order to save them from Moloch, because the people would thereafter be exposed to the fascination of the horrid superstition; but there is no proof whatever that they were acquainted with it at this time. These cruel rites, together with many other heathen abominations, are forbidden in Levit. xviii, 21 and Deut. xviii, 10, in view of the entry in Canaan, where they were practiced. The prophet Amos, when he reproaches them with having 'carried the tabernacle of *their* Moloch' even in the wilderness (Amos v. 26), absolves them by implication from any darker superstition; and the highly rhetorical passage Ezek. xx. 26 seems to refer to the consequences of disobedience at a later date, and can hardly be pressed against the entire silence of the Pentateuch. Anyhow it does not seem possible, on the strength of a supposed intention on the part of God of which no trace appears in the text, to impose a narrow and arbitrary limit upon the plain command to number 'all the first-born, from a month old and upward.' If we turn from these speculations to the reason and ground of the matter as stated by God himself, it will appear much more simple. It was distinctly on the ground of their preservation from the destroying angel in Egypt that the first-born of Israel were claimed as God's *peculium* now (see ver. 13). The command in Exod. xiii. 1 was no doubt prospective, but the sanctification of the first-born was based upon the deliverance itself; and this command was intended not to limit that sanctification for the present, but to continue it for the future. Now if we turn to Exod. xii. 29,30, and ask who the first-born were whom the destroying angel cut off, we see plainly enough that they included the eldest son, being a child, in every house; that every family lost one, and only one. On the one hand, Pharaoh himself was in all probability a first-born, but he was not in any personal danger, because he ranked and suffered as a father, but not as a son. On the other hand, the majority of families in which the first-born was a daughter, or had died, did not therefore escape: 'there was not a house where there was not one dead.' Taking this as the only sure ground to go upon, we may conclude with some confidence that the first-born now claimed by God included all the eldest sons in the families of Israel who were not themselves the heads of houses. These were the destroyed in Egypt - these the redeemed in Israel. How they came to be so few in proportion is a matter in itself of extremely slight importance, and dependent, perhaps, upon causes of which no record was left."

We could add to this interesting comment that the first-born at the time of the first Passover, had already been redeemed by the blood of the lamb. It would seem doubtful that God would take them again as a ransom, by way of having them substituted by the Levites. This would mean that only those who were born after the exodus would fall into this category. This would mean that in the one year since the exodus more than 2,000 babies had been born into young families. This is not too amazing, if we consider the effect the end of slavery would have upon a nation. A "baby-boom" could be expected in this first year of freedom.

The possibility that the first-born in question were all babies and young children, is reinforced by the price of five shekels that was levied for each of them, because this is the price fixed in the book of Leviticus for boys between the age of one months and five years. We read there: "If it is a person between

one month and five years, set the value of a male at five shekels of silver and that of a female at three shekels of silver.”<sup>33</sup>

Both the Levites and the amount of money gathered from the 273 first-born in excess of the tribe of Levi, were given to Aaron. Aaron and his office of high priest is greatly enhanced by this gesture. For God had said earlier in vs. 12 and 13: “I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether man or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD,” and here God gives the Levites and the money to Aaron as a present. This puts Aaron on the same level with God. Aaron will have used the money, as he used the Levites, for the service in the tabernacle; but he was, evidently, relatively free to use his own judgment and discretion as to how both were to be used. God gives here to a human, to one of His own creatures, an authority which is equal to His own. In all this Aaron foreshadows the man Jesus Christ, the real High Priest, to whom was given “all authority in heaven and on earth.”<sup>34</sup>

Finally, we could ask the question why the tribe of Levi was chosen as a substitute for Israel’s first-born. The first thought that comes to mind is that the fact that Moses himself was a Levite shows a conflict of interests. Blood is thicker than water. But it was God who chose, not Moses. The fact that Moses was a Levite may have played a role in God’s choice. It has been suggested that God’s choice of the Levites was influenced by their attitude during the incident with the Golden Calf. We read that, when the people had gone wild, Moses “stood at the entrance to the camp and said, ‘Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.’ And all the Levites rallied to him.”<sup>35</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that the number of the Levites comes closest to the number of first-born to be redeemed. As it is, God’s choice of the Levites overturned Jacob’s curse on them. He had said: “I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.”<sup>36</sup> They were scattered among the nation, but as God’s salt, not as Jacob’s ashes.

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<sup>33</sup> Lev. 27:6

<sup>34</sup> Matt. 28:18

<sup>35</sup> Ex. 32:26

<sup>36</sup> Gen. 49:7

## CHAPTER FOUR

### B. Organization of the Priests (continued) 3:1-4:49

The fourth chapter goes over part of the material given in abbreviated form in the previous one, but here the tasks the various clans of the Levites have to perform is spelled out in great detail. For the purpose of the division of labor that another count is made. In the previous chapter the males were counted from the age of one month and above for the purpose of substituting for Israel's first-born. Here the count starts at age thirty and finishes at fifty for the purpose of breaking down and putting up the tabernacle during the desert journey.

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* points to the discrepancy between the age limit given here and in other parts of the Old Testament. We read: "[From thirty years old] In <Num. 8:24>, the Levites are ordered to enter on the service of the tabernacle at the age of twenty-five years; and in <1 Chr. 23:24>, they were ordered to commence that work at twenty years of age. How can these different times be reconciled?

1. At the time of which Moses speaks here, the Levitical service was exceedingly severe, and consequently required men full-grown, strong, and stout, to perform it; the age therefore of thirty years was appointed as the period for commencing this service, the weightier part of which is probably here intended.

2. In <Num. 8:24>, Moses seems to speak of the service in a general way, the severe, which was to be performed by the full-grown Levites, and the less laborious work which younger men might assist in; hence, the age of twenty-five is fixed.

3. In David's time and afterward, in the fixed tabernacle and temple, the laboriousness of the service no longer existed, and hence, twenty years was the age fixed on for all Levites to enter into the work of the sanctuary. The rabbis say that the Levites began to learn to do the service at twenty-five, and that having been instructed five years, they began the public service at thirty, and thus they reconcile the two periods referred to above. We may well suppose that the sons of the prophets continued a considerable time under instructions before they were called fully to exercise themselves in the prophetic office."

The Levites, who had been divided up already into three clans: the Kohathites, the Gershonites and the Merarites, are now counted separately and each clan is given its specific task in the transportation of the tabernacle during the journey toward Canaan.

The Kohathites are given the most important task of preparing the furniture of the tabernacle for transportation and of carrying the pieces. Aaron was a Kohathite, and he and his sons were in charge of the actual preparation of the furniture, before the carriers were called in to begin the transportation. Nobody was allowed to touch or even see the sacred furniture. That is why everything is covered and wrapped before it is carried into the open.

The first article to be prepared is the ark. Even Aaron and his sons were not allowed to touch the object which represented the throne of God. Even on the Day of Atonement, when Aaron had to enter the Holy of Holies, he was not allowed to see the ark. We read in the description of the ritual of that day: "He is to put the incense on the fire before the LORD, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die."<sup>37</sup> So we may presume that Aaron had to take down the curtain, that separated the first chamber from the second, in such a way that it fell upon the ark and covered it before human eye could gaze upon it.

Vs. 6 tells us that the poles used for the carrying of the ark were to be put in place. This gives the impression that they had been taken out. When God gave Moses instructions regarding the making of the ark, however, He said specifically: "The poles are to remain in the rings of this ark; they are not to be removed."<sup>38</sup> So, presumably, now the poles were not inserted but only adjusted for the purpose of carrying.

The ark, the table, the golden altar and the lampstand were all to be covered with a piece of cloth and sea cow hides. In the case of the ark, the blue cloth was put on top, with all the other furniture the hides were on top. The ark was covered with blue cloth, and so was the lampstand and the gold altar. The table itself was covered with blue cloth, but a purple cloth was put on top of the utensils and the showbread. Also the brass altar was to be covered with a purple cloth. The blue, obviously, referred to the heavenly character of the articles, and the purple must have been a reminder of the price that was paid by the shedding of blood in order to make fellowship with God possible. So the sacrificial animal and the bread on the table were united by the color of the cloth that covered them. They were also united in the Passover celebration.

<sup>37</sup> Lev. 16:13

<sup>38</sup> Ex. 25:15



We read that during the Last Supper, our Lord, the Lamb of God, “took bread gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’”<sup>39</sup>

Adam Clarke has an interesting observation in connection with the disassembling of the tabernacle. He quotes a certain Ainsworth and says: “Mr. Ainsworth has a very useful note on the 20th verse of this chapter, the most edifying part of which I shall here lay before the reader. He considers the tabernacle and temple, not only as pointing out the old dispensation, the annulling of which was typified by their destruction, but he considers also the former as emblematical of the body of man.

‘The apostle,’ says he, ‘treating of the death of the saints, uses this similitude: ‘If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For we that are in THIS TABERNACLE do groan, being burdened, not for that we would be unclothed but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life,’ <2 Cor. 5:1-4>. So Peter calls his death the putting off of his TABERNACLE, <2 Pet. 1:14>. And this similitude is very fit; for, as here, in the tabernacle of Moses, the holy things were first covered and taken away, (see <Num. 4:20>,) so the soul and its powers are first withdrawn from the body by death. 2. Since the curtains and coverings were taken off and folded up, so the skin and flesh of our bodies are pulled off and consumed. 3. Since the boards of the tabernacle were disjointed and pulled asunder, so shall our bones and sinews: compare Job’s description of the formation of man, <Num. 10:8-12>; and Solomon’s account of his dissolution, <Eccl. 12:3-4> 4. Since the disjointed and dissolved tabernacle was afterward set up again, <Num. 10:21>, so shall our bodies in the day of the resurrection; see <1 Cor. 15:51-54>.’ ”

And, of course, we cannot think of death and resurrection without reference to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says about the celebration of the Last Supper: “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’”<sup>40</sup> The KJV and some other translations insert the word “broken” so that it reads “This is my body, which is broken for you.” The Greek, however, does not have the word in the original. It is quite legitimate, though, to see the death of our Lord in the disassembling of the tabernacle. The great difference is that, when the tabernacle was taken apart the curtain was taken down and put upon the ark. When Jesus died the curtain was torn to give us access into the presence of God. Matthew, giving the account of Jesus’ death says: “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”<sup>41</sup> And the writer to the Hebrews draws the lesson from this event by saying: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body ...”<sup>42</sup>

So, the tabernacle, which was a complete picture of God in His Incarnation, had to be taken apart and reassembled over and over again until the moment that the picture became reality. By that time the tent had been replaced by a magnificent building. Actually, the temple that stood in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ death was the third copy in stone of the Incarnation. From that building too, it was prophesied by Christ that it would be torn down; which happened in 70 AD when the Romans captured Jerusalem. Matthew records: “Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. ‘Do you see all these things?’ he asked. ‘I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.’”<sup>43</sup>

As we said before, Aaron was probably the one who covered the ark, but his sons assisted him in the covering of the other pieces of furniture. According to vs. 16, Aaron’s son, Eleazar is given the general oversight and he is specifically charged with the care of the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular grain offering and the anointing oil.

God is very concerned about the safety of the Kohathites. The admonition to Moses and Aaron: “See that the Kohathite tribal clans are not cut off from the Levites,” seems to indicate that the priests would be held responsible if anything happened to these Levites because of their negligence. God wants the priests and the Levites to be very much aware of the danger of His holiness. Familiarity breeds negligence. Being in the presence of the Lord is more dangerous than handling live wire. The tragedy with Aaron’s two sons, Nadab and Abihu, should have been a sufficient warning, but man’s memory tends to be short. Added

<sup>39</sup> Matt. 26:26

<sup>40</sup> I Cor. 11:23,24

<sup>41</sup> Matt. 27:50,51

<sup>42</sup> Heb. 10:19,20

<sup>43</sup> Matt. 24:1,2

to this, man can be so hardened in his heart that he becomes totally insensitive to glory. The apostle John testifies: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."<sup>44</sup> But he was one of the few who saw this and understood it. To most men John's previous words apply: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."<sup>45</sup> God does not want any more fatal accidents to happen among the Kohathites, because He loves them.

*The Pulpit Commentary* remarks on vs. 15: "One thing which the Kohathites almost certainly had to carry is omitted here, possibly because it was carried without any cover at all, and was not regarded as of equal sanctity with the rest. Anyhow, the omission is very remarkable, and may have been accidental. It is supplied by the Septuagint and the Samaritan text in the following addition to ver. 14 : 'And they shall take a purple cloth, and cover the laver and its foot, and they shall put it into a hyacinthine cover of skin, and put it on bars.' The burdens of the Kohathites were six, not counting the laver and its foot: (1) the ark; (2) the table of shewbread; (3) the candelabrum; (4) the golden altar; (5) 'instruments of ministry;' (6) the frame of the brazen altar."

Vs. 21-27 deal with the responsibility of the Gershonites. They are in charge of all the curtains and coverings of the tabernacle. The curtain that separated the Holy from the Holy of Holies was excluded from this inventory, because it was used to cover the ark. The Gershonites had the lightest load to carry, probably because they were the smaller of the three clans into which the tribe of Levi was divided. The heaviest burden fell upon the Merarites, who had "to carry the frames of the tabernacle, its crossbars, posts and bases, as well as the posts of the surrounding courtyard with their bases, tent pegs, ropes, all their equipment and everything related to their use." We find their task described in vs. 29-34. They were the largest of the clans. The NIV renders vs. 32 as: "Assign to each man the specific things he is to carry." The KJV translates this as: "by name ye shall reckon the instruments of the charge of their burden." The *Septuagint* translates this as: "Number them by name and all the articles borne by them." *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: "Perhaps the solid part of the fabric were numbered for convenience of setting up, and, therefore, were assigned each to its own bearer."

The weight of the different parts of the tabernacle added up to a heavy load to carry through the desert. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* remarks here: "From this and the preceding chapter we see the very severe labour which the Levites were obliged to perform while the journeyings of the Israelites lasted. When we consider that there was not less than 10 tons 13 cwt. 24 lb. 14 oz.. i. e., almost ten tons and fourteen hundred pounds' weight of metal employed in the tabernacle ... besides the immense weight of the skins, hangings. cords, boards, and posts, we shall find it was no very easy matter to transport this movable temple from place to place." If Clarke's calculations are correct, the weight of the metal alone would add up to about 7,500 kg.

The rest of the chapter, from vs. 35-49 gives us the count of each clan and the total number of Levites in the age bracket in which they had to serve, that is between age 30 and 50. The Kohathites add up to 2750, the Gershonites to 2630 and the Merarites to 3200, bringing the total to 8580, which is approximately 38% of the number of Levites that was counted as a substitution for the firstborn of the whole nation.

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<sup>44</sup> John 1:14

<sup>45</sup> John 1:10,11

## CHAPTER FIVE

### II. Sanctification of Israel 5:1-10:10

#### A. Sanctification through Separation 5:1-31

##### a. Expulsion from the camp. (vs. 1-4)

This section deals with three kinds of separation: 1. A physical separation, 2. A moral separation, and 3. A spiritual separation.

##### 1. A physical separation.

God commanded Moses to send out of the camp anyone with an infectious skin disease or a discharge of any kind, or who is ceremonially unclean because of a dead body.

As *Adam Clarke's Commentary* points out, there were two reasons for the expulsion of the above mentioned individuals: contagion and sanctification. The skin disease and the discharge could make other people sick, and so, in some cases, could the handling of a dead body be a vehicle for transmission of sickness. But the main issue was, of course, that sickness and death, as synonyms of sin, could not be tolerated in the presence of God.

The NIV does not use the term leper, like most other translations do. The Hebrew word is *tsâra`*, which *Strong's Definitions* describe as: "to scourge, ... to be stricken with leprosy." *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* remarks on this: "Modern medicine now recognizes that some of these symptoms belonged to diseases other than leprosy." Whatever the disease may have been, it was considered to be incurable, apart from divine intervention. Yet, the book of Leviticus deals in detail with the sickness and with the ritual that had to accompany the purification, once it has been determined that the sufferer was healed.<sup>46</sup>

Leprosy was the sickness that pictured, more than any other disease, the damage sin had done to mankind. It was *tsâra`*, the scourge. The rite of purification in connection with this sickness is one of the most beautiful and meaningful illustrations of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As far as we know the only lepers, among the nation of Israel, that were ever healed were the ones who were cured by Christ. When Jesus heals one of the leper in the Gospel of Mark and tells him: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them,"<sup>47</sup> it would probably have been the first time the prescribed ritual of purification could have been performed by a Jewish priest. Unfortunately, the man disobeyed Jesus command, so the priests could not act out the rite that symbolized the Lord's death and resurrection.<sup>48</sup>

##### 2. A moral separation.

The second category of people to be sent away, were the ones with a discharge. TLB translates this with: "all who have open sores," but the connection seems to be that of a sexual disease. The Hebrew word is *zûwb*, which is defined by *Strong's* as: "to flow freely (as water), i.e. (spec.) to have a (sexual) flux." Since the kind of sickness referred to here is, in most cases, transmitted by sexual intercourse, the impurity has a moral connotation. Where leprosy exemplified sin in its outward demonstration, these symptoms embody the fact that sin has affected the very core of man's being. That part of man's life which stood for the most intimate relationships, was spoiled by sin and had become offensive to God.

##### 3. A spiritual separation.

The third group of people to be sent away, were those who had been into close contact with death. Their impurity was more transitory than of the previous two categories, since they could be declared clean at the end of a certain period of time. Presumably, the contact with death in this context, is with the human body. Leviticus specifies that contact with any dead creature defiled a human being. We read about certain ritually impure animal: "You will make yourselves unclean by these; whoever touches their carcasses will be unclean till evening."<sup>49</sup> Later in the book of Numbers we read: "Anyone out in the open who touches someone who has been killed with a sword or someone who has died a natural death, or anyone who

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<sup>46</sup> See Lev. 13, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Mark 1:44

<sup>48</sup> See Mark 1:40-45

<sup>49</sup> Lev. 11:24

touches a human bone or a grave, will be unclean for seven days.”<sup>50</sup> And as a general rule, a priest could not serve if he came into contact with the dead. “A priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die.”<sup>51</sup> Death is the ultimate insult to God and to man as the bearer of His image. God does not want His people to consider death as a natural phenomenon, but as an infringement upon His holiness.

b. Restitution. (vs. 5-10)

The sinful condition which forms the core of these verses is not spelled out. It is simply defined as doing wrong to someone in any way. It pertains to the relationship between individuals, but the source of the trouble is unfaithfulness in the relationship with God. Vs. 6 reads: “When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD, that person is guilty.” Since it involves restitution, we can narrow the offense to wrongful acts in a business relationship. We find the clause “unfaithful to the LORD” also in Leviticus, in the same context, where the sins are more specifically spelled out. We read: “If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the LORD by deceiving his neighbor about something entrusted to him or left in his care or stolen, or if he cheats him, or if he finds lost property and lies about it, or if he swears falsely, or if he commits any such sin that people may do ...”<sup>52</sup> Cheating in business, overcharging or taking advantage of another man’s weak condition, would all fall into this category. A man who loves God will love his neighbor as he loves himself. Straying from this principle defiles the camp just as much as the physical problems in the previous section did. God considers the sins we commit in our relationship with our fellowmen as being committed to Him. In the parable of the separation of the sheep and the goats, Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”<sup>53</sup> The prodigal son understood this, and so, in his confession to his father he said: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.”<sup>54</sup>

In the context of our social relations sin is a complicating factor. God’s rule for any society is: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>55</sup> In practice, however, no human society observes this fundamental requirement. The air we breathe is polluted with sin, greed and selfishness. Even if the root of sin were not in our hearts, we would hardly be able to keep ourselves clean. The clause “any such sin that people may do” describes the reality of all human relations.

The passage before us suggests that there are moments of spiritual illumination in the human heart that make man realize that he has, in fact, wronged his neighbor and is, consequently, guilty before the Lord. These verses deal with such moments of awakening, which are caused by the realization of God’s presence. Where God’s presence is not experienced, cheating and lying will continue undisturbed. We could describe the conditions God mentions here to Moses as a spiritual revival.

There is no clearer sign of a spiritual awakening as when people start to confess their sins and make restitution for the wrongs they have done. Before World War II a Chinese evangelist held meetings in the Indonesian city of Makassar. This caused a revival among the Chinese merchants of the city. The Dutch colonial authorities of that time realized that something unusual was happening among them, when Chinese store owners came to them and paid them back for what they had overcharged them. Restitution is the clearest indication of repentance. No repentance and restitution is possible, however, without the convicting work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of man. Jesus says about the Holy Spirit: “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.”<sup>56</sup>

Forgiveness of sin is based, not only upon restitution, but also upon a sacrifice. Without the sacrifice, which in this case is the guilt offering, restitution would not have any effect. It is the sacrifice that erases the sin from God’s record in heaven. The basis for our restitution is the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross.

Restitution itself consisted of the return of stolen or illegally retained items and the payment of a fine of 20% of the value of the item. Zacchaeus understood the principle, but he went far beyond the law

<sup>50</sup> Num. 19:16

<sup>51</sup> Lev. 21:1

<sup>52</sup> Lev. 6:2,3

<sup>53</sup> Matt. 25:40

<sup>54</sup> Luke 15:21

<sup>55</sup> Luke 10:27

<sup>56</sup> John 16:8

when he said to Jesus: "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."<sup>57</sup>

The duty of restitution did not end with the death of the person to whom it had to be made. If that person had passed away in the meantime his heirs would also received the right to benefit from the fruits of restitution. We gather this from vs. 8, which reads: "But if that person has no close relative to whom restitution can be made for the wrong, the restitution belongs to the LORD and must be given to the priest, along with the ram with which atonement is made for him." *Adam Clarke* comments on this point: "The Jews think that this law respects the stranger and the sojourner only, because every Israelite is in a state of affinity to all the rest; but there might be a stranger in the camp who has no relative in any of the tribes of Israel." It would, indeed, add to the greatness of the nation of Israel if the foreigners living among them would be treated in the same way as the kinsman. A spiritual revival would clearly be enhanced by a wiping out of all racial prejudice.

### 3. A spiritual separation.

The law described in vs. 11-31 is hard for us to understand. We call it a spiritual separation, because this bond between husband and wife is an expression of the love relationship between Christ and the church. Paul says: " 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church." Unfaithfulness in this intimate relationship is, according to Christ, the only reason for divorce. Our Lord said: "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."<sup>58</sup> The keyword, to establish the relationship with the rest of this chapter, seems to be "impurity," which would be a reason for expulsion from the community. We read in vs. 13: "and this is hidden from her husband and her impurity is undetected."

What bothers us in this section, however, is not the fact that there may have been unfaithfulness and that the husband is jealous, but that a ritual, that smells of bad magic, is used to override the denial of the woman.

It seems that Israel was not the only nation that used this kind of "witch hunt" to determine the guilt of a woman in a case of suspected adultery. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* thinks that other nations copied Israel's model, but there is no guarantee that such was the case, and that the other nations were not the ones who practiced this judgment before Israel did. If that is true, the verses before us would be a divine sanction upon an existing practice. Turning the judgment over to the priest takes the process out of the realm of magic and bring it under the control of the Holy Spirit, in the same way as the casting of dice, or the use of the Urim and Thummim became venues for consulting the Lord. That seems to be an acceptable explanation.

Our problem remains, though, when we observe how young Christians, who came out of the superstition of paganism, and who were used to this kind of magic, using cursed water or fetishes to determine guilt or innocence, see in this law a sanction for their heathen practices.

The Pulpit Commentary has some very useful and insightful remarks, which we copy: "A law prescribed by God, and yet in substance borrowed from half civilised heathens; a practice closely akin to yet prevalent superstitions, and yet receiving not only the toleration of Moses, but the direct sanction of God; and ordeal which emphatically claimed to be infallibly operative through supernatural agencies, yet amongst other nations obviously lending itself to collusion and fraud, as does the trial by red water practised by the tribes in West Africa. In order to justify heavenly wisdom herein, we must frankly admit, to begin with -- (1) That it was founded upon the superstitious notions that immaterial virtue can be imparted to physical elements. The holiness of the gathered dust and the awfulness of the written curses were both supposed to be held in solution by the water of jealousy. The record does not *say* as much, but the whole ordeal proceeds on this supposition, which would undoubtedly be the popular one. (2) That it was only fitted for a very rude and comparatively barbarous state of society. The Talmud states that the use of it ceased forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem (if so, during our Lord's earthly lifetime); but it may be held certain that it ceased long before -- indeed there is no recorded instance of its use. It was essentially an ordeal, although one Divinely regulated, and as such would have been morally impossible and highly undesirable in any age but one of blind and uninquiring faith. And we find the justification of it exactly in the fact that it was given to a generation which believed much and knew little; which had a profound belief in magic, and no knowledge of natural philosophy. It was ever the wisdom of God, as

<sup>57</sup> Luke 19:8

<sup>58</sup> Matt. 19:9

revealed in the sacred volume, to take men as they were, and to utilise the superstitious notions which could not at once be destroyed, or the imperfect moral ideas which could not at once be reformed, by making them work for righteousness and peace. It is, above all, the wisdom of God not to destroy the imperfect, but to regulate it and restrain its abuses, and so impress it into his service, until he has educated his people for something higher. Everybody knows the extreme violence of jealousy amongst an uncivilised people, and the widespread misery and crime to which it leads. It may safely be affirmed that *any* ordeal which should leave no place for jealousy, because no room for uncertainty, would be a blessing to a people rude enough and ignorant enough to believe in it. Ordeals are established in a certain stage of civilisation because they are wanted, and are on the whole useful, as long as they remain in harmony with popular ideas. They are, however, always liable to two dangers. (1) They occasionally fail, and are known to have failed, and so fall into disrepute. (2) They always lend themselves readily to collusion or priestcraft. The trial of jealousy being adopted, as it was, into a system really Divine, and being based upon the knowledge and power of God himself, secured all the benefits of an ordeal and escaped all its dangers. It is probable enough that the awful side of it was never really called into play. No guilty woman would dare to challenge so directly a visitation so dreadful, as long as she retained any faith or any superstition. Before the time came when any Jewish woman had discarded both, the increasing facilities of divorce had provided another and easier escape from matrimonial troubles.” In spite of some obvious arrogance and presumption, which seemed to be typical for the age in which this was written, the author hit upon some good points. There must have been superstition among the Israelites and it is probable that, by using it, God intended to open the way for a greater revelation of His grace.

About the phasing out of the ordeal, *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says: “The rabbins say that the trial by the waters of jealousy was omitted after the Babylonish captivity, because adulteries were so frequent among them that they were afraid of having the name of the Lord profaned by being so frequently appealed to! This is a most humiliating confession.”

The situation calls for a suspicious husband, who believes that his wife does not respond to his love as she used to. His jealousy may be completely unfounded. He may be the type of man whose suspicion is easily provoked. We have to remember that, without this law, the woman would have no way to justify herself. Her husband's jealousy would be sufficient to make life unbearable for her. The rite prescribed in these verses gives her the opportunity to prove her innocence. So, we could see in this law a means to protect the woman.

The NIV says in vs. 14: “if feelings of jealousy come over her husband.” Other translations, such as the RSV and KJV render it as: “if the spirit of jealousy comes upon him.” *Adam Clarke Commentary* says on “the spirit of jealousy”: “*Ruach kinah*, either a supernatural diabolic influence, exciting him to jealousy, or the passion of affection of jealousy, for so the words may be understood.” A demonic influence would add another dimension to the drama.

If the woman were caught in the act of adultery, her life and the life of the man who had sinned with her, would have been forfeited. The law said: “If a man commits adultery with another man's wife-- with the wife of his neighbor-- both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.”<sup>59</sup> The point in case here is that, either the lovers are not caught, or there is no case; only an unfounded suspicion.

The sacrifice to be brought in the prescribed ritual is a grain offering. There is no killing of animals and no blood flows, because no guilt has been established. The grain offering symbolizes the consecration of the human body to God, without any connection to a sinful condition. The fact that God requires this sacrifice to be brought is an indication that He holds the woman not guilty unless proved otherwise. *The Pulpit Commentary* looks at this kind of sacrifice from another angle, by remarking: “It was to be a meat offering -- not connected on this occasion with any other sacrifice -- of the fruits of the earth, symbolising the fruits of her guilty, or at least careless and suspicious, conduct.” The commentary may be presuming too much too early. The offering has some unusual features in that no oil is poured on it and no incense is added. It is referred to as “an offering for jealousy.” So, we could ask the question to whom the offering benefits. The husband brings it for his wife, but not necessarily in her behalf. The choice is between two evils: adultery and jealousy. If the woman is guilty, the man's jealousy is legitimate. Jealousy in itself is not a sin. Jealousy is one of God's attributes. But not all jealousy is related to the divine. The outcome of the trial may be that the husband was guilty and the wife was not.

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<sup>59</sup> Lev. 20:10

It is not clear where the wife is placed. We read that "the priest shall bring her and have her stand before the LORD." Women were normally not allowed to enter the courtyard. We don't know whether in this case an exception was made, or whether the ceremony took place in the women's court.

Before the woman is put under oath, some holy water is prepared, probably drawn from the washbasin, to which dust from the floor is added and ink from a document on which the curse was written. *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that, since the dust was taken from the tabernacle, which symbolized the presence of the Lord, it was considered to be holy. It would be more logical to see in the dust the unholy part of the ceremony; that element that would cause sickness and, maybe, death. The consumption of dust scraped from the floor is not recommended for reasons of health. The germs that would live in that dust, especially in the semi tropical conditions in which the Israelites lived in the desert, could easily cause sickness. Under normal circumstances, it would be miraculous if the person who swallowed the dust would not experience any ill effects. The water was, rightfully, called: "this bitter water that brings a curse."

The priest has to loosen the hair of the woman. It is hard to determine what the meaning of this part of the ritual is. The KJV renders this as "uncover the woman's head." The *Pulpit Commentary* refers, in connection with this phrase, to Paul's words in I Corinthians, where we read: "And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head-- it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head."<sup>60</sup> A reference to Paul's words is, however, hardly valid in the context of this rite of jealousy. Paul spoke to Corinthian Christians, whose culture was drastically different from that of the Jews. In Israel, for instance, a man would not think of praying with uncovered head. So, we cannot appeal to the custom of another culture that was more than two thousand years removed from the one in Israel's history at the time of the desert crossing, to shed light on this rite. The only conclusion we can draw is that woman, at this period, did their hair up, or covered their heads, and that, when she stood before the Lord, whatever fashion prescribed was, temporarily laid aside. God wanted the woman to appear before Him as she was, not as she showed herself to be to other people.

While the woman is under oath, the curse is read to her, to which she agrees, before passing the ordeal of drinking the water, by saying "Amen, amen." *Adam Clarke's Commentary* remarks on this: "This is the first place where this word occurs in the common form of a concluding wish in prayer. The root *aman* signifies to be 'steady, true, permanent,' And in prayer it signifies, 'Let it be so - make it steady - let it be ratified.' "

The curse is written with ink on paper and the ink is washed off in the water the woman has to drink. That is one of the parts the *Pulpit Commentary* pointed to as using the superstition of people to transfer a curse from paper to the person. We could, however, see this part of the ritual as symbolic, in the same way as the eating of the book Ezekiel and John were commanded to do. God said to Ezekiel: " 'Open your mouth and eat what I give you.' Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe. And he said to me, 'Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.' So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, 'Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.' So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth. He then said to me: 'Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them.' "<sup>61</sup> John describes a similar experience in Revelation, where we read: "Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: 'Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.' So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, 'Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.' I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, 'You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.' "<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> I Cor. 11:5-10

<sup>61</sup> Ezek. 2:8-3:4

<sup>62</sup> Rev. 10:8-11

About this part of the ritual *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says: "*The priest shall write these curses ... and he shall blot them out.* It appears that the curses which were written down with a kind of ink prepared for the purpose, as some of the rabbins think, without and calx of iron or other material the could make a permanent dye, were washed off the parchment into the water which the woman was obliged to drink, so that she drank the very words of the execration. The ink used in the East is almost all of this kind - a wet sponge will completely efface the finest of their writings."

It would seem that the normal result of drinking water in which dust of the floor was mixed would cause sickness under any circumstance. If there were no harmful effects, it would be that the Lord intervene, because the woman was not guilty. So, it would require a miracle were the woman to remain healthy and unaffected. To depend on a miracle is a hazardous way to live. Any human being would rather build his life on any other kinds of security than on the intervention of the Lord. We can imagine how a woman, who was guilty of adultery, must have felt during this ordeal. Even a woman who was not guilty would be in danger of suffering from psychosomatic symptoms.

It is not too clear what actually happened when the woman drank the water. Vs. 24 read: "He [the priest] shall have the woman drink the bitter water that brings a curse, and this water will enter her and cause bitter suffering." TLB paraphrases the verse with: "(When he requires the woman to drink the water, it becomes bitter within her [if she is guilty].)" *Adam Clarke* comments on this bitterness: "*The bitter water that causeth the curse.* Though the rabbins think that the priest put some bitter substance in the water, yet as nothing of the kind is intimated by Moses, we may consider the word as used here metaphorically for affliction, death, etc. These waters were afflicting and deadly to her who drank them, being guilty."

Although the Bible does not speak about death as the result of the consumption of this water, that can certainly not be excluded. It seems, however, that the ordeal would cause miscarriage or infertility.

The content of the curse is put rather graphically: "May this water that brings a curse enter your body so that your abdomen swells and your thigh wastes away." *Adam Clarke* comments on this: "*Thy belly to swell and thy thigh to rot.* What is meant by these expressions cannot be easily ascertained. *Lanpel yarech* signifies literally thy "thigh to fall." As the *thigh*, feet, etc., were used among the Hebrews delicately to express the parts which nature conceals ... the expression here is probably to be understood in this sense; and the falling down of the thigh here must mean something similar to the falling down of the womb, which might be a natural effect of the preternatural distention of the abdomen."

Probably, several details about the circumstances under which a husband would become jealous are omitted in the account. One possibility is that the woman was pregnant and that the husband had his doubts as to whether the baby was his.

Jealousy in itself is not a sin. In a healthy marriage relationship jealousy will not demonstrate itself, because of the absence of doubt. If there is doubt as to whether either partners are not faithful to their pledge to one another, a lack of jealousy could be considered unhealthy. Only a spouse who does care is not jealous. Where there is complete trust between partners there is no place for jealousy. So jealousy is a kind of built-in safeguard to maintain a relationship of love. The point of this portion is, not in the first place, adultery, or even jealousy, but doubt. If the husband knows for sure his wife has been unfaithful to him, there would be no point in submitting her to this ordeal. The ordeal is meant, both as a punishment and to settle doubts.

In the context of this chapter, which is the purity of the camp, the section, as the two previous ones are object lessons of Israel's relationship with God. As marriage is the clearest picture of Christ and the church, as Paul says,<sup>63</sup> the unfaithfulness of the wife is an image of man's unfaithfulness in his relationship with God, and the husband's jealousy reflects the jealousy of God. God calls Himself "Jealous." We read in Exodus: "Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."<sup>64</sup>

This is one of the rare instances in the Bible where a person is cursed. Vs. 27 says: "she will become accursed among her people." The KJV is closer to the Hebrew in its rendering: "and the woman shall be a curse among her people." It is not that people will curse her, but having swallowed the curse, she becomes a curse. This is an illustration of the fact that we become what we eat, not only in the physical sense, that the food we take in builds our body, but also spiritually. If the Word of God is the source of our lives, Christ will be formed in us; if we eat the food of the enemy the devil has gained a foothold in the community because of a human being who is not willing to confess her sin. We are either a blessing or a curse; there is no neutral ground.

<sup>63</sup> Eph. 5:31,32

<sup>64</sup> Ex. 34:14



We cannot read the word curse without thinking of Paul's description of our Lord's suffering and death. In Galatians he says: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'"<sup>65</sup>

The husband is cleared of all responsibility in the case. TLB says: "Her husband shall not be brought to trial for causing her horrible disease, for she is responsible."

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<sup>65</sup> Gal. 3:13

## CHAPTER SIX

**B. Sanctification through the Nazirite Vow 6:1-27**

Actually, only vs. 1-21 deal with the Nazirite vow; the last six verses contain the formula with which the priests were to bless the people.

The Nazirite vow occupies a distinct place in the Pentateuch and in the whole religious system of the Old Testament. It seems to stand in complete contrast to the principle that the only way of fellowship with God was through the intermediate ministry of the priest. It provided the opportunity to any member of the Jewish community, regardless of sex, caste or tribe to enter into a special relationship with God. It was a demonstration of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who works with the freedom and unpredictability of the wind. Jesus said to Nicodemus: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."<sup>66</sup>

The taking of the Nazirite vow was an option open to any member of the Israelite nation, whether man or woman. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: "In this too it stood on the same plane as the prophetic office, for which room was left in the religious system of Moses, and which was designed to correct and supplement in its spiritual freedom the artificial routine of that system. As the prophetic office might be exercised by women, so the Nazirite vow might be taken by women."

The Nazirite vow was a pledge of consecration to the Lord. The vow was done by choice, but as suggested above, the Holy Spirit who draws people to God, must have done His work behind the scenes and have awakened the desire in a person's heart to commit himself to God in an act of special dedication. There was, however, never any compulsion; a man or a woman dedicated himself or herself to the Lord for a certain period of time and in a special way, because he or she wanted to.

There is no indication in this chapter as to what the content of such a vow would be. The chapter deals with regulations that had to be observed, limitations that would be imposed and rituals to be performed, but not with content. Yet, we may be sure that the vow did not merely consist in the observation of outward rituals, although we are given the impression that the outward manifestations were the most important feature of the Nazirite vow. We can be sure, however, that the content was more important than the form.

The outward indications that a person had made the Nazirite vow were all negative; he was to abstain from anything that had to do with the vine, from the use of a razor and from contact with dead bodies. It is easy to find the positive aspects of these prohibitions, at least as far as two of the three prohibitions is concerned. Wine is used to induce joy in an artificial way. David says: "You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound."<sup>67</sup> And Paul admonishes us in the Ephesian epistle: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."<sup>68</sup> Prohibition to touch a dead body testifies to the fact that God is the God of the living, the source of all life. Jesus said to the Sadducees, who did not believe in life after death: "But about the resurrection of the dead-- have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."<sup>69</sup> The matter of not cutting hair is more difficult to spiritualize, but it was the only visible sign of the vow. One could abstain from the fruit of the vine and from contact with death, without being observed, but the uncut hair made it impossible to hide the fact that one was a Nazirite.

In *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, we read the following about the Nazirites: "The word naaziyr, from naazar, "to separate" signifies merely "a separated person," i. e., one peculiarly devoted to the service of God by being separated from all servile employments. From the Nazarites sprang the Rechabites, from the Rechabites the Essenes, from the Essenes the Anchorites or Hermits, and in imitation of those, the different monastic orders. Some contend strongly that the Nazarite was a type of our Lord; but neither analogy nor proof can be produced. Our blessed Lord both drank wine and touched the dead, which no Nazarite would do: as to his either shaving his hair or letting it grow, we know nothing. His being called a Nazarene, <Matt. 2:23>, is nothing to the purpose, as it can mean no more than either that he was an

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<sup>66</sup> John 3:8

<sup>67</sup> Ps. 4:7

<sup>68</sup> Eph. 5:18

<sup>69</sup> Matt. 22:31, 32

inhabitant of Nazareth, which was a place of no credit, and therefore used as a term of reproach; or that he was in a general sense consecrated to the service of God-- so were Samson, Samuel, Jeremiah, and John the Baptist; or rather, that he was the neetser or "BRANCH," <Isa. 11:1>, and tsemach, <Zech. 3:8; 6:12>, which is quite a different word, but this title is expressly applied to our blessed Lord by the above prophets; but in no place do they or any other prophets call him a Nazarite, in the sense in which naaziyr is used. Indeed it could not in truth be applied to him, as the distinguishing marks of a Nazarite never belonged to him. He was, it is true, the neetser or branch out of the root of Jesse, the genuine heir to the throne of David, whose dominion should extend over the universe, who should be King of kings, and Lord of Lords; but the word Naazoraiois, <Matt. 2:23>, signifies merely a Nazoroean, or an inhabitant of Nazareth."

*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says: "While no number of days for the vow is given in the Old Testament, Jewish tradition prescribed 30 days or a double period of 60 or even triple time of 90 to 100 days." The Bible does not give us any examples of people who took the Nazirite vow for a limited period of time. The only three Nazirites we know were Nazirites for life: Samson,<sup>70</sup> Samuel,<sup>71</sup> and John the Baptist.<sup>72</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes Hegesippus, who said about James, the Lord's brother: "He did not drink wine nor strong drink, and no razor came on his head." None of these examples are very helpful in our study; the first three were pledged to the Lord before they were born, by their parents and James' Nazirite vow, if it existed, falls outside of the scope of Biblical studies.

In spite of what the commentators maintain, that Jesus was not a Nazirite, we have to admit that the only real example of a Nazirite, who made the vow for a limited period of time is our Lord Jesus Christ. He did this during the Last Supper, when He said to His disciples: "I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."<sup>73</sup> This must have been one of the reasons why He refused the wine that was offered to Him at the crucifixion. We read in Matthew's record of the crucifixion: "There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it."<sup>74</sup> But a few hours later Jesus asked for a drink and did take the wine that was offered to Him. John record the end of the period when Jesus abstained from wine. In his record of the crucifixion we read: "Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.' A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."<sup>75</sup> If we compare this moment with Jesus' word during the Last Supper, we have to come to the conclusion that Jesus, at that moment had arrived in His Father's kingdom. His Nazirite vow is the shortest on record and the only one that clearly defines the content.

Actually, Jesus is the only human being who completely fulfilled the Nazirite vow in the deepest meaning of it. He fulfilled the prophecy of David in the book of Psalms: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come-- it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'<sup>76</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* contests this by saying in its introduction to Num. ch. 6: "The Hebrew *Nazir* has been written Nazarite in English under the mistaken impression that there is some connection between Nazir and Nazarene (Matt. ii. 23). A very little reflection will show that 'the Nazarene' not only was no Nazir, but that he even took pains to let it be seen that he was not. John the Baptist was the Nazir of the New Testament, and in all outward things the contrast was strongly marked between them (Luke vii, 14, 33, 34; John ii. 2)." This quote from the, otherwise excellent, commentary shows that the point of the content of the Nazirite vow was completely misunderstood by the commentator. John the Baptist may have observed the outward requirements of the vow, but Jesus exemplified the inner content of the dedication. The commentator also ignores the significance of the verse in Matthew ch. 2, which he does mention, but does not elaborate on: "And he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: 'He will be called a Nazarene.'<sup>77</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Judg. 13:5

<sup>71</sup> I Sam. 1:11

<sup>72</sup> Luke 1:15

<sup>73</sup> Matt. 26:29

<sup>74</sup> Matt. 27:34

<sup>75</sup> John 19:28-30

<sup>76</sup> Ps. 40:6-8

<sup>77</sup> Matt. 2:23

The Nazirite vow was “a vow of separation to the LORD.” The Hebrew word for separation is *pala'*, which is defined by Strong as: “to separate, i.e. distinguish (literally or figuratively); by implication, to be (causatively, make) great, difficult, wonderful.” It is related to the word translated with “holy.” The KJV uses the word “separate twice in vs. 2. We read: “When either man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazarite, to separate themselves unto the LORD ...” The NIV simply says: “If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite...” Commenting on the text of the KJV, the *Pulpit Commentary* says: “The two words translated ‘separate’ are not the same. The first (from *pala*, to sever, to consecrate, to distinguish as exceptional) is of somewhat doubtful use here. ... The other word is *nazar*, is used in a general sense in Gen xlix. 26; Deut. xxxiii. 16, or with the addition, ‘unto the Lord,’ as in Judges xii. 5. It had, however, acquired a technical sense before this, as appears from Levit. xxv. 5, 11, where the undressed vines are called ‘Nazirites,’ as recalling the unshorn locks of those who had taken the vow.” So there is a link between the name Nazirite and the vow concerning the use of anything that had to do with the grapevine.

The fact that the Scriptures are vague about the content of the Nazirite vow, (our chapter only deals with the outward ritual to be observed), is an indication that God wanted the vow to be filled with content at a later time. The Israelites who took the vow may have had a clear concept of what they wanted to do during their period of consecration, but in reality they portrayed something that was far beyond their comprehension. The real content of the vow was what David wrote in the fortieth psalm and which is quoted by the author of the Hebrew epistle: “Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am-- it is written about me in the scroll-- I have come to do your will, O God.’”<sup>78</sup> The fulfillment of all Nazirite vows was in the sacrifice of Christ’s body on the cross.

In the ritual of the vow the largest space is reserved for the stipulation regarding death in the family. Two verses deal with the prohibition about drinking wine or consuming anything that has to do with the vine; one verse only says that the Nazirite is not allowed to cut his hair, but Moses takes six verses to explain what happens if a Nazirite would be in close contact with death. The vow expresses the reality of life, not of death in any form. Life takes precedence over all human relations, even the most intimate ones. We have the saying: “Blood is thicker than water.” We could alter this by saying: “Life is thicker than blood,” since the Nazirite vow superseded even the requirements of caring for a deceased parent.

An interesting feature of the vow is that it is called the dedication of the hair. In vs. 9 we read: “If someone dies suddenly in his presence, thus defiling the hair he has dedicated, he must shave his head on the day of his cleansing-- the seventh day.” In the previous verse it is called “the symbol of his separation to God [which] is on his head.” From vs. 11 we may deduct that the Nazirite vow was, in fact a consecration of one’s head to the Lord. When the vow was broken through contact with a dead body and then renewed, we read: “That same day he is to consecrate his head.” This makes it clear why the hair took on such significance in the vow; we could see it as a “statement” a person makes of his dedication to the Lord, much in the same way as in the previous decade young men made statements about their orientation by wearing earrings. Throughout the ages hairstyles have always expressed lifestyles. People think it important to wear their hair according to the latest vogue.

There is quite a difference, however, between wearing one’s hair in a certain way because it is fashionable and dedicating one’s head to the Lord. Imagine what it would do to the IQ of the world population if all Christians would dedicated their heads to the Lord. It would create a spiritual “think tank” that would be more influential in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth than any Christian College of University. Dedicating one’s head to the Lord would mean the practical application of “loving the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and *with all your mind*.”<sup>79</sup>

*Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* writes about the subject of hair: “In Old Testament times men as well as women wore long hair. Both Samson and Absalom were admired for their long, full hair <Judg. 16:13-14; 2 Sam. 14:25-26>. Baldness was considered embarrassing <2 Kin. 2:23-24; Is. 3:24>, and Israelite men were forbidden to cut the forelocks of their hair <Lev. 19:27>. But men under a NAZIRITE vow shaved their entire heads when the vow was completed <Num. 6:18>. Women apparently left their hair loose. Both men and women groomed their hair <Is. 3:24>, because leaving it unkempt was a sign of mourning <Ezra 9:3>. Beautiful hair was prized by both men and women <Song 4:1; 5:11>, while gray hair

<sup>78</sup> Heb. 10:5-7

<sup>79</sup> See Matt. 22:37

was desired by the aged <Prov. 16:31; 20:29>.” The prohibition in Leviticus was given in the context of idolatry and practices in heathen countries. We read: “Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.”<sup>80</sup>

One of the most controversial Nazirites was Samson, whose strength was in the fact that his hair had never been cut. His confession to Delilah: “No razor has ever been used on my head, ... because I have been a Nazirite set apart to God since birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man,” became his undoing. Samson’s case was, obviously, a very unusual one and no doctrine of divine strength and the connection between strength, hair and the Nazirite vow can be built upon it. Of all the Nazirites, Samson was the most carnal one and the least dedicated to the glory of the Lord. His raw, brutish strength may have been supernatural, it was hardly, what we would consider, the power of the Holy Spirit; although the Bible does say, at the moment of his defeat, after his hair had been cut: “But he did not know that the LORD had left him.”<sup>81</sup>

Interestingly, there was no prescribed ritual to mark to beginning of the Nazirite vow. Only if the vow was broken by contact with a dead body did the Nazirite have to renew his vow with a sacrifice, and also at the time when the period, for which the vow was made, had expired. There is not even an indication that the vow had to be made publicly. It could be done in the privacy of fellowship with the Lord alone.

If the Nazirite vow was interrupted by contact with a dead body, the Nazirite had to rededicate himself completely for the same period of time for which the vow was made initially, even if the interruption was accidental. Vs. 9 gives an example as to how this interruption could occur: “If someone dies suddenly in his presence, thus defiling the hair he has dedicated ....” This kind of accidental interruption is treated as sin, although it cannot be considered as a sinful act. In this case the Nazirite did not commit a sin, but he was polluted by sin. If we lean against a freshly painted post, we will, unwittingly, get paint on our clothing, whether we want it or not. God treats our involuntary pollution as sin that has to be atoned for. Even if a person would never have committed any sin in his life, he would still “fall short of the glory of God.”<sup>82</sup>

This principle throws a new light on the complex problem of sin. According to the *Pulpit Commentary*, Jesus declared the opposite principle when He said: “ ‘Are you so dull? ... Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.’ (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean.’) He went on: ‘What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’ ”<sup>83</sup>

When we consider the context of both passages, however, we will have to conclude that there is no real contradiction between the two. Jesus spoke to an audience that was under the conviction that ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ were purely ritual concepts, without any moral connotation. The point He wanted to make is about man’s sinful nature as the source of his sinful behavior. The misconception about the character of sin accounted for the fact that the Jews were unwilling to enter Pilate’s palace, because it would make them ritually unclean, but they had no qualms about murdering Jesus on the basis of trumped up charges.<sup>84</sup>

The passage from Numbers six speaks about what effect God’s fallen creation has upon the holiness of His character. As an example, we can say that it would be just as embarrassing if we would appear before royalty with clothing that had been stained without our being aware of the fact, as when we would personally be rude to the king.

A Nazirite who had been defiled had to wait seven days before the ritual of his purification and rededication could begin. We read in vs. 9 and 10 that he has to shave his head on the seventh day and bring a sacrifice on the eighth. This meant that the Nazirite would be ritually impure for a whole week before anything could be done about his restoration. Often, the period of a week symbolizes a lifetime. The Passover, for instance was followed by the week long Feast of Unleavened Bread which represented a life of purity. For the Nazirite the week stood for a life of impurity. Evidently, God wanted to impress upon the defiled Nazirite that there was more involved than a mere accidental contact with a dead body, but that there was a condition of impurity that affected the whole of life.

<sup>80</sup> Lev. 19:27

<sup>81</sup> Judg. 16:20

<sup>82</sup> Rom. 3:23

<sup>83</sup> Mark 7:18-23

<sup>84</sup> See John 18:28

The seventh day was not necessarily the Sabbath day, since it was counted from the first day of defilement; but we can see a parallel with the week that runs from Sabbath to Sabbath. On the seventh day then, the equivalent of the Sabbath, the Nazirite had to shave his head and start over again. We do not read that it was customary to shave one's head at the beginning of the vow, but only when the vow is resumed. It may have become a custom, though, to enter into a period of a Nazirite vow by shaving one's head. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, for instance, he was advised by the apostles to accompany some men who had taken a vow, in order to alleviate the suspicion that was upon him that he no longer observed the Old Testament law. We read in Acts that the apostles say to him: "Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved."<sup>85</sup> It does not say, explicitly, that the men were entering into a Nazirite vow or whether they were rededicating themselves.

The shaven head, obviously, stand here for a new beginning, like a new birth. The eighth day is the day of resurrection. On that day the Nazirite had to bring three animals to be sacrificed as he rededicated himself to the Lord: two birds and a year-old male lamb. One bird was to be sacrificed as a sin offering, the other one as a burnt offering and the lamb as a guilt offering. The ritual of these sacrifices is described in the first seven chapters of Leviticus. The guilt and sin offerings indicate that the person who brought them confessed to be guilty, although, not necessarily, through an intentional act. The burnt offering bore no relation to sin; it was the expression of the perfect love of the Son for the Father. The sin offering stressed the fact that the person had committed a sinful act and the guilt offering that the offender possessed a sinful nature. In bringing the sacrifice of the two birds, the Nazirite said to God that he had sinned, but that he loved God, and in bringing the lamb he told God that he was a sinner. All sacrifices pointed, of course, to the reality of Christ's death on the cross. It is the sacrifice of Jesus that gives meaning and content to the dedication of our lives to God. Without His sacrifice no dedication to God would be acceptable and they would be as blasphemous as the "worship" the Roman soldiers brought Christ when they prepared Him for His crucifixion.<sup>86</sup>

The sacrifice of restoration differed from the sacrifice that marked the end of the vow in that different animals were involved and a different meaning was attached to each of the animals. Whereas, in case the vow had been interrupted by defilement, the Nazirite had to bring two birds and a male lamb, respectively as a sin offering, a burnt offering and a guilt offering, the sacrifices that marked the end of the vow and the return to a pre-Nazirite lifestyle, were a year-old male lamb as a burnt offering, a year-old ewe lamb for a sin offering and a ram for a fellowship offering. All of these animals, as any sacrificial animal, had to be without defect. The fellowship offering was to be accompanied by a grain offering. Only one of these sacrifices made reference to the existence of sin; the other ones were expressions of gratitude and love. So, even when the person who had made the Nazirite vow, was free of the Nazirite restrictions, his relationship with God underwent no basic change. His life continued to be in loving submission to the will of God.

When Jesus' Nazirite vow ended He found Himself in the Father's Kingdom, which He entered with the words: "It is finished." We read in John's account of the death of our Savior: "When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."<sup>87</sup> The sacrifices prescribed to mark the end of the Nazirite vow illustrate this crucial moment in the history of the universe. It is celebrated with a burnt offering, a sin offering, a fellowship offering and a grain offering, covering the whole gamma of the Levitical sacrifices, with the exception of the guilt offering.

The most puzzling sacrifice for us, in this context, is the sin offering, which was the ewe lamb. In a sense this sacrifice was the least representative of the reality of Christ's sacrifice. Jesus was a man and ewe lambs are female. The only place where a ewe lamb is mentioned in Leviticus is in connection with the cleansing of a leper. We read: "On the eighth day he [the cleansed leper] must bring two male lambs and one ewe lamb a year old, each without defect, along with three-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering, and one log of oil."<sup>88</sup> In that ritual the sacrifice of the eighth day symbolizes the resurrection; it is brought on the eighth day, which is the day of the resurrection of Christ and it is brought after the leper has been declared healed and after the leper has shaved all the hair of his body, including his eyebrows and washed his clothes. These rituals, obviously, symbolize the entering into a new life. This is,

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<sup>85</sup> Acts 21:24

<sup>86</sup> See Matt. 27:27-30

<sup>87</sup> John 19:30

<sup>88</sup> Lev. 14:10

undoubtedly, what the Holy Spirit had in mind in the giving of these orders regarding the sacrifices that ended the period of dedication of the Nazirite.

The kind of grain offering, which accompanied the bloody sacrifice, was an indication that the sacrifice was an offering of thankfulness. In the law pertaining to these sacrifices, we read: "If he offers it as an expression of thankfulness, then along with this thank offering he is to offer cakes of bread made without yeast and mixed with oil, wafers made without yeast and spread with oil, and cakes of fine flour well-kneaded and mixed with oil."<sup>89</sup> It was the grain offering that made the fellowship offering into an expression of gratitude.

A rather curious part of the ritual was the burning of the hair. The Pulpit Commentary comments on this by saying: "It is not said, nor intended, that the hair was offered to God as a sacrifice. If so, it would have been burnt with the burnt offering which represented the self-dedication of the worshipper. It had been holy to the Lord, growing uncut all the days of the vow. The vow as now at an end; the last solemn act of sacrifice, the peace offering, which completed all, and typified that fearless and thankful communion with God which is the end of all religion, was now going on; it was fitting that the hair which must now be shorn, but could not be disposed of in any ordinary way, should be burnt upon the altar of God."

The last part of the ritual is the waving of the boiled shoulder of the fellowship offering before the Lord by the Nazirite and the priest together. All the right thighs of the fellowship offerings belonged already to the priest.<sup>90</sup> The addition of the shoulder is typical for the sacrifice that ends the Nazirite vow. This is the only sacrifice in which the shoulder of the animal is mentioned. It could be, however, that the word for shoulder and thigh were used interchangeably, for in Deuteronomy, where the rights of the priests are repeated, the thigh which was given habitually is not even mentioned, but we read: "This is the share due the priests from the people who sacrifice a bull or a sheep: the shoulder, the jowls and the inner parts."<sup>91</sup>

There is an open ended clause in the phrase "... in addition to whatever else he can afford." The Pulpit Commentary says about this: "If he can afford or can procure anything more as a free-will offering, he may well do so. In later days it became customary for richer people to defray for their poorer brethren the cost of their sacrifices (Josephus, 'Ant.,' xix 6,1; and cf. Acts xxi. 24)." This clause takes the Nazirite vow out of the realm of legalism. The vow and its accomplishment could very easily become an outward manifestation of an attitude, which had nothing to do with the consecration of one's inner being to God. A Nazirite could become proud of the fact that he had observed the rules of the vow; as if he had "arrived" in the spiritual sense of the word. He could think that he had paid to God what he owed Him. The last clause makes us understand that there is no ultimate sacrifice we can bring to the Lord. Paul's advice to the Philippians is appropriate here: "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."<sup>92</sup>

The last six verses of this chapter give us the text for the priestly blessing:

"The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."

This three-fold blessing was not merely a formula to be used to mark the end of a ceremony; it was infinitely more than a string of words; it was the act by which the Name of God was put on the Israelites. This Name is YHWH, which is the Name God used to reveal Himself to Moses at the burning bush. We read in the account of Moses' call: "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'"<sup>93</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* remarks: "It is a fact, the significance of which cannot be denied, that *the name* which was commanded to be put upon the people was lost, and irrecoverably lost, by the later Jews. Out of an exaggerated dread of possible profanation, they first disobeyed the command by substituting Adonai for that name outside the sanctuary; and finally, after the death of Simeon the Just, the priests ceased to pronounce the name at all, and therefore lost the tradition by which the pronunciation was fixed.

<sup>89</sup> Lev. 7:12

<sup>90</sup> See Lev. 7:32

<sup>91</sup> Deut. 18:3

<sup>92</sup> Phil. 3:12-14

<sup>93</sup> Ex. 3:14

Our method of spelling and pronouncing the name as Jehovah is merely conventional, and almost certainly incorrect.”

The apostle John describes the ultimate blessing that is awaiting God’s children in heaven in terms of the Name of the Father and the Son being put on their foreheads. We read in Revelations: “Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads,” and, “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”<sup>94</sup> The content of God’s blessing is in the bearing of God’s Name, and God’s Name expresses God’s character. When God says to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM,” and He puts His Name on us, that means that we will be as HE IS. John affirms this in his first epistle by saying: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”<sup>95</sup>

Now, let us have a look at the formula, the words that convey the fact that God’s Name is put upon His children. The NIV translation of the blessing reads:

“The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* points out that the Name of the Lord is used three times in the blessing and it asks the question: “Are we to see in this threefold use of the Divine name a shadowing forth of the Holy Trinity?” The commentator continues: “It is obvious that it cannot be proved, and that it would not even have suggested any such idea to the priest who gave, or to the people who received, the benediction. To them the threefold form merely added beauty and fulness to the blessing (cf. Eccles. iv. 12). But that is not the question. The real question is whether the Old Testament was written for our sakes ( 1 Cor. ix. 10; x. 11; 2 Tim. iii. 15,16), and whether the God of the Jews was indeed the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (John v. 17; viii. 54). If so, it is not possible for us to avoid seeing in this benediction a declaration of the threefold Being of God and it is not possible to avoid believing that he meant us to see such a declaration, veiled indeed from the eyes of the Jew, but clear enough to the Christian.” We fully accept this approach to the text. It is the Old Testament version of the New Testament blessing, which the apostle Paul expresses as: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”<sup>96</sup>

The *Adam Clarke Commentary* remarks: “There are three forms of blessing here, any or all of which the priests might use on any occasion. The following is a verbal translation:

1. May Yahweh bless thee and preserve thee!
2. May Yahweh cause his faces to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee!
3. May Yahweh lift up His faces upon thee, and may be put prosperity unto thee!

This is a very comprehensive and excellent prayer, and may be paraphrased thus:

1. May God speak good unto thee, by giving thee his excellent promises! May he preserve thee in the possession of all the good thou hast, and from all the evil with which thou art threatened!
2. May the Holy Trinity illuminate thy heart, giving thee the true knowledge of thyself! and of thy Maker, and may he show thee His graciousness in pardoning thy sins, and supporting thy soul!
3. May God give thee communion with the Father, Son, and Spirit, with a constant sense of his approbation, and grant thee prosperity in thy soul, and in all thy secular affairs!”

TLB translates the blessing with:

“May the Lord bless and protect you;  
may the Lord’s face radiate with joy because of you;  
may he be gracious to you, show you his favor,  
and give you his peace.”

We could read: “May the Lord bless you, in keeping you, in making His face shine upon you and in being gracious to you, in turning His face toward you and in giving you peace.” The verb “bless” is used to express the content of the blessing, which is: protection, joy, grace and peace.

<sup>94</sup> Rev. 14:1; 22:4

<sup>95</sup> I John 3:1,2

<sup>96</sup> II Cor. 13:14



The word Hebrew word for “keep” is *shamar* which is defined by *Strong’s* as; “to hedge about (as with thorns), i.e. guard; generally, to protect, attend to.” We need this protection in the hostile world in which we live. The Lord Himself is our only defense against the attacks of the Evil One upon us. At least eighteen times in the book of Psalm is God referred to as “our shield” or “my shield.” Just a few examples are: “But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head,”<sup>97</sup> “My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart,”<sup>98</sup> “You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word,”<sup>99</sup> and “He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me.”<sup>100</sup> When a woman marries, she acquires the name of her husband, which means that her husband is responsible for her protection. In putting His Name upon us, God guarantees our safety in a way that surpasses all other protections we may claim in this life. The more we understand who the foe is we are facing, the more we will appreciate and use the protection of the Name of our Savior.

The second part of the blessing is that the Lord makes his face shine upon you and is gracious to us. The translation of TLB really brings this phrase to life with: “may the Lord’s face radiate with joy because of you.” We could interpret “the LORD make his face shine upon you” as may God’s face light up when He sees you. We rarely come to the point where we can believe that God would take pleasure in us. David’s question: “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?”<sup>101</sup> keeps on haunting us, because we are too conscious of the fact that we are sinners. It is hard for us to see that God would see us as forgiven and that His face would light up with joy when He sees us. But if we really believe that God loves us, why would we not believe that He would act as a lover acts when he sees the object of his love? This is, probably, what Jesus meant when He tells the story of the servants who receive the talents and the master says to the faithful servant: “Enter into the joy of your master.”<sup>102</sup> What greater blessing can one desire than to be the object of God’s love and joy!

The blessing reminds us of the fact that God’s joy over us is part of God’s grace toward us. The word “gracious” is *chanan*, which means, literally: “to bend or stoop in kindness to an inferior; to favor,” but it also has the meaning of to implore or to entreat, according to *Strong’s Dictionary*.

In the rendering of the NIV the blessing continues with: “May the LORD turn his face toward you.” The RSV as well as the KJV translate this phrase with: “The Lord lift up his countenance upon you.” The word face here is the same, however, as the word used in the previous verse, and the NIV translates the word correctly in the same way in both instances. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: “This clause seems to repeat the last in a somewhat stronger form, as implying more personal and individual attention from the Lord. His face shines upon all that love him, as the sun shines wherever no clouds intervene; but his face is lifted up to that soul for which he has a more special regard. ...To lift up the eyes or the face upon any one is to look upon that one with peculiar and tender interest.” The apostle Paul expresses this thought clearly when he writes to the Corinthian Christians: “But the man who loves God is known by God.”<sup>103</sup> The omniscient God knows, of course, everybody and everything. There is, however, a special knowledge that is found within the context of a loving relationship., there is a difference between God knowing or our existence in all its details and being known by God. To keep within the realm of human understanding, we can say that when God turns His face toward us, He recognizes us.

The benediction ends with the words: “and give you peace.” The Hebrew word is *shalom*, which has become one of the key words in modern Hebrew. According to *Strong’s Definition* the word is derived from *shâlam*, which means “to be safe” or “to be completed.” It carries the connotation of happiness, friendliness, welfare, health and prosperity.

The chapter began with regulations regarding the Nazirite vow and it ends with the blessing which puts the Name of YHWH upon the people of Israel. Although no connection between the two parts is mentioned, it seems that one flows into the other. It is in the act of dedication to the Lord that the blessing is received. But above all, it is through the supreme Nazirite vow that was made and carried out by our Lord Jesus Christ that God’s blessing came to the world. The core of all Nazirite vows was expressed in the

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<sup>97</sup> Ps. 3:3

<sup>98</sup> Ps. 7:10

<sup>99</sup> Ps. 119:114

<sup>100</sup> Ps. 144:2

<sup>101</sup> Ps. 8:4

<sup>102</sup> Matt. 25:21 (RSV)

<sup>103</sup> I Cor. 8:3

sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Of this the writer to the Hebrews says: “Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am-- it is written about me in the scroll-- I have come to do your will, O God.’ First he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them’ (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, ‘Here I am, I have come to do your will.’ He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”<sup>104</sup> And the apostle Paul puts it all in a nutshell when he writes to the Galatians: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Heb. 10:5-10

<sup>105</sup> Gal. 3:13,14

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## C. Sanctification through Worship 7:1-9:14

This section can be divided into five sections according to the following topics:

1. The offerings of the tribal leaders for the dedication of the tabernacle. ch. 7:1-89
2. Regulations regarding the care of the candlestick. ch. 8:1-4
3. Regulations regarding the sanctification of the Levites. ch. 8:5-26
4. Regulations regarding the observance of the Passover. ch. 9:1-14
5. Description of the cloud and the pillar of fire. ch. 9:15-23

## 1. The offerings of the tribal leaders for the dedication of the tabernacle. ch. 7:1-89

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* remarks on the opening verse of the chapter: "[On the day that Moses had fully set up the tabernacle] The transactions mentioned in this chapter took place on the second day of the second month of the second year after their departure from Egypt, and the proper place of this account is immediately after the tenth chapter of Leviticus."

From *The Pulpit Commentary* we copy the following: "**On the day that Moses had fully set up the tabernacle.** This expression, 'on the day' .... has given rise to considerable difficulty. Strictly speaking it should mean the first day of the first month of the second year (Exod. xl. 17); and so the Targum of Palestine, 'It was on the day which begins the month Nisan.' It is, however, quite clear from the narrative itself, as well as from its position, that the offerings were not actually made until after the taking of the census and the distribution of their respective duties to the Levitical families, *i. e.* until the eve of the departure from Sinai. .... Either the date here given is a mistake (which, on any supposition, is most improbably), or it must be referred to the intention and inception of the princely offerings, the actual presentation being made at the time indicated in the narrative, *i. e.* in the first half of the second month."

The point, of course, is that the leaders of the tribes, or the princes, as the KJV calls them, brought their offerings after the tabernacle had been assembled and inaugurated. There is a collective offering, consisting of "six covered carts and twelve oxen," and an offering brought by each of the leaders individually on separate days, consisting of "one silver plate weighing a hundred and thirty shekels, and one silver sprinkling bowl weighing seventy shekels, both according to the sanctuary shekel, each filled with fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering; one gold dish weighing ten shekels, filled with incense; one young bull, one ram and one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; one male goat for a sin offering; and two oxen, five rams, five male goats and five male lambs a year old, to be sacrificed as a fellowship offering."

These carts were meant to be the vehicles for the transportation of the tabernacle when it was moved from place to place during the desert crossing. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* remarks here: "Observe, No sooner is the tabernacle fully set up than this provision is made for the removal of it." And he draws the spiritual lesson from this fact that our life in this world is transient.

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* says about these carts: "[Six covered wagons] *sheesh eglot tsaab*, 'six tilted wagons,' the Septuagint translates *ek hamaxas lampenikas*, with which the Coptic agrees; but what *lampenic* chariots were, no person pretends to know. Covered or tilted is probably the meaning of the original. The wagons were given for the more convenient exporting of the heavier parts of the tabernacle, which could not be conveniently carried on men's shoulders."

There is no mention about who took the initiative for this offering. We do not read that the Lord required the leaders of the tribes to bring this, so we may assume that there had been a gathering of leaders at which the problem of the transportation of the tabernacle was discussed and it was decided that the carts would be a convenient way of lightening the burden of the Levites. According to the logistical report given in Ex. 38:24 ff., 29 talents and 730 shekels was used in the making of the tabernacle, more than 100 talents and 1,775 shekels of silver, and 70 talents and 2,400 shekels of bronze. TLB translates this in 3,140 pounds of gold and 9,575 pounds of silver, and 7540 pounds of bronze. This adds up to 18,455 pounds of metal alone. The fact that men got together to discuss the logistics of a project that God had presented to them gives us an interesting pattern as to how to go about the work of the Lord. We have the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations." God entrusts men with His projects and He leaves it to them as to how to

go about the implementation. The tribal leaders came up with some excellent solutions, and they paid for it themselves. Part of the cost was too great to be born individually, so it was shared: two leaders combined their resources to provide for one cart, but each one contributed one ox. The idea that this arrangement was the result of human initiative and not a direct command of the Lord is reinforced by what we read in vs. 4 and 5: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Accept these from them, that they may be used in the work at the Tent of Meeting. Give them to the Levites as each man's work requires.' " It seems that Moses may have objected to the plan, since there had been no divine directive and that God overrules him.

The fact that the tribal leaders are identified as those in charge of the census suggests that the project of the carts and the oxen, as well as the following sacrifices, were more than the plan of a group of twelve men, but that the whole population was involved.

Moses assigns two carts and four oxen to the Gershonites and four carts and eight oxen to the Merarites, but "the Kohathites, because they were to carry on their shoulders the holy things, for which they were responsible." The Merarites received the greater number of carts and oxen, since they were responsible for the heaviest load in the transportation of the tabernacle: the boards, pillars, foundations, pins, and cords.<sup>106</sup> The Gershonites were responsible for the tapestries.<sup>107</sup>

The dedication of the altar is celebrated for a period of twelve days, during each of which one of the tribal leaders comes to present his gifts and those of the tribe he represents before the Lord. The altar is the bronze altar on which the bloody sacrifices were made, picturing the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The bronze altar is anointed; that is the Holy Spirit takes possession of it and transforms it from a wooden structure on which death reigned supremely into a place where love was expressed in its highest form and where death was, ultimately conquered. For this celebration each leader brought one silver plate, one silver sprinkling bowl, and one gold dish. The silver plate and bowl were filled with flour and oil, and the gold dish with incense. Added to this each one brought "one young bull, one ram and one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; one male goat for a sin offering; and two oxen, five rams, five male goats and five male lambs a year old, to be sacrificed as a fellowship offering."

To our modern mind the verses 13 through 83 make for the dullest reading one can imagine. For twelve long days we are dragged from one verse to another, in which the only difference is the name of the tribal leader; the inventory of his gifts is repeated meticulously. TLB senses that the readers would get bored with this repetition and therefore shortens its paraphrase. After 18 giving the details of Nahshon's offering on the first day, we are told: "The next day Nethanel, the son of Zuar, chief of the tribe of Issachar, brought his gifts and offerings. They were exactly the same as Nahshon had presented on the previous day." Thus this version skips all the verses in which the inventory of the gifts are repeated.

The only minute exception is found in vs. 23, where we read: "This was the offering of Nethanel son of Zuar," instead of "his offering was ...." *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: "His offering, and that of all the rest, is described in exactly the same words and phrases, with the single minute exception, that in ver. 19 we have, 'he offered for his offering,' instead of 'his offering was.' Even the small peculiarity of omitting the word shekels from the statement of the weight of the silver chargers and the golden spoons appears throughout (cf. Gen. xx. 16). No doubt the record was copied or enlarged from some document written at the time, and its studied sameness reflects the careful and equal solemnity with which the offerings of the several princes were received."

When Matthew Henry wrote his commentary a few centuries ago, people were less in a hurry than we are now, but yet he must have met with impatient people also, because he remarks: "Though the offerings were all the same, yet the account of them is repeated at large for each tribe, in the same words. We are sure there are no vain repetitions in scripture; what then shall we make of these repetitions? Might it not have served to say of this noble jury that the same offering which their foreman brought each on his day brought likewise? No, God would have it specified for each tribe: and why so?" He answers his question by saying: "(1.) it was for the encouragement of these princes, and of their respective tribes, that each of their offerings being recorded at large no slight might seem to be put upon them; for rich and poor meet together before God. (2.) it was for the encouragement of all generous acts of piety and charity, by letting us know that what is so given is lent to the Lord, and he carefully records it, with every one's name prefixed to his gift, because what is so given he will pay again, and even a cup of cold water shall have its reward. He is not unrighteous, to forget either the cost or the labour of love, <Heb. 6:10>. We find Christ taking particular notice of what was cast into the treasury, <Mk. 12:41>. Though what is offered be but little,

<sup>106</sup> See Num. 3:36,37

<sup>107</sup> See Num. 3:25,26

though it be a contribution to the charity of others, yet if it be according to our ability it shall be recorded, that it may be recompensed in the resurrection of the just.”

In a way TLB does not render us a service in leaving out the details. It seems that God has something special to say to us in these repetitions. He, first of all, wants to stop us in our track. If we are too much in a hurry to read this, we are going too fast. God wants us to know that He pays special attention to each of the offerings brought by the twelve tribal leaders. And if He takes them and their offerings so seriously, He will do the same with us and with what we bring before Him. What if God would be in the same hurry with us as we are with Him, and skip over our lives without paying attention?

The first one to bring his offering is Nahshon, son of Amminadab, or Naashon as the KJV calls him, the leader of the tribe of Judah. He was Aaron brother-in-law, according to the record of Exodus.<sup>108</sup> He is called the leader of Judah, every time the name of the tribe is mentioned. Both Matthew and Luke mention his name as one of the ancestors of Christ.<sup>109</sup> He plays a preeminent role in the early stages of the desert crossing. After the Levites, the tribe of Judah is first in relationship to the tabernacle as well as in marching order, and here, he opens the festivities of the inauguration. Yet, he is the only one of the tribal leaders, who is not addressed as “the leader.”

TLB describes the gift he, and all the other leaders bring, as: “a silver platter weighing three pounds and a silver bowl of about two pounds, both filled with grain offerings of fine flour mixed with oil,” and “a tiny gold box of incense which weighed only about four ounces.” These gifts were meant for the dedication of both altars; the grain offering for the bronze altar and the incense for the golden altar. Besides these gifts a certain number of animals is brought for three different kinds of sacrifices: a burnt offering, consisting of one young bull, one ram and one male lamb a year old, a sin offering, made with one male goat and a fellowship offering, consisting of two oxen, five rams, five male goats and five male lambs a year old; a total of twenty-one animals. The emphasis was, obviously, on the fellowship offering, as an expression of gratitude. The sin offering is the smallest one, as if a reference to sin is only made in passing. During the twelve day period of dedication a total of two hundred fifty-two animals was sacrificed.

The leader of the tribe, in behalf of which the sacrifices were brought, would have to lay his hands of the sacrificial animal to indicate that he and his tribe identified themselves with the animal and that what happened to the animal, actually, should happen to them, actually, did happen to them: they poured their souls out into death before the Lord. That is why God takes these sacrifices so seriously and He lets Moses give a detailed account of the sacrifices that were brought each day. “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints!”<sup>110</sup>

At the end of this account we find a summery of all the gifts and sacrifices, with weights and numbers totaled up. It is as if the Lord wanted to indicate that He accepts these gifts and sacrifices, not only as acts of personal dedication, but as a whole, coming from the people. The body of Christ is typified by this. Surrender, sacrifice and fellowship are acts made on a personal basis, but they have a uniting affect upon the individual. In Christ, we become not only individual priests, but a kingdom of priest, members of His body.

Vs. 89 seems to stand by itself without connection to the previous verses: “When Moses entered the Tent of Meeting to speak with the LORD, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover on the ark of the Testimony. And he spoke with him.” The fact that we find it immediately after the account of the gifts and sacrifices for the dedication of the altar suggests that there is a connection. Moses had heard the voice of God, speaking to him personally, before this time. But it was after the dedication of the altar that God’s voice appeared to come “from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover on the ark of the Testimony.” God Himself testifies to the uniqueness of this when He says to Aaron and Myriam: “When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD.”<sup>111</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* remarks here: “It is quite obvious that this statement more properly belongs to an earlier period, viz., to that immediately succeeding the consecration of the tabernacle. On the day it was set up Moses was not able to enter it (Exod. xl. 35), but no doubt he did so very soon afterwards, and received from the mouth of the Lord, speaking in the holiest, all the commandments and ordinances

<sup>108</sup> Ex. 6:23

<sup>109</sup> Matt. 1:4; Luke 3:32,33

<sup>110</sup> Ps. 116:15

<sup>111</sup> Num. 12:6-8

recorded in Leviticus and in the beginning of this book. Perhaps the first communication made to him in this way concerned the offerings of the princes when first brought near (vers. 4, 11), and for that reason the statement may have been appended to the record of those offerings.”

Nobody in the whole of the Old Testament knew this kind of fellowship with God. Whether this meant that Moses could, actually, enter into the Holy of Holiest, behind the veil, we do not know, but the verse seems to suggest this. How else would Moses know the exact place from which the voice came? God’s revelation of Himself to other prophets came in a supernatural way; in His speaking to Moses the supernatural became natural; Moses did not dream or have vision he heard the voice of God coming directly to him from a place in space and time. As far as Moses was concerned the Word had become flesh. That is the essence of the Incarnation, that the supernatural has become natural. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”<sup>112</sup>

According to what God said to Aaron and Myriam, Moses saw the form of the Lord. We are not told what this form was. It must have been more than the cloud and the pillar of fire, since that could be seen by any Israelite. It was not the full glory of God either, because there would have been no reason for Moses to ask to see God’s glory.<sup>113</sup>

It is hard for us to grasp that anyone could advance any further in the realm of spiritual reality than Moses did; and yet the apostle Paul indicates that God’s revelation to us, in Christ, surpasses the one given to Moses. He writes to the Christians in Corinth: “We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> John 1:14

<sup>113</sup> See Ex. 33:18

<sup>114</sup> II Cor 3:13,17,18

## CHAPTER EIGHT

This chapter deals with two subjects:

2. Regulations regarding the care of the candlestick. vs. 1-4
3. Regulations regarding the sanctification of the Levites. vs. 5-26

### 2. Regulations regarding the care of the candlestick vs. 1-4

*The Pulpit Commentary* says about the introductory phrase, “The Lord spake unto Moses”: “It does not appear when. The attempt of modern commentators to find a real connection between this section and the offering of the princes or the consecration of the Levites is simply futile. Such connection may be imagined, but the same ingenuity would obviously be equally successful if this section had been inserted in any other place from Exod. xxxvii, to the end of this book.” And on vs. 4 the Commentary says: “This has been recorded in Exod. xxxvii. 17. The repetition of the statement in this place seems to be conclusive that these verses are out of their historical position, and that their insertion here is due to some fact connected with the original records with which we are not acquainted. It may be this that these verses originally followed verse 89 of the previous chapter, and followed it still when it was inserted, for reasons already suggested, after the narrative of the offerings of the princes.” In saying these things, the Commentary disregards the obvious spiritual significance of the record and contradicts its own earlier remark that the real question is whether the Scriptures were written for our instruction or not.

The NIV rendering of vs. 2 seems clear enough: “When you set up the seven lamps, they are to light the area in front of the lampstand.” The more literal translation of the KJV: “When thou lightest the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light over against the candlestick,” leaves us in the dark. (No pun intended!) The Hebrew words, translated with “in front of” or “over against” are a composite preposition: *‘el*, which *Strong’s Dictionary* defines as: “denoting motion towards, but occasionally used of a quiescent position, i.e. near, with or among; often in general, to;” *muwl*, defined as: “properly, abrupt, i.e. a precipice; by implication, the front; used only adverbially (with prepositional prefix) opposite,” and *paniyim*, which can mean the face (as the part that turns).” So the NIV translation: “in front of the lampstand,” seems to be a logical one.

The intention of the menorah was to let its sevenfold light shine toward the entrance of the tabernacle, that is toward the people. The seven lamps of the lampstand are the image of the Holy Spirit. In the book of Revelation, this image is used repeatedly. First of all, John sees Jesus standing between seven lampstands which represent seven churches. We read: “I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone ‘like a son of man.’”<sup>115</sup> From what Jesus says to the church in Ephesus, however, we understand that the lampstand is also the divine element in the church, which is the Holy Spirit. We read: “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”<sup>116</sup> Earlier in the book we read: “Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.”<sup>117</sup> And, finally, we understand from the benediction with which the book of Revelation opens, that it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to bless the church: “Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne.”<sup>118</sup> So, the position of the lamps of the lampstand in the tabernacle shows us that the Holy Spirit is there to minister to the people. God lets the light of His Spirit fall upon us.

At the same time we see that man is involved in this ministry, not only as a receiver of that light, but as a vehicle. The lampstand was made in the form of a almond tree, in various stages of blooming, with buds and flowers, which expressed a growing process. The Holy Spirit, being God Himself, does not grow; but people, the church, filled with the Holy Spirit do.

Finally, we are given the assurance that this lampstand was a true copy of a heavenly reality. “The lampstand was made exactly like the pattern the LORD had shown Moses.” It was an expression in early matter of a spiritual reality. As such it was part of the Incarnation; God the Holy Spirit came to men in a

<sup>115</sup> Rev. 1:12,13

<sup>116</sup> Rev. 2:5

<sup>117</sup> Rev. 4:5

<sup>118</sup> Rev. 1:4

visible form. The miracle that invisible things can be expressed in earthly matter and substance will never cease to amaze us. The sculptor can make a piece of marble live with emotion, and a painter can put paint on canvas and evoke a world of feeling. God created bodies of flesh and blood that can give expression to a human soul and spirit. But the greatest miracle of all is that the Word became flesh.

### 3. Regulations regarding the sanctification of the Levites. vs. 5-26

The sanctification of the Levites differed from the consecration of the priests. The Levites are “purified,” but the priests are “consecrated.” The Hebrew words used are different. The word for purify is *taher*, which is defined by *Strong’s* as: “to be bright, to be pure, physical sound, clear, unadulterated; Levitically, uncontaminated; morally, innocent or holy.” The Hebrew word for consecrate is *qadash*, which is defined by *Strong* as “to be or make, pronounce or observe as clean (ceremonially or morally).” The Pulpit Commentary says: “There was in this case no ceremonial washing, no vesting in sacred garments, no anointing with holy oil, or sprinkling with the blood of sacrifices. The Levites, in fact, remained simply representatives of the congregation, whereas the priests were representatives also of Christ.”

There is no explanation as to what “the water of cleansing” may have constituted. There is a description of the preparation of “the water of cleansing” in ch. 19:1-10, but it is not clear whether this water had already been prepared at the time of the purification of the Levites. The water is called here “the water of cleansing,” other translations use the expression “the water of expiation,”<sup>119</sup> or “the water of purifying.”<sup>120</sup> The Hebrew says literally: “the water of sin.”

The purification consisted of four parts: a ritual that included shaving of the whole body, washing of body and clothes, and sprinkling with water; a double sacrifice of two bulls, (one as a sin offering and the other as burnt offering), accompanied by a grain offering; imposition of hands by the whole nation of Israel (probably represented by their clan leaders), and the presentation before the Lord of the Levites as a wave offering.

The shaving and washing, obviously, represents a new beginning, like a new birth. When Naaman was healed of his leprosy, we read: “So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.”<sup>121</sup> This kind of “new beginning” was acted out ritually in this ceremony. The Levites stand before the Lord as people who have been regenerated in order to serve Him. The apostle Paul puts this in a New Testament context when he says: “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”<sup>122</sup> The purification of sin is brought about by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has washed us from our sin in His blood.<sup>123</sup> But our regeneration, the renewing of our inner being, is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In the case of the Levites this was done in a symbolic way. The sprinkling and the washing and the sacrifices brought, did not necessarily bring about a change in heart. The hearts of some, who were open to the working of God’s Spirit, may have been transformed; but that which touches the skin usually goes no deeper than the skin. The ceremony described here, therefore, is only an image of what a born again Christians experience in the regeneration. The ceremony emphasizes the fact that man is born a sinner and that he cannot serve God without regeneration. This is what Jesus made clear to Nicodemus when He said: “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”<sup>124</sup>

In the light of this whole ceremony we have to keep in mind that the Levites were taken to serve the Lord in the place of all the first born of Israel. The fact is emphasized strongly in this passage. So, what

<sup>119</sup> RSV; ASV

<sup>120</sup> KJV

<sup>121</sup> II Kings 5:14 (RSV)

<sup>122</sup> Titus 3:4-7

<sup>123</sup> Rev. 1:5<sup>b</sup> (KJV)

<sup>124</sup> John 3:5-8



was done symbolically to the Levites was done substitutionally to all the firstborn of the nation and by consequence to the whole nation. Israel was to be a nation of priests, and the sanctification of the Levites was one step in that direction.

So, the symbolism of the new birth, as expressed in the shaving and washing of the Levites, pointed to the time when Israel would be a nation of people who would know the Lord in their hearts. Jeremiah prophesied about this new covenant, saying: “ ‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD. ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘ ‘Know the LORD,’ ‘ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the LORD. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’ ”<sup>125</sup> This is the covenant that has been inaugurated for us in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The second part of the ritual was the sacrifice of the two bulls; one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering. *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks that the sacrifice of a bull as a sin offering was reserved for the expiation of the sins of a high priest, or the sin of the whole congregation. In the law on the sin offering we read: “If the whole Israelite community sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD’s commands, even though the community is unaware of the matter, they are guilty. When they become aware of the sin they committed, the assembly must bring a young bull as a sin offering and present it before the Tent of Meeting.”<sup>126</sup> This kind of sacrifice, therefore, reinforces the concept that the Levites represented the nation of Israel as a whole, in their service in the tabernacle. The sacrifice also emphasized the fact that Israel consisted of a nation of sinners, not only because of their acts, but because of their sinful nature. As descendants of Adam, they were born in sin; committing sin was natural for them. They were condemned to death, not merely because of what they did, but because of who they were. The imposition of hands upon the head of the bull, symbolizes this fact. Jesus died not only for our sins, He died in our stead.

After the initial purification of the Levites by washing and shaving, the Israelites lay hands upon them. As suggested before, this ritual was probably performed by proxy. We can hardly assume that over two million men laid their hands on the heads of more than eight thousand Levites. But we are given no details as to how this part of the ritual was carried out. The important message is that the Israelite nation as a whole identified itself with the Levites. In the consecration of the Levites, all of Israel was consecrated to the Lord.

The same is true of the presentation of the Levites before the Lord. We read in vs. 11: “Aaron is to present the Levites before the LORD as a wave offering from the Israelites.” This wave offering cannot be seen but as a symbolic gesture. The wave offerings of the sacrifices brought on the altar, could be lifted up in the air and waved before the Lord, but it would be a physical impossibility to lift up the bodies of some eight thousand men and wave them back and forth. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: “Some have supposed that they were marched up and down before the altar, forgetting that the court would scarcely afford standing room for 1000 people, while the Levites between thirty and fifty numbered more than 8000. It is certain that the Levites could only be brought before the Lord, could only be waved (howsoever that was done), could only lay their hands upon the bullocks, by representation.” A possibility would be that the Levites “waved” themselves before the Lord. We can still observe in our present day Jews swaying their hips when they pray, and it may be presumed that this was the way the Levites presented themselves before the Lord at their inauguration.

Although the apostle Paul will not have meant to tell us that we should do so in a literal fashion, as a praying Orthodox Jew, he does tell us to “offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is [our] spiritual act of worship.”<sup>127</sup> The point of it is that spiritual worship is practical; it involves the body; it is active and living.

It is interesting to observe that this presentation of the Levites, this offering of their bodies as a living sacrifice to God, is done before the bloody sacrifice of the bulls is made. It is, as if the awareness of

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<sup>125</sup> Jer. 31:31-34

<sup>126</sup> Lev. 4:13,14

<sup>127</sup> Rom. 12:1

the sinful nature only comes to the surface, after the act of dedication has taken place. In dedication ourselves to the Lord, we become aware of the fact how much the image of God, in which we were created, has deviated from the original. In the presence of the Lord we come to the conclusion that we fall short of the glory of God; which is Paul's definition of sin. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."<sup>128</sup> This condition of sin is atoned for in the offering of the bull as a sin offering. The Levites lay their hands on the bull, thus identifying themselves with the animal that is slain, and confessing that their condition merits the death penalty, which they accept by substitution. Then the other bull is sacrificed as a burnt offering, which is the expression of the supreme love, the *agapè*, which motivated Jesus to give Himself to the Father in His death on the cross. People who bring a burnt offering are, in Paul's words, "imitators of God." Writing to the Ephesians, he says: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."<sup>129</sup>

Having performed through this ritual presentation of themselves before the Lord, the Levites are allowed to serve in the tabernacle. There is a paradox in the fact that, on the one hand, the Levites are representatives of the whole nation of Israel; all Israel had identified itself with them in the laying on of hands. On the other hand, the Levites are set apart from the nation. God says to Moses: "In this way you are to set the Levites apart from the other Israelites, and the Levites will be mine." God wanted Israel, as a whole, to be a holy nation. The book of Leviticus resounds with this theme: "I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy."<sup>130</sup> But God knew His people. He knew the quality of their daily lives, and He wanted to give them a role model to follow in the Levites.

In this context we find the same reference to the first born among the Israelites and the death of all the first born in Egypt, as in ch. 3:5-13. The repetition of the connection between the Passover experience, in which the first born of Israel were saved by the blood of the lamb, and the presentation of the Levites, who were a living sacrifice unto the Lord, as a substitution of Israel's first born, serves to remind the people of their status before the Lord. The claim of God was upon the life of each member of the nation. They were never allowed to forget.

*The Pulpit Commentary* has an interesting comment on the phrase "To make an atonement for the children of Israel." We read: "This is a remarkable expression, and throws light upon the nature of atonement. It is usually confined to purely sacerdotal ministrations, but it clearly has a somewhat different scope here. The idea that the Levites 'made an atonement' by assisting the priests in the subordinate details of sacrifice hardly needs refutation; as well might the Gibeonites be said to 'make an atonement' because they supplied the altar fire with wood. The real parallel to this is to be found in the case of Phinehas, of whom God testified that 'he hath turned my wrath away from the children of Israel,' and 'made an atonement for the children of Israel' (ch. xxv. 11, 13). It is evident that Phinehas turned away the wrath of God not by offering any sacrifices, but by making the sin which aroused that wrath to cease: he made an atonement for the people by discharging for them that holy and bounden duty (of putting away sin) which the rest of them failed to perform. Similarly the Levites made an atonement not by offering sacrifice (which they could no more do than the children of Judah), but by rendering unto God those personal duties of attendance and service in his courts which *all* the people ought to have rendered had they only seen fit."

Another interesting feature in the same verse is that the service rendered by the Levites protected the Israelites against the danger the presence of God's holiness exposed them to. We read that atonement was made "so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary." Approaching the holiness of God would be more lethal to any human being than touching high tension life wire without any insulation. The reference in this context to the striking down of the firstborn of Egypt and the salvation of Israel's firstborn, gives us insight into how the presence of the Levites at the tabernacle meant protection for the average Israelite. The singling out of every firstborn in Israel meant that God laid claim to every family. Every family member went free because their firstborn had been redeemed. In Egypt this redemption was provided by the death of the lamb and the protection of its blood. In the desert the firstborn, and consequently, every family member was redeemed by the substitution of the Levites for every oldest son.

In New Testament terms this means that every human being has the freedom to enter in God's presence, because of the redemption in God's firstborn Son, Jesus Christ, who not only protects us with His

<sup>128</sup> Rom. 3:23

<sup>129</sup> Eph. 5:1,2

<sup>130</sup> For example: Lev. 11:44

blood, but saves us from God's wrath by His life. The author of the Hebrew epistle attests to this by saying: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."<sup>131</sup> And Paul writes to the Romans: "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"<sup>132</sup>

The NIV says that, after the ceremony of inauguration, "the Levites came to do their work at the Tent of Meeting under the supervision of Aaron and his sons." Other translations use the preposition "in" instead of "at." The Pulpit Commentary believes that the verse speaks about the entering of the Levites into the tabernacle after everything was packed for transportation, since only the priests could enter the tent. It seems logical, however, to take the phrase "in the tabernacle" to mean to include the court, in which the sacrifices were brought and most of the labor was performed.

The chapter ends with a regulation concerning the age limits between which the Levites had to officially perform their duties at the tabernacle. We read in vs. 24: "This applies to the Levites: Men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the Tent of Meeting." This seems to contradict the age mentioned in ch. 4:3, where we read: "Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work in the Tent of Meeting." *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks on this point: "a short time before the minimum age had been fixed at thirty (ch. iv. 3). That direction, however, concerned the transport of the tabernacle and its belongings; this was a permanent regulation designed for the ordinary labors of the sanctuary at a time when the Levites would be scattered through their cities, and could only serve by courses. For the latter purpose many more would be required: and indeed they were found insufficient as it was in the latter days of David, when the wealth and devotion of the kingdom were fast increasing (see on 1 Chron. xxiii. 24-27)." The text referred to by this commentary reads: "These were the descendants of Levi by their families-- the heads of families as they were registered under their names and counted individually, that is, the workers twenty years old or more who served in the temple of the LORD. For David had said, 'Since the LORD, the God of Israel, has granted rest to his people and has come to dwell in Jerusalem forever, the Levites no longer need to carry the tabernacle or any of the articles used in its service.' According to the last instructions of David, the Levites were counted from those twenty years old or more." From this we would get the impression that it was upon David's instruction that the age was changed from thirty to twenty, in which case the text in this present chapter would be an insertion from a later date. It is also possible, however, to see the phrase "According to the last instructions of David," as pertaining to the fact that the Levites had not longer any duties in the transportation of the tabernacle and its furniture.

There may be another meaning, however, which can only be found in the original, but is hidden in the various English translations. The NIV renders vs. 24 with: "This applies to the Levites: Men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the Tent of Meeting," but the KJV translates it with: "This is it that belongeth unto the Levites: from twenty and five years old and upward they shall go in to wait upon the service of the tabernacle of the congregation." The phrase "to wait upon the service" literally means in Hebrew "to war the warfare." The thought that the younger Levites especially were conscripted to perform duties during times of war, is a very plausible one. From a report of the war of Jehoshaphat against the Moabites and Ammonites we gather that the Levites marched ahead of the army as a choir that praised the Lord. We read: "Then some Levites from the Kohathites and Korahites stood up and praised the LORD, the God of Israel, with very loud voice. Early in the morning they left for the Desert of Tekoa. As they set out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, 'Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful.' After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: 'Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.'"<sup>133</sup> The proof is not very conclusive and it is the only illustration we have in the Bible of Levites carrying out their tabernacle duties in the midst of a scene of war. In the account of the battle of Jericho, it is the priests who sound the trumpet, not the Levites.

<sup>131</sup> Heb. 10:19-22

<sup>132</sup> Rom. 5:10

<sup>133</sup> II Chr. 20:19-21

The fact that the Hebrew uses the phrase “to war the warfare” indicates that the service of the Lord on earth is carried out in hostile territory. The “Prince of this world” will oppose every effort to serve the Lord, and he will put every possible obstacle in the way to discourage and dissuade us. Those who want serve the Lord will have to fight for it.

The setting of the age limit at the end of this chapter not only marks the age of entering upon the service, but also of leaving it. Levites were officially retired at the age of fifty. That seems very young in our modern day and age. A place is left for work on a honorary basis and for volunteer work. Very few people, however, would be considered too old to work at the age of fifty. At that point, however, the burden of responsibility was lifted from them. Those who kept on working did it, not because they had to, but because they wanted to.

It has been said that there is no retirement for a servant of the Lord, this verse seems to contradict this. The Lord allows for the fact that the burden may become too heavy and that there is a point at which we may simple draw back and enjoy what we do and what we are. Having come at this place in my own life, I found out that this is one of the hardest positions to maintain. It is so much more difficult to sit back and enjoy ourselves, without feeling guilty about it, than to lose ourselves in all kinds of activities and responsibilities. Evidently, God wants us to know that His burden is light.

## CHAPTER NINE

Our outline draws a line through the middle of this chapter, between verse 14 and 15. The first part still falls under the heading of **Sanctification through Worship**, which runs from 7:1-9:14; the second part comes under **Sanctification through Divine Guidance**, running from 9:15-10:10.

The worship in question is the celebration of the Passover. The time given for this celebration was “the first month of the second year after they came out of Egypt,” which is exactly one year after the exodus. The tabernacle had just been erected. We read in the last chapter of Exodus: “So the tabernacle was set up on the first day of the first month in the second year.”<sup>134</sup> The Lord had already given to Moses the instruction to hold a census, according to ch. 1:1, and, probably, the offerings of the tribal leaders for the inauguration of the tabernacle, as described in ch. 7, had already been made. We are now in the second week of the New Year, since the Passover was to be celebrated on the fourteenth day of that month.

This was to be the first commemoration of the exodus from Egypt, one year after the original event took place. *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks that there may have been some doubts as to whether the people were to celebrate the feast at all during the desert crossing, and God’s specific command answers their question. It seems, however, that the Passover was not celebrated after this until about forty years later, when Israel actually entered Canaan. Only after the younger generation had gone through the rite of circumcision at Gilgal, we read in the book of Joshua that they celebrated the Passover: “On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover.”<sup>135</sup> It is true that, in the original instructions, there was only question of a commemoration after the people had entered the promised land. We read in the Exodus account: “When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony,” and “When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites and Jebusites-- the land he swore to your forefathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey-- you are to observe this ceremony in this month.”<sup>136</sup> But one gets the impression that the Passover was never commemorated consistently, even from the first time the Israelites did enter the promised land. When king Josiah reinstates the practice we read: “Not since the days of the judges who led Israel, nor throughout the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah, had any such Passover been observed.”<sup>137</sup> Seeing the place of importance the Passover celebration takes in the Pentateuch, it is amazing that, of all feasts, this particular one was neglected to such a degree. Forty years of wandering through the desert and the lack of some kind of civilization, such as existed in Egypt and later in Canaan, which would be a necessary element in the celebration, would account for it. After all, one would need houses and doors in order to be able to apply the blood to the lintel and the side-posts of the doors. The practice to kill the lambs and apply the blood to the door-posts was later changed to a celebration which converged on the temple, which became the only place where the Passover lambs were killed.

One of the main reasons for the negligence in the observation of the feast, however, must have been the neglect of the written Word. It was not until Josiah’s days, when the written Word of God was rediscovered that the Passover celebrations was given its rightful place in the life of the nation. It was not until the scroll of the Pentateuch was rediscovered and read, that the Passover was celebrated again. We read that, during the restoration of the temple a scroll was found. “Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, ‘I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD.’ He gave it to Shaphan, who read it. Then Shaphan the secretary went to the king and reported to him: ‘Your officials have paid out the money that was in the temple of the LORD and have entrusted it to the workers and supervisors at the temple.’ Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, ‘Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.’ And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king. When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. The king gave this order to all the people: ‘Celebrate the Passover to the LORD your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant.’”<sup>138</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* enters rather deeply into the problem of this first celebration of the feast in the desert, suggesting that the number of one-year-old lambs available would not have been sufficient to

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<sup>134</sup> Ex. 40:17

<sup>135</sup> Josh. 5:10

<sup>136</sup> Ex. 12:25; 13:5

<sup>137</sup> II Kings 23:22

<sup>138</sup> II Kings 22:8-11; 23:21

provide for this celebration. The Commentary quotes Josephus who wrote, “that in that day 256,000 lambs were slain and their blood sprinkled upon the altar within the three hours ‘between the evenings.’” “This would seem to be a physical impossibility, and we can only remark that Josephus was certainly no eye-witness of the event. In the original instructions given there was no indication that the task of killing the Passover lambs or kids was reserved for any special group of people. The Passover was a family affair, where one family, or a combination of families, got together to celebrate. The only difference in the first anniversary celebration was the lack of door-posts and lintels.

It seems that the main reason for the insertion of the portion at this point in the account of the book of Numbers is that it deals with the provision for a deferred celebration of the feast, one month later. The case of some men who had touched a dead body, and who were thus ceremonially defiled, became the reason for the issue of a general rule. King Hezekiah used this provision in the law to postpone the Passover celebration. We read in II Chronicles: “The king and his officials and the whole assembly in Jerusalem decided to celebrate the Passover in the second month. They had not been able to celebrate it at the regular time because not enough priests had consecrated themselves and the people had not assembled in Jerusalem.”<sup>139</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that Jesus may have acted according to this provision in the law by celebrating the Passover prematurely. The Commentary says: “And possibly it was in the spirit of this command that our Lord acted when he ate the passover by anticipation with his disciples twenty-four hours before the proper time-- at which he was himself the Lamb slain.” This last point hinges on the interpretation of the term which is used to indicate the proper time, which is “between the evenings.” The Hebrew words are *bēyn ‘ereb*, which is generally taken to mean “at dusk.” It could, however, be interpreted literally as between one evening and another; which would allow for a period of twenty-four hours. If taken in this way, Jesus was well within the prescribed time limits when He brought His disciples together and transformed the Passover celebration and the Feast of Unleavened bread into a celebration of the “Last Supper.” Our Western mind would have a hard time understanding that time could be defined so loosely as to allow for anytime during a twenty-four hour period, but once we move out of the Western word, we observe that the rest of the world is not bound to the clock the same Westerners usually are.

A strange phenomenon is the use of the word “dead body” in this context. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: “**Dead body.** Hebrew, *nephesh*, as in ch. v. 2; vi. 11, and other places. It is inexplicable how this word, which properly means ‘soul,’ should have come to be used of a corpse; perhaps it is an additional testimony to the complete absence from Jewish teaching of any doctrine of an immortal spirit. The Septuagint uses *psyche* here.” It seems, however, that use of this word, which is also used to indicate the creation of Adam in the Genesis account, (“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul”)<sup>140</sup>, points to the meaning of mortality rather than the absence of a doctrine of immortality. The suggestion seems to be that the disintegration of what was created in God’s image is foul to God and defiles the person who comes into close contact with it.

It is also important to note that it was especially this kind of defilement, the touching of a dead body, which is mentioned as preventing people to observe the Passover ritual, which was a commemoration of death by substitution. There were other things that could make people ritually unclean, but they are not mentioned here, although they would, probably, prevent participation in the Passover as well. There seems to be a rather profound lesson to be learned that some forms of death are an abhorrence to God and others are like a pleasing aroma. “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.”<sup>141</sup> There is a difference between dying because the lifeline with God is severed, or dying as an expression of love. The person who had been contaminated by the one could not participate in the commemoration of the other.

Another reason for a deferred celebration was if a person was away on a journey. This, of course, was no form of defilement, but it was a separation, which meant a severance of fellowship also; fellowship with the family, which was of fundamental importance in the Passover celebration, and fellowship with God, who had declared Himself present locally in the tabernacle, above the cherubs of the ark. Leaving is also a form of death, as the French proverb says.<sup>142</sup>

<sup>139</sup> II Chr. 30:2,3

<sup>140</sup> (Gen. 2:7 - KJV)

<sup>141</sup> Ps. 116:15

<sup>142</sup> Partir c’est mourir un peu.

*The Pulpit Commentary* adds that “The Rabbins ruled that it meant a distance of fifteen miles or more from the temple at sunrise of the fourteenth of Abib.”

There is something touching in the repetition of some of the elements which constitute the celebration of the Passover. The Lord says specifically: “They are to eat the lamb, together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They must not leave any of it till morning or break any of its bones.” The Father wants the celebration to be a perfect picture of His Son’s sacrifice. It is closely linked to the Feast of Unleavened bread; which is an expression of the consequences redemption has on daily life. The blood of the lamb gives to the partaker the right to live a life from which sin has been removed. The bitter herbs are a reminder of the essence of suffering, the price that was paid for the redemption, the fact that nothing of the lamb was to remain till the next day, was a reminder of the once-for-all character of the sacrifice, and, finally, the unbroken bones contained the promise of the resurrection. In giving the eyewitness account of Jesus’ death, John says: “But when they [the Roman soldiers] came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.”<sup>143</sup>

The verses 13 and 14 reveal two striking principles, which not only apply to the celebration of the Passover, but to the whole of man’s relation with God. The first principle is the deviousness of the human heart and the second is the ministry-principle of God’s covenant with Israel. God foresaw the possibility of a man using the clause for the deferred celebration as an excuse not to celebrate at all. *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks about the statement that, in the deferred celebration also, all the regulations had to be observed: “The later Jews held that this passover need only be kept for one day, and that leaven need not be put away from the house. But this was a clear departure from the original rule, for it was evidently intended that it should be in all respects a true passover, and in this case six clear days were allowed for the keeping of it.” God ruled that the man who tried to avoid the commemoration of his deliverance forfeited his rights as an Israelite. The phrase, “That man will bear the consequences of his sin,” does not spell out what those consequences would be, but we can take it to mean that the sin could not be expiated by any sacrifice, since he disdained the sacrifice God had ordained for his salvation. The author of the Hebrew epistle speaks in New Testament terms about this kind of person when he says: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?”<sup>144</sup> And at another place, the same writer says: “They are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”<sup>145</sup> In the context of the Epistle to the Hebrews, this means that a Jew, who had discovered that Christ was reality portrayed in the Old Testament sacrifices, and who came to the point where he turned his back to the reality in order to revert to the Old Testament images of animal sacrifice, virtually cut himself off from the possibility of having his sins atoned for, since he rejected the means of atonement. As a Jew who had been included in the covenant God had made with His people, he withdrew himself from the protection of the blood of the covenant, and thus exposed himself to the full attack of the enemy.

We have to be very careful not to build a theology of eternal security, or of the possibility of falling away from God’s grace, upon the above. The fact that a person was born a Jew meant that he was included in God’s covenant with the people of Israel, which was a different position from a New Testament Christian who is “in Christ.” Jesus calls the woman whose back was bent over “a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years”, and when Zacheus confesses his sins before Christ, Jesus says: “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.”<sup>146</sup> Evidently, being a daughter and son of Abraham, put those people in a position in which they could claim salvation, but they were not saved before they met Christ. The man who refuses to observe the Passover ritual, reneges his status as “son of Abraham.”

On the other hand, aliens were invited to the Passover celebration, if they observed the rules. These rules are spelled out in Exodus: “An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD’s Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the

<sup>143</sup> John 19:33

<sup>144</sup> Heb. 10:26-29

<sup>145</sup> Heb. 6:6

<sup>146</sup> See Luke 13:16; 19:9

land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you.”<sup>147</sup> This is the ministry-principle, or missionary principle of the Passover celebration. It emphasized the fact that the people of Israel were to be a nation of priests. The God of Israel is the savior of the world, but man has to meet God on God’s conditions.

In vs. 13 the Passover celebration is called “the LORD’s offering.” This term is rather unusual since “offerings” were, generally, sacrifices brought in connection with the Levitical priesthood. The Passover celebration and the killing of the lambs, however, was a family affair in which no priest was called in. The head of the household served as a priest. There is a hidden reference to the priesthood of Christ in this, since Christ Himself did not belong to the tribe from which priests came to serve. The writer to the Hebrew touches upon this when he says about Christ’s priesthood: “He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.”<sup>148</sup> It is also true that the Passover sacrifice predated all the other sacrifices. It formed the basis for all the other ones. It was not until after Israel had left Egypt, which was made possible by the killing of the Passover lamb, and arrived at Mount Sinai, that the instructions for the tabernacle service were given.

#### **D. Sanctification through Divine Guidance 9:15-10:10**

Here we enter upon the last section of Part One of our outline of Numbers. The verses 15-23 describe, what the *Pulpit Commentary* calls: “The Signals of God.”

This section takes us back to the last verses of the book of Exodus. After Moses had finished the work of assembling the tabernacle, we read: “Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”<sup>149</sup> The accent in Exodus is upon the glory of God, which came down in the midst of the people. In our chapter in Numbers the stress seems to be upon the guidance which the cloud offered to the people and the people’s obedience to God’s directives. The keywords here are “They obeyed the LORD’s order, in accordance with his command through Moses.” The cloud was the physical evidence of God’s presence and the moving of the cloud was the visible guidance during the crossing of the desert.

*Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says about the pillar of fire and cloud: “The phenomenon by which God guided the Israelites during their travels through the wilderness after leaving Egypt <Ex. 14:24>. The pillar of fire and cloud is first mentioned in <Exodus 13:21-22>, where some of its characteristics are described. In the form of cloud by day and fire by night, the pillar was constantly visible to the Israelites. By this phenomenon, God led the people on their journey from the border of Egypt as they marched toward the Promised Land. As a pillar of fire, it gave enough light for the people to travel by night.

The pillar of fire and cloud was also a visible sign or representation of God’s presence with His people. In a sense God could be said to be “in” the pillar <Ex. 14:24>; in it He “came down” to the tabernacle of meeting <Num. 12:5>, and “appeared” at the tabernacle <Deut. 31:15>.

After the tabernacle was built in the wilderness, it was covered by a cloud which had the appearance of fire by night. Although this cloud was not described as a pillar, it must have been the same phenomenon. While the cloud remained over the tabernacle, the people did not break camp. But they set out when the cloud was taken up. Wherever it settled down again was to be the next stopping place.”

The description of how God guided His people through the desert by means of the moving of the cloud is given before Israel arrived at the borders of Canaan. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: “This supernatural phenomenon was not transitory, like the glory-cloud *within* the tabernacle (Exod. xl. 35; cf. 1 Kings viii. 10), but permanent, as long at least as the Israelites were in the wilderness.” We have no indication, however, that the cloud went ahead of them after the people refused to enter the promised land and were condemned to wander in the desert for forty years. The last mention of the cloud is when the people revolt against Moses and Aaron and hold them responsible for their own failure to enter the land. We read: “But when the assembly gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron and turned toward the Tent of Meeting, suddenly the cloud covered it and the glory of the LORD appeared.”<sup>150</sup> There, the cloud

<sup>147</sup> Ex. 12:48,49

<sup>148</sup> Heb. 7:13,14

<sup>149</sup> Ex. 40:34

<sup>150</sup> Num. 16:42



suddenly appears, which would suggest that it had not been visible anymore previously. As long as Israel obeyed the Lord's guidance, guidance was given; but as soon as they refused to follow the cloud, the cloud withdrew and they were on their own. There is a strong suggestion that, during the forty years of disobedience, the people literally wandered aimlessly through the desert, without any other goal but to die there. There is no clearer picture of what it means to lead a life outside the presence of God; it is a life without a goal and without meaning. Paul describes it as "without hope and without God in the world."<sup>151</sup>

On the other hand there is the testimony of those who "follow the Lamb wherever he goes."<sup>152</sup> God does not ask us to find our own way through life. He is willing and eager to take us by the hand. The Psalmist says: "You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory."<sup>153</sup> And the author of Hebrew presents the picture of Jesus as our guide through life, by saying: "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering."

In the verses 17-23 we are given a rather detailed description of the pattern of the way in which the Lord guided the Israelites through the desert by means of the moving of the cloud. These verses elaborate what was said briefly in the book of Exodus.<sup>154</sup> God had, obviously, a well defined travel plan for His people, which included periods of prolonged rest and short interruptions of travel; sometimes no longer than one night at a place. We do not read what happened with the tabernacle during those overnight stops, but it seems hardly possible that the tabernacle could be assembled completely in such a short time, only to be taken down the next morning. On the other hand, we do not know how long it took to put everything together. With several thousand men involved, it may have been the work of a few hours only. Also, at the time of arrival at the place where the night was spent, it was not known when the cloud would move again, so the people would, probably, prepare themselves for an average stay of several days every time they pitched their tents somewhere. Vs. 21 suggests that the cloud could break up even in the middle of the night. It could be, though, that the verse only speaks about a hypothetical incident. The following verse mentions periods of "two days or a month or a year," which may be the actual duration of the various stops. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "It is not known whether or on what occasion the Israelites actually remained in camp for a year." The Hebrew word translated "year" is *yamin*, which means "days" or an undefined period.

The point of these verses is that God's guidance is unpredictable. There was no set pattern which would allow people to get into a rut. The only routine consisted in obeying when the order was given. There were periods of waiting which were sometimes prolonged.

One of the hardest things in the life of a human being is waiting, and waiting for the Lord is the hardest of all. David knew that it takes more strength and courage to wait than to act, for he says: "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD."<sup>155</sup>

Jesus introduces the concept of watchfulness in regard to God's guidance. Speaking about His return, He says: "Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back-- whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"<sup>156</sup>

There are periods of prolonged waiting, but there are other moments at which God is so much in a hurry that we can hardly keep up. The cloud can move anytime and it can move fast. The Holy Spirit keeps us on our toes. As long as we are on earth, we are in God's boot camp. Some of the moves may seem purposeless, but the purpose of the exercises is to teach us to obey.

Finally, the Israelites "obeyed the LORD's order, in accordance with his command through Moses." The "through Moses" clause refers, both, to the Lord's command and to the people's obedience. The people did not just run and pack when the cloud moved. God communicated the command to Moses through the moving of the cloud and Moses passed on the marching order. This is a perfect image of our obedience to God's guidance in Jesus Christ. The writer to the Hebrews elaborates on this point. First of all,

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<sup>151</sup> Eph. 2:12

<sup>152</sup> Rev. 14:4

<sup>153</sup> Ps. 73:23,24

<sup>154</sup> See Ex. 40:36-38

<sup>155</sup> Ps. 27:14

<sup>156</sup> Mark 13:33-37

he says that: "Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses."<sup>157</sup> Then we read about Jesus' own obedience to God's commands, and the purpose of this in relation to the guidance we receive through Him. "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. ....Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."<sup>158</sup> It is through Christ's suffering and obedience that we receive God's marching orders and, at the same time, it is through Him that we are able to obey.

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<sup>157</sup> Heb. 3:3

<sup>158</sup> Heb. 2:10; 5:8,9

## CHAPTER TEN

This chapter can be divided in two parts, the dividing line running between the verses 10 and 11. The first part is a continuation of the theme that began in the previous chapter: Sanctification through Divine Guidance 10:1-10, and the second part marks the beginning of part two of the whole book of Numbers, which marks the failure of the nation of Israel to reach the goal God had set for them.

### D. Sanctification through Divine Guidance 10:1-10

This section introduces the two silver trumpets which were used to give the audible signal for departure at the moving of the cloud. The trumpets had other purposes also, as we will see below, but in the context of these verses the connection is, obviously, to the moving of the cloud.

*The Pulpit Commentary* says about the making of the trumpets: “Hebrew, *khatsothserah*. From the testimony of Josephus, from the representation on the arch of Titus, and from a comparison of ancient Egyptian trumpets, it is clear that these trumpets were straight, long, and narrow, with an expanded mouth. The *shophâr*, or trumpet of the Jubilee, on the other hand, was a buccina or cornet, either made of a ram’s horn, or shaped like one.”

In one of its Homilies, connected with this portion of Scripture, *the Pulpit Commentary* says the following about the use of the trumpets: “There is a manifest connection between the cloud and the trumpets. At Sinai there was ‘a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud’ (Exod. xix. 16). This seems to have been a miraculous sound, but Jehovah now orders Moses to have two silver trumpets made for permanent use. Thus trumpets as well as cloud were remembrancers of Sinai. God uses sound along with light to signify his will to his people; he appeals not only to their eyes, but also to their ears. Though the cloud was there they were not ever watching it. The longer it rested, the less conscious of its presence they became. Therefore God added the sound of the trumpets, a sudden, startling sound, to stop each one in his work, or raise him out of his sleep.”

As this Homily suggests, the silver trumpets were a copy of the one God used on the day He came down upon Mount Sinai. The sound of the trumpet at that day was a supernatural phenomenon, that can not be explained by any natural means. The sound the two silver trumpets produced is an expression of a divine reality, by using earthly matter. In that sense the making of the trumpets corresponded to the making of the tabernacle and all its furniture, in that it expressed in material form a heavenly reality.

The trumpets had a multiple use. One was to give an audible signal for the order to march, just as the moving of the cloud was the visible one. The trumpets complete the picture of the manner in which God guides His people: there was the moving of the cloud, the ministry of Moses and the sound of the trumpets.

The various signals the trumpets could give are not spelled out in detail in these verses; guidance was given by their sound, but they were also used to call the people together or to call the leaders of the people. The trumpets were to be used in times of war, not only to assemble the army, but to catch God’s attention. God assures the people that when they sound the trumpets in time of need: “Then you will be remembered by the LORD your God and rescued from your enemies” (vs. 9).

And, finally, the trumpets were to announce certain festivities, of which, specifically, the New Moon festivals are mentioned. The section ends with the statement: “I am the LORD your God.”

The first use of the trumpets was to call the people together. This was indicated by the sound of both trumpets at the same time. The nation of Israel was God’s church, His *ekklesia*, the ones He called out of this world to be set apart for Him. At the first revelation of God’s presence on top of Mount Sinai, God had said to Israel: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>159</sup> The trumpet blast was a reminder to the people of the call of God upon them. God’s call is loud and clear and those who do not hear it have a serious hearing problem. It is the same call with which God called Adam after he sinned. We read in the Genesis account: “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’”<sup>160</sup>

<sup>159</sup> Ex. 19:5,6

<sup>160</sup> Gen. 3:8,9

The second signal is the sound of one trumpet only. When this was heard, the leaders of the tribes had to gather together for a conference with Moses. So the sound of one trumpet pertains to the horizontal level of relationships men and men, but the sound of both trumpets to the vertical relationship between God and men.

The third signal is called “a trumpet blast.” The KJV calls it “an alarm.” The Hebrew word is \* *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: “This seems to signify a continuous peal, easily distinguished, wherever audible, from the blowing in short, sharp tones.” The word “alarm” has a connotation of panic in modern English, which is, evidently, not the intention in this context. This trumpet blast was the signal for the breaking up of the camp. This puts the use of the trumpets in the context of divine guidance, which was the reason why they were introduced at this place in Scripture. Only two trumpet blasts are mentioned here: one for the breaking up of the eastern section, which included Judah, Issachar and Zebulun, and one for the breaking up of the southern group, including Reuben, Simeon and Gad. Whether the trumpets were sounded for the departure of the other two section of the camp, we do not know. It could be that, once the first two groups were set in motion, the others would follow naturally, or the fact that the trumpets would sound again was considered so self-explanatory, that it was not worth mentioning it. It could also be that this part of the original text was lost. *The Pulpit Commentary* mentions that: “The Septuagint inserts in ver. 6, ‘And ye shall sound a third alarm, and the camps which are pitched westwards shall move; and ye shall sound a fourth alarm, and the camps which are pitched northwards shall move.’ ” This would suggest that the Hebrew text we know now is incomplete.

The task of blowing the trumpets is given to the sons of Aaron, that is to the priests, as “a lasting ordinance.” The priest were, probably, also the guardians of the trumpets, which were kept in the sanctuary. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about the phrase “an ordinance for ever,” which is the KJV’s rendering: “The accustomed formula for some sacred institution which was to have a permanent character and an eternal meaning (cf. Exod. xii. 24). The truth of these words cannot be exhausted by an actual use of 1500 years, followed by complete disuse for 1800 years. The ‘ordinance’ of the silver trumpets must be perpetuated ‘for ever’ in the gospel, or else the Divine word has failed.”

The linking of the use of the trumpets with the proclamation of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is a legitimate application of Old Testament truth to a New Testament period, promotes the ones who are “in Christ” to the rank of priests; which is what the New Testament clearly teaches. It is up to the believers in Christ, to sound the trumpet.

We are also to expect the sound of the trumpet, as the signal of the Lord’s return. Jesus, Himself, said: “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.

And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”<sup>161</sup> The apostle Paul connects the sounding of the trumpet with the Lord’s return. He says: “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”<sup>162</sup> And elsewhere: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”<sup>163</sup> And: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”<sup>164</sup> And, finally, seven trumpets are sounded by seven angels at different intervals in the book of Revelation, when various scenes of the end times, probably the great tribulation, unfold before us.<sup>165</sup>

All the above reference speak about the use of trumpets by angels, but the trumpets in our text are sounded by men. This reinforces the thought that the trumpets on earth are a copy of the heavenly instruments; an expression in silver and sound of a spiritual reality.

Once the people of Israel arrived in the promised land, the trumpets lost a good deal of their practical use. There was no longer any need for a convocation of the nation at the entrance of the tabernacle, or for the breaking up of camp. The only reference to the use of the trumpets after the arrival of

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<sup>161</sup> Matt. 24:30,31

<sup>162</sup> I Cor. 15:51,52

<sup>163</sup> I Thes. 4:16

<sup>164</sup> I Thes. 4:16

<sup>165</sup> See Rev. 8:2-11:15

the people in Canaan is in vs. 9 and 10. The first mention is in connection with a war and the second for the celebration of the Feast of the New Moon and other festivities, which are not specified. *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: "The practical use of the trumpets ceased with the years of wandering; the ceremonial use was continued as long as the people dwelt in 'their land;' the spiritual use remains an 'ordinance for ever,' as long as the church is militant here on earth. That the use of the two silver trumpets was ceremonial, and not practical, after the conquest of Canaan is evident from the purpose and effect ascribed to that use. Whether in war or in worship, that purpose was *not* to convoke the people, nor to give signals to the host, *but* to put God in mind of his promises, and to invoke his covenanted grace. Indeed, *two* trumpets, as here prescribed, could not be otherwise than ceremonially used after the nation was spread abroad over the whole face of Canaan; and there is no direction to make more than two such trumpets. The use of trumpets in subsequent times is indeed often mentioned both in war and in holy festivities, and it was undoubtedly founded upon this Divine ordinance; but it was not in literal compliance with it, for the obvious reason that many trumpets were used instead of two only (see I Chron. xv. 24; 2 Chron. v. 12; Neh. xii. 35)."

Finally, the trumpets sounded as a celebration of time. The peal of heavenly music was to accompany various feast, also the ones that were not specified; but the New Moon festivals are mentioned. "Blow the trumpet<sup>166</sup> at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day.<sup>167</sup>

Time is a mysterious element in our existence on earth. Our times are determined by the position of our globe in our solar system. The sun governs our daily and yearly schedule and the moon marks the months of the year. We little realize, as Einstein did, that time is relative. The calculation of time in other galaxies must be different from ours on earth. The size of our planet and our distance to the sun and moon are defining factors. Heaven has its own time, and it is called "Eternity." God wants His people to celebrate time and rejoice in His creation of the solar system, evidently, with the purpose also of remembering eternity. Moses said, not without gloom: "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."<sup>168</sup> The context in which Moses spoke those words was, probably, during the forty years wandering in the desert, when the only prospect the Israelites had was to die. The two silver trumpets teach us that there is another way to "number our days aright," and that it to celebrate time as part of God creation, and to redeem the time. Celebration of time should, however, not close our eyes for the present reality of evil. Paul says: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil."<sup>169</sup>

## **Part Two: The Failure of the Old Generation to Inherit the Promised Land (10:11-25:18)**

### *I. The Failure of Israel En Route to Kadesh 10:11-12:16*

#### **A. Israel Departs Mount Sinai 10:11-36**

This brings us to the second major division of the book of Numbers. Unfortunately, the dividing line falls in the middle of the chapter.

This part of the chapter describes the first breaking up of camp after the construction of the tabernacle, and the beginning of that part of the desert crossing which, in God's plan, would have been the last leg of the journey. It occurred approximately one year and one week after the exodus from Egypt. The twentieth day of the second month corresponds to May 6 on our calendar, according to *The Pulpit Commentary*. Evidently, this departure did not take place on the actual anniversary of the exodus, because of the Passover celebration, and the possible postponement of one month, mentioned in ch. 9:1.

For the first time, the cloud of the presence of the Lord lifted from the tabernacle, and the two silver trumpets sounded, and the marching orders were passed on from Moses to the tribal leaders and to the people. Although the part about the trumpets is not specifically mentioned, we may assume that all the instructions given before were now put into practice.

Vs. 12 mentions that the cloud came to rest in the desert of Paran. The KJV renders this verse with: "And the children of Israel took their journeys out of the wilderness of Sinai; and the cloud rested in

<sup>166</sup> Not "the ramshorn" as the NIV translates it

<sup>167</sup> Ps. 81:3 (RSV)

<sup>168</sup> Ps. 90:12

<sup>169</sup> Eph. 5:15,16 (RSV)

the wilderness of Paran.” The NIV allows for more flexibility by saying: “Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai and traveled from place to place until the cloud came to rest in the Desert of Paran,” and the RSV, probably more correctly, says: “and the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai; and the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran.” Comparing this statement with the one in ch. 12:16, where we read: “After that, the people left Hazeroth and encamped in the Desert of Paran,” we understand that there must have been one or more intermediate stops. Evidently, the phrase describes one whole leg of the journey, after which a period of rest of one day or more was observed. This corresponds with what we read in vs. 33: “So they set out from the mountain of the LORD and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest.”

Judah is the first of the tribes to set out and under its banner traveled Issachar and Zebulun. There appears to have been four standards, each one covering three tribes. After the Judah-section leaves the tabernacle is taken down, and, probably the parts that constitute the frame and covering are carried off by cart, in order to be erected at the next stop as a resting place for the furniture that was carried afterward by the Levites responsible for this task. We gather this from vs. 21, which reads: “Then the Kohathites set out, carrying the holy things. The tabernacle was to be set up before they arrived.”

The rear guard is made up by the tribe of Dan, under whose banner are also the tribes of Asher and Naphtali. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this rear guard: “Literally, ‘the collector,’ or ‘the gatherer, of all the camps. The word is applied by Isaiah to God himself (Isa. lii. 12; lviii. 8) as to him that gathereth the outcasts of Israel.’ Dan may have been the collector of all the camps simply in the sense that his host closed in all the others from behind, and in pitching completed the full number. Under any ordinary circumstances, however .... the work of the rear-guard in collecting stragglers and in taking charge of such as had fainted by the way must have been arduous and important in the extreme.”

Pondering all these facts, we are, again, amazed at the efficiency with which this huge group of people traveled through the wilderness. With God Himself as the supreme commander, His children marched from the land of slavery to the land of promise, “like a mighty army.” The fact that the people traveled under the guidance of a supernatural being and that they were sustained in a supernatural way, did, in no way, eliminate the need for attention to the details of all the logistics. From a human viewpoint, this transport of over two million people through an area that is characterized as “that vast and dreadful desert,”<sup>170</sup> equals the best organized military operation in history. Living a life on a supernatural level is not the equivalent of a haphazard, disorganized existence.

The following intermezzo in vs. 29-32 emphasizes even more this interplay between the supernatural and the natural. Moses invites Hobab, his brother-in-law to travel with them to Canaan. Evidently, Hobab was an expert in desert traveling. Moses says to him: “Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the desert, and you can be our eyes.”

Who this Hobab was cannot be established with certainty. Some take him to be the same person as Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, others the son of Jethro. His name only appears here and in the book of Judges where Hobab is also called Moses’ brother-in-law, and is indicated as the father of the Kenites.<sup>171</sup> The words “father-in-law,” “brother-in-law” and “son-in-law” have a very wide meaning in Hebrew and indicate nothing more than “related by marriage.” Some commentators identify Hobab with Jethro, but this seems very unlikely, since we read that Jethro returned to his country at a much earlier stage, even before the giving of the law. After having chaperoned his daughter, Zipporah, Moses’ wife, and having given some sound advice to his son-in-law, we read: “Then Moses sent his father-in-law on his way, and Jethro returned to his own country.”<sup>172</sup> If we would take this report in Exodus to be identical to Moses’ conversation with Hobab here, we run into serious problems with the chronology of the accounts.

More interesting for the purpose of our study is the fact that, beside the supernatural guidance God provides for the travel of His people through the desert, Moses also seeks the help of human experience. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about Hobab’s services: “It is not indeed easy to say *where* any room was left for the good offices and experience of Hobab; the cloud of the Divine Presence *seemed* to control absolutely the journeying and encamping of the people; yet if we really knew in detail the actual ordering of that wondrous march, we should doubtless find that the heavenly guidance did but give unity and certainty to all the wisdom, caution, and endeavour of its earthly leaders. Indeed if we recall to mind that

<sup>170</sup> Deut. 1:19

<sup>171</sup> Judges 4:11

<sup>172</sup> Ex. 18:27

the host is calculated at more than two millions of people, it is quite evident that even during the march to Kadesh (and much more in the long wanderings which followed) it must have been extremely difficult to keep the various divisions together. In the broken and difficult country which they were to traverse, which had been familiar to Hobab from his youth, there would be scope enough for all his ability as a guide."

We do not read here that Hobab accepted Moses' offer, but the quote from Judges indicates that he did settle in Canaan, since we find his offspring, the Kenites, living in the land.

Verse 33 marks the actual departure for the Promised Land. This is the third highlight in the history of salvation, which is portrayed in the exodus of Israel. The first being the actual deliverance from slavery, the second the "festival of the Lord in the desert," and this departure: the reaching for the goal. This day, the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, would have become a day to be commemorated in the history of the people, were it not for the fact that they failed to reach their goal because of their disobedience. The three day's march brings this huge nation to the desert of Paran, which, according to *The Pulpit Commentary* may have meant the covering of about 30 miles. The implication is that every day they trekked about 10 miles and then stopped for the night.

The phrase: "The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest," is an intriguing one. It sounds as if the Lord would have to search for places, and by looking around, determine which one would be good enough for the people. This, of course, is inconsistent with the doctrine of God's omniscience. We should, therefore, consider the phrase to be an attempt to give expression of God's care and tenderness for His children. The place to which He leads us, is the one He has chosen for us. The principle is the same as in the image David uses to indicate God's care and comfort, by saying: "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."<sup>173</sup>

In reality, it must have been the combination of Hobab's practical knowledge of the terrain and God's guidance of the people, which determined the place where Israel would pitch camp for a period to replenish and rest.

Moses' cry: "Rise up, O LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you," when the cloud lifted and: "Return, O LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel," when it came down to rest was, probably, the standard formula for every instance when the cloud moved. It is obvious that the moving of the cloud was not caused by Moses' words, but that the phrases expressed the approbation of the people at the moving of the cloud. The moving of the cloud was God's initiative; what Moses said was just and "Amen" to God's act. *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: "When the ark and the cloud set forward, it was the Almighty God going on before in victory; when the ark and the cloud rested, it was the all-merciful God returning to protect and cherish his own. This is clearly recognised in this morning and evening prayer of Moses. The typical and spiritual character of this setting forward and that resting could not well have been lost upon any religious mind - that God going before us is the certain and abiding pledge of final victory, that God returning to us is the only hope of present safety."

In this "morning and evening prayer of Moses," as *The Pulpit Commentary* calls it, we see an identification of the cause of the people with the cause of God. The enemies of the people of Israel are God's enemies and visa-versa. God's principle enemy is Satan. Moses' words contain the recognition that the people of Israel are not contending with flesh and blood primarily, but with the armies of the Evil One. God leads His people to glory through enemy territory.

The last words of the chapters: "Return, O LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel," could also be translated: "Return, O Lord, the myriad thousands of Israel" that is to their promised home, as suggested by *The Pulpit Commentary*. The latter does not seem to fit into the context which deals with the lifting and descending of the cloud upon the ark.

In the larger context of the Christian pilgrimage, every Christian ought to adopt Moses' "morning and evening prayer." Christians are men and women who "follow the Lamb wherever he goes."<sup>174</sup> They are being led to glory by the Son of God.<sup>175</sup> And they pray expectantly for the return of the Lord, saying: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"<sup>176</sup>

<sup>173</sup> Ps. 23:2-4

<sup>174</sup> Rev. 14:4

<sup>175</sup> Heb. 2:10

<sup>176</sup> Rev. 22:20

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

This chapter begins the recording of the various failures of the people, beginning immediately upon their departure from Mount Sinai and leading up to their last and fatal failure to enter Canaan. Following the outline of *Nelson's Bible Dictionary* we study:

- B. Failure of the People 11:1-9
- C. Failure of Moses 11:10-15
- D. God Provides for Moses 11:16-30
- E. God Provides for the People 11:31-35

### B. Failure of the People 11:1-9

This chapter proves that failure to achieve the larger goals begins with smaller failures. The grumbling of the people about the small things in life, leads to the defeat in the larger things. We will never learn to trust the Lord for great things if we do not trust Him for the incidentals. George Mueller, who built a monument of trust in the Lord in the nineteenth century with his founding of the orphanages in Bristol, once wrote a tract about believing God, in which he stated emphatically, that trusting the Lord for large amounts of money begins with trusting Him for dimes and pennies. The people of Israel failed to enter the promised land, because they failed at the beginning of their journey toward it.

The key to this failure of the nation as a whole was their lack of gratitude. It is true, that objectively considered, their circumstances were not rosy, but they had the assurance of God's provision for their needs. The difference between their previous condition and their present one is not understood clearly by them. In Egypt they were slaves; their lives were constantly in danger; their children were unprotected, but life was regulated to the extreme, which gave them a certain feeling of security, however false this may have been. Their utterance: "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt *at no cost*-- also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic," is completely unrealistic. They ate fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic at the price of their lives and freedom. Saying that food was free shows that they had lost sight of the right perspective. In the desert their food was provided for in a supernatural way. The menu was limited, and there was no reserve of it. Every day there was enough for the day, never more and never less. This meant that their sense of security was gone. Unless they could bring themselves to see that the presence of the Lord was the guarantee of their safety, they would feel themselves lost, and in danger of starvation. The fact that they have freedom and dignity is overshadowed by the monotony of their daily menu. They would gladly have exchanged their liberty for a dish of "Gefülte Fisch."

We read in verse 1: "Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused." According to *The Pulpit Commentary* the literal reading of this phrase is: "And the people were as complainers evil in the ears of the Lord." This means that they did more than just filing a complaint; they demonstrated their character as complainers. As we said before, the deliverance of the people out of Egypt did not root up Egypt in the hearts and minds of the people. They kept on living and behaving as slaves. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes, correctly: "Slavery, even when its outward pressure is past and gone like a bad dream, leaves behind it above all things an incurable suspicion of, and a rooted disbelief in, others, which shows itself outwardly by blank ingratitude and persistent complaint of bad treatment. This is the well-known mental attitude of liberated slaves even toward their benefactors and liberators; and in the case of Israel this temper extended to the King of Israel himself, whom they held responsible for all the privations and terrors of an apparently needless journey through a hideous waste."

The enemy often succeeds in creating an atmosphere of hopelessness, in making us believe that the desert and its hardship are created by God, and that He is ultimately responsible for all our suffering. The story of Job is an elaborate illustration of this strategy. Once we understand that God did not create deserts, but that He allows us to cross them in order to teach and form us, we can see through the tactics of the enemy and overcome the temptation of complaining. There are several useful warnings in the New Testament to make us understand the scenery that forms the background of our lives is not what we think it is. Paul advises the Christians in Thessalonica: "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for



you in Christ Jesus.”<sup>177</sup> James goes even further by saying: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”<sup>178</sup>

The Israelites were disappointed in discovering that their journey from Egypt to Canaan was not a joy ride. They should have understood from the way in which God delivered them out of Egypt, by a series of severe punishments to the Egyptians, that they came out of enemy territory, and that they had to travel through enemy territory, in order to reach Canaan, which was also enemy territory. They had no idea why God allowed this to happen to them; that is was for “the testing of [their] faith [that] develops perseverance.” They did not understand what they were, and what God wanted them to be: a kingdom of priests.

There is a direct link between our spirituality and our attitude towards food. The apostle Paul shows us his insight in this matter by saying: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>179</sup> And: “ ‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food’ -- but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.”<sup>180</sup> To those who think that they can alter their relationship with God by following certain dietary regulations, he says: “But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”<sup>181</sup> It is true, however, that, if we make food our first priority in life, we damage our relationship with the Lord. We need food to stay alive, but life is more than eating and drinking. Moses sums it up at a later date by saying: “He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”<sup>182</sup> What we eat is sanctified by our prayer, and if we eat with thanksgiving, we will not cause any harm to our fellowship with God. Paul speaks about people who order others “to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth,” and he adds: “For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”<sup>183</sup>

The first complaint, however, was not against food but against hardship in general. We read: “Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused.” We are given no details as to the matters the people complained about. Hardship is a rather general term. The RSV and TLB use the word “misfortune.” As mentioned above, the literal meaning of the phrase is: “And the people were as complainers evil in the ears of the Lord.” Their complaining was not a request for a change in certain conditions or matters, but it was a demonstration of their character. They had a spirit of complaint which had taken possession of them. This does not necessarily mean that a certain demon had taken possession of their hearts, although the attitude of the people will have been welcomed by the enemy, but that they chose the evil of complaining over the good of gratitude toward the Lord. They were saying that God mistreated them. Therefore, God considered them to be evil.

To bring the people to their senses God kindles a fire in the camp, starting at the outskirts. *Adam Clarke* thinks that the fire started in the middle of the camp and consumed tents as far as the outskirts, but there is no reason to believe that it was a disaster of this magnitude. We are not told how the fire started; whether it was caused by lightning or spontaneous combustion. If it is true that it only burned at the edge of the camp, it is unlikely that the fire came from the sanctuary, like it did when Aaron’s two sons were killed.

The immediate result of the fire is that people pray; or, at least, they ask Moses to pray. In answer to Moses’ prayer the fire stops. The KJV says: “the fire was quenched.” This would allow for human intervention. It seems, however, that the fire stopped in the same supernatural way as it had started. It was the Lord’s doing, and it was recognized as such. The incident is commemorated by the name given to the place where it occurred. We read: “So that place was called Taberah.” Taberah simply means “burning.” Since this name does not occur in the list of places of encampment, it is presumed that “Taberah” was in the vicinity of Sinai and that the incident took place during the first three days of the trek to the Desert of

<sup>177</sup> I Thes. 5:18

<sup>178</sup> James 1:2,3

<sup>179</sup> Rom. 14:17

<sup>180</sup> I Cor. 6:13

<sup>181</sup> I Cor. 8:8

<sup>182</sup> Deut. 8:3

<sup>183</sup> I Tim 4:3-5

Paran. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes that, if it had not been for the mediation of Moses, the people would have gotten no further than Taberah on their journey to the promised land. Without mediation and divine intervention there is no progress in anybody's spiritual life.

Verse 4 tells us that the effect of fire was short lived. Immediately upon the incident of the first three verses, the people resume their complaining, and this time they are more specific. The instigators of the trouble are "the rabble." The Hebrew word is *hasaphsuph*, which is translated by the KJV as "the mixed multitude." TLB renders the word simply with "the Egyptians." *The Pulpit Commentary* says that they were: "the rabble, which had followed the fortunes of Israel out of Egypt, where they had probably been strangers and slaves themselves." At the time of the departure of Israel from Egypt, we read: "Many other people went up with them."<sup>184</sup> Some of these people may have been of mixed racial background. In Leviticus, for instance we read about the son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father.<sup>185</sup> Such people may have been the instigators of the rebellion, the fact remains that the found such a good sound board for their complaint in the whole nation. As soon as the word "meat" is dropped, all the people start demanding meat. One of the tragedies of this incident is that the people received what they asked for. Their prayers were answered to their own detriment. The psalmist says: "And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul."<sup>186</sup>

It is true that human beings need variety in order to feel satisfied. The limitations of their diet was part of the price they had to pay for their freedom and dignity, but, all of a sudden the people felt that they price they paid was too high. At this point the record regresses somewhat to give a short description of the manna, and its mode of distribution, which was the object of the people's complaint. The psalmist says about this manna, and its supernatural occurrence: "He gave a command to the skies above and opened the doors of the heavens; he rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grain of heaven. Men ate the bread of angels; he sent them all the food they could eat." *The Pulpit Commentary* commenting on the phrase, "Men ate the bread of angels," says rather dryly: "To the eye of the Psalmist the manna appeared as angels' food ....; but then the Psalmist had not lived on manna every day for a year."

The question is, does God want us to put up with monotony, either in diet or in any other phase of our existence? I believe the answer is "no!" The point of this passage, therefore, is not that it is sinful to ask for meat, or for whatever variety we need to feel satisfied with our condition, but that the Israelites complained instead of asking. Nobody thought of turning to the Lord to ask for meat. James' words are surely applicable here: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."<sup>187</sup>

#### **C. Failure of Moses** 11:10-15

Nobody believed that God would even consider such a request. Even Moses felt it would be impossible for God to provide enough meat to feed the whole multitude. Nobody had any faith in God's ability to do the impossible. First of all, Moses complains to the Lord that he is unable to provide for the needs of the people, and when God promises him to send enough meat for the whole nation for the next month, he answers: "Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, 'I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!' Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?" This issue of the whole passage is summed up in God's question: "Is the LORD's arm too short?" It is this question that makes this portion of Scripture to such a strange mixture of glory and misery. We find both beauty and ashes in these verses.

#### **D. God Provides for Moses** 11:16-30

The glory of these verses is the fact that God gives an outpouring of His Spirit upon seventy of the elders of Israel, so that they receive wisdom and power to assist Moses in the task he feels is too heavy for him. It is obvious that Moses had been put on a pedestal by the people. When the fire broke out they turned to Moses to pray to the Lord. But it seems that Moses had put himself on a pedestal also, by assuming that he was, in fact, the only one God would ever be able to use. This, in itself, is an unhealthy attitude; it is a trap for people who have come to a place of prominence.

<sup>184</sup> Ex. 12:38

<sup>185</sup> Lev. 24:10

<sup>186</sup> Ps. 106:15 (KJV)

<sup>187</sup> James 4:1-3

In vs. 10-15 Moses voices his complaint before God. Moses' words to God are frank, to say the least. The people are grumbling, but Moses actually blames God for their condition. He may have thought back to the moment when God called him in the desert of Sinai, and when he refused to go.<sup>188</sup> Now he says to God: "I told you I could not do this." Moses, for a moment, loses sight of where he is and how he got there. The miracles, accompanying the exodus of the people out of Egypt, have lost their sharp edge in Moses' memory. Moses experiences, what is called a "burn-out" in modern English.

We read in vs. 10: "The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled." The Hebrew has some strange expressions to convey the difference between God's reaction to the complaining of the people and Moses'. God's anger expressed itself in "rapid breathing in passion," as *Strong's Definition* defines it. The Hebrew word used is 'aph , which actually means "nose or nostril." Moses, however, was displeased. The Hebrew word used for his feelings is 'ayin, which means "the eye." The primitive way of putting it, would be to say that Israel's attitude affected God's nostrils and Moses' eyes, meaning that God was furious and Moses was merely upset. God's reaction was violent, because He knew that Israel's attitude would lead to final defeat. He knew that their craving for meat would make them unfit to wage the war of conquest for the promised land. People who need their steak do not make for good missionaries. God saw the consequences of Israel's failure in the context of the history of salvation.

Moses, on the other hand, felt that he had failed as a leader. He may have shared God's vision up to a certain point, but he could not see over the horizon of his own time. He only saw that his power over the people was slipping, which meant that he was not the leader he ought to be, and he blamed God for that. We read that he asked the Lord: "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? .... I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now-- if I have found favor in your eyes-- and do not let me face my own ruin." This prayer is a cry of despair. Moses is depressed to the point where he wants to die. There is nothing of God's furious anger in Moses' attitude. Ultimately, Moses only pities himself. There is even a hint of feeling in it that the people's request for meat is not unreasonable. Only, it is beyond his capacity to provide. God has done him wrong!

God does not get upset with Moses' outburst. He accepts Moses' complaint without any argument or without any effort to rectify Moses' perception, and He offers an immediate solution to Moses' despondency and despair. God's compassionate reaction to Moses' outburst is very moving; it shows His deep, understanding love for His servant. God does not get upset with us if we are upset with Him. It is when we are upset without Him, that we become the subjects of His wrath.

This does not seem to be the first time that some leaders of the people we delegated to assist Moses. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says at this point: "This institution of the seventy persons to help Moses the rabbis consider as the origin of their grand council called the Sanhedrin. But we find that a council of seventy men, elders of Israel, had existed among the people a year before this time." Moses' father-in-law had given him this advice: "Select capable men from all the people-- men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain-- and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."<sup>189</sup> And when the glory of the Lord descends upon Mount Sinai, we read: "Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up."<sup>190</sup> It seems, however, that Moses had found it difficult to delegate responsibility to other people. He may not have considered them spiritually qualified for the task. This is the problem God addresses here in calling these men together and to put on them the same spirit that was on Moses. Good leadership is never a one-man-job. The functioning of the body of Christ requires team work.

#### **E. God Provides for the People 11:31-35**

The second part of God's answer to Moses is that the people have to prepare themselves for the meat that will be given to them the next day. We read: "Tell the people: 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat.' " The fact that the Lord tells the people to consecrate

<sup>188</sup> See Ex. 3, 4

<sup>189</sup> Ex. 18:21-23

<sup>190</sup> Ex. 24:9

themselves indicates that the eating of the meat in itself was not something sinful; it was a gift from God, which they could have enjoyed as a blessing. That they gorged themselves and called judgment upon themselves, was not God's doing or intention. The Hebrew word for "consecrate" is *qadash*, which means to become clean, ceremonially or morally. The same word is used when the people are ordered to prepare for the revelation of God's glory on Mount Sinai.<sup>191</sup> The eating of the meat was to be a sacrament, not a orgy, as the people made it to be.

Yet, the provision with meat becomes a punishment. The people get from the frying pan into the fire; from one monotony into another. They will eat meat "for a whole month-- until it comes out of [their] nostrils and [they] loathe it." The problem is not the quality or the quantity of the meat, but the condition of their souls. The psalm we quoted before said: "And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul."<sup>192</sup> The Hebrew words are *razown nephesh*, which literally means "thinness of a breathing creature." It could be translated, as the Amplified Bible renders is "thinned their numbers by disease." Hence, the NIV reads: "So he gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them." Holding on to the thought that God's blessing did more spiritual than physical harm to the people, which fits into the context, we see that it is not variety that forms the spice of life, but God's blessing. King Solomon says in the book of Proverbs: "The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it."<sup>193</sup> And twice we read his considered opinion in Ecclesiastes: "That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil-- this is the gift of God .... Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work-- this is a gift of God."<sup>194</sup> To eat and to enjoy what we eat is a gift of God. This gift is what God withheld from His people in this instance.

The first thing that happens is the convocation of the seventy elders at the entrance of the tabernacle. As it turns out only sixty-eight show up, for we learn later that two of the ones called did not come. Their names are given as Eldad and Medad. The strange part of what happens next is that those men do not receive the Holy Spirit as a direct outpouring from God, but that part of the Spirit which is on Moses is given to them. It is as if God's want to emphasize the principle that He gives His Spirit only to one Person, which is Jesus Christ, of whom Moses was an image, and that the Holy Spirit in us is the Spirit of Christ. It seems that this giving of the Spirit was for a limited period and for a specific purpose, for we read that the presence of God's Spirit manifested itself in prophecy, which gift was bestowed upon those men only for that day. The Hebrew uses the word *wayitnab'uw*, "they prophesied," which word is derived from *naba'* a primitive root; to prophesy, meaning "to speak (or sing) by inspiration."

The question is, what does this all mean? Why were these seventy people given the gift of prophecy for only a limited period of time, probably for just one day? *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this gift: "The phenomenon here mentioned for the first time was no doubt an ecstatic utterance, not exactly beyond the control, but certainly beyond the origination, of those who prophesied. It must not be confounded with that state of calm, spiritual exaltation in which such men as Isaac and Jacob spake concerning things to come." We are not told whether the utterance of the seventy was ecstatic or not, but taken within the context of the chapter, that is the spirit of complaint among the people and their sinful reaction upon the coming of the quail, we may suppose that their prophecy was relevant to the condition of that day and that what they did was issue a warning to the people not to let themselves go wild when the quail arrived. God wanted to prevent the orgy by sending prophets who admonished people with His Word. The warning was in vain, but now the blame fell fully on the people and not on the Lord.

There is an intermezzo in the story, which tells the tale of the two elders who did not show up; Eldad and Medad. The reason for their absence is not given, so there is no point in theorizing about it. The interesting part is that, in spite of the fact that those two men do not follow the requirement to present themselves at the place indicated, and consequently would not qualify for the gift of the Spirit, they receive it anyhow. Another significant point in the story is the reaction of Joshua and Moses' answer. Joshua feels that the fact that some of the Spirit that was on Moses is given to men who do not identify with Moses, diminishes Moses' status. Moses' greatness and humility becomes clear in the answer he gives: "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"

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<sup>191</sup> See Ex. 19:10, 15

<sup>192</sup> Ps. 106:15 (KJV)

<sup>193</sup> Prov. 10:22

<sup>194</sup> Eccl. 3:13; 5:19

*Adam Clarke* has a rather amusing note on this incident: “A late eminent divine and poet, (Charles Wesley),<sup>195</sup> has made a good use of this transaction to illustrate that species of divine call to the ministry, so instrumental in the salvation of myriads, which some have decried, because it appeared to them irregular, and not authorized by the hierarchy of the nation. I shall give this piece, not for the amusement but the instruction of the reader:

ELDAD, they said, and MEDAD there,  
Irregularly bold,  
By Moses uncommission’d, dare  
A separate meeting hold!  
And still whom none but heaven will own.  
Men whom the world decry,  
Men authorized by GOD alone,  
Presume to prophesy!

How often have I blindly done  
What zealous Joshua did,  
Impatient to the rulers run,  
And cried, “My lords, forbid!  
Silence the schismatics, constrain  
Their thoughts with ours t’ agree  
And sacrifice the souls of men  
To idol UNITY!”

MOSES, the minister of God,  
Rebukes our partial love,  
Who envy at the gifts bestow’d  
On those we disapprove.  
We do not our own spirit know,  
Who wish to see suppress’d  
The men that Jesu’s spirit show,  
The men whom God hath bless’d.

SHALL we the Spirit’s course restrain,  
Or quench the heavenly fire?  
Let God his messengers ordain,  
And whom he will inspire.  
Blow as he list, the Spirit’s choice  
Of instruments we bless;  
We will, if Christ be preached, rejoice,  
And wish the word success.  
Can all be prophets then? are all  
Commission’d from above?  
No, but whome’er the Lord shall call  
We joyfully approve.  
O that the church might all receive  
The spirit of prophecy,  
And all in Christ accepted live,  
And all in Jesus die!

“I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”  
Moses’ heart must have swelled with joy to see the Holy Spirit moving freely, at least for that day. God lifted the heavy burden from his weary soul by giving him a vision of a whole nation, not only of priests, but of prophets; people who spoke the Word of the Lord and whose heart was in tune with His. Even in our

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<sup>195</sup> Insertion is mine

time, which is called the Dispensation of the Holy Spirit, it is a sweet dream to see everyone who calls upon the Name of Jesus Christ, filled with the Spirit of God. We could, very appropriately, quote Wesley's words for our day: "O that the church might all receive the spirit of prophecy, and all in Christ accepted live, and all in Jesus die!"

Moses' dream was short lived; the next day it became evident that the people gave priority to their stomach over their heart. The meat made the flesh gain the victory.

Then came the quail. Evidently the appearance of quail in itself was not an unusual phenomenon. *Adam Clarke* quotes a certain "Mr. Hasselquist, the friend and pupil of the famous Linnaeus, [who] saw many of them about this time of the year, when he was in Egypt." The supernatural feature in this event is the sheer multitude of the birds. If Mr. Hasselquist saw the birds in Egypt, we would suspect that they were brought on by a westerly wind, coming from the Red Sea and not from the Gulf of Aqaba. This does not correspond, however, with the version of the psalmist, who says: "He let loose the east wind from the heavens and led forth the south wind by his power. He rained meat down on them like dust, flying birds like sand on the seashore."<sup>196</sup>

About the fact that the wind "brought them down all around the camp to about three feet above the ground, as far as a day's walk in any direction," *Adam Clarke* observes: "[Two cubits high upon the face of the earth.] We may consider the quails as flying within two cubits of the ground; so that the Israelites could easily take as many of them as they wished, while flying within the reach of their hands or their clubs. The common notion is, that the quails were brought round about the camp, and fell there in such multitudes as to lie two feet thick upon the ground; but the Hebrew will not bear this version. The Vulgate has expressed the sense, .... 'And they flew in the air, two cubits high above the ground.' "

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* says about the quail: A game bird of the family Coturnix, closely related to "partridges".... Quail and partridges are near relatives, the partridge a little larger and of brighter color. Quail are like the gray, brown and tan of earth. Their plumage is cut and penciled by markings, and their flesh juicy and delicate food. Their habits are very similar. They nest on the ground and brood on from 12 to 20 eggs. The quail are more friendly birds and live in the open, brooding along roads and around fields. They have a longer, fuller wing than the partridge and can make stronger flight. In Palestine they were migratory."

Vs. 32 tells us: "All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than ten homers. Then they spread them out all around the camp." Not only did every person gather an unbelievable amount of meat, (not less than ten homers), but they also put the meat out to dry, evidently, because they did not believe the word of the Lord that they would eat quail for one whole month. One homer, according to *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, "was originally a donkey load and hence a measure of like capacity." In modern measurements this would amount to about 393 kilo, or 864.6 pounds. So, in their greed, each person stored up ten homer, or almost 4000 kilo of meat, over 8000 pounds, enough for more than ten years, if one eats about two pounds of meat a day. This gives us an impression of the mentality of the people, and how much faith they demonstrated in God's provision for their sustenance. This little calculation makes us better understand why the wrath of God burned against the people, "while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed." God looked down from heaven upon the people He had delivered miraculously from Egypt, which He had made from a herd of slaves into a nation of free men, and which He lead through the wilderness to their new home, providing for them in a supernatural way, and they behaved worse than pigs. These were the sons He was leading to glory!

What kind of plague struck the people is not told in these verses; the most likely conjecture is that it was the result of overeating. As we read in the above quote from *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, "the flesh of quail is juicy and delicate." To be served some of the finest kinds of meats in a desert, after more than a year of a mostly vegetarian diet, was probably more than most people could manage. The plague could very well have been the reaction of the body to a too rapid and too copious consumption of high grade meat. The mention that "the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed," does not necessarily mean that the people did not get to eat or digest any of the meat. The fact that the plague hit "the sturdiest among them, cutting down the young men of Israel," as the psalmist says,<sup>197</sup> would suggest that those who had complained the hardest were hit most. It was not a

<sup>196</sup> Ps. 78:26-27

<sup>197</sup> Ps. 78:31

matter of starved people killing themselves by eating too much too soon, but of greedy people killing themselves by indulging beyond satisfying their normal appetite. How many people died, we are not told. But the Israelites left a sad monument behind at the place where they got what they wanted. "The place was named Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had craved other food." *Kibroth Hattaavah* means the graves of greediness. This first place of encampment, after the departure of the people from Mount Sinai, after the conclusion of the Festival of the Lord, could have been a place of rich blessing, instead of a graveyard.

"From Kibroth Hattaavah the people traveled to Hazeroth and stayed there." Hazeroth means "enclosures." Whether this means and "ancient stone enclosures erected by wandering tribes for their herds and flocks, " as *The Pulpit Commentary* suggest, or a place where the people withdrew themselves spiritually from fellowship with God, cannot be determined. From this point on, however, the victory of this great nation is gone, not to return until the next generation is ready to enter the promised land.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

In this chapter we come to the last part of, what our outline called: “The Failure of Israel En Route to Kadesh,” spanning chapter 10:11 through 12:16.

### F. Failure of Miriam and Aaron 12:1-16

This time Moses is attacked where it hurts most, by those who were closest to him: his own sister and brother. The theme of the chapter is *Pride and Prejudice*. Miriam and Aaron demonstrate spiritual pride in saying: “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? .... Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” And they showed racial prejudice, because our text says that they began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife. It may be concluded that Miriam was the instigator of this confrontation, since the Lord singles her out for punishment. We do not need much imagination to see how the relationship between two sisters-in-law could cause a flair up of emotions that demonstrated itself in spiritual pride.

Supposing that Moses wrote this account, we have to appreciate the fact that no details are given about the poor family relationships. We are only given to understand that what triggered the confrontation was Miriam’s attitude toward her sister-in-law.

We do not know much about Zipporah. From the strange episode in Exodus, where we read that “Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son’s foreskin and touched [Moses’] feet with it, [saying] ‘Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,’ ”<sup>198</sup> we could draw the conclusion that she was a strong headed woman, and that Moses was sometimes unable to overrule her. But then, we do not know anything about Miriam’s character either. We do get the impression, though, that Aaron was more easily swayed than his brother. Anyhow, the “spiritual” confrontation must have been triggered by something as unspiritual as character clashes within the family. The overall impression we receive from the opening words, however, is that Zipporah was considered by Miriam as “not being one of them.” More than a clash of character, this was racial prejudice in its purest form. Had Zipporah been Egyptian instead of Cushite, things might have been different.

Miriam and Aaron confront Moses with the accusation that he monopolizes divine revelation. They say: “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? .... Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” The Scriptures add: “And the LORD heard this.” The obvious meaning of the latter phrase is that God took Moses’ defense. God’s children are rarely called upon to defend themselves. Truth does not need to be defended. In case we are accused and stand trial, Jesus wants us to testify to the truth of the Gospel, not to clear our own name. We read: “On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”<sup>199</sup> Our defense is in the hands of the greatest lawyer of the universe: the Paraklete, the Holy Spirit.

We read about Moses: “Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.” The KJV translates the Hebrew word *anav* with “meek.” *Strongs’ Definition* describes it as “depressed (figuratively), in mind (gentle) or circumstances (needy, especially saintly).”

In the *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* we read: “[The man Moses was very meek]--<Exo. 14:13; 32:12-13; Num. 14:13; 21:7; Deut. 9:18>. This observation might have been made to account for Moses taking no notice of their angry reproaches, and for God’s interposing so speedily for the vindication of His servant’s cause. The circumstance of Moses recording an eulogium on a distinguishing excellence of his own character is not without a parallel among the sacred writers, when forced to it by the insolence and contempt of opponents <2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11-12>. This the opinion of Calvin, Hengstenberg, etc. But it is not improbable that, as this verse appears to be a parenthesis, it may have been inserted as a glees by Ezra or some later prophet. This is the view taken by Rosenmuller, Jahn, and Kurtz. Others, instead of ‘very meek,’ suggest ‘very afflicted,’ as the proper rendering.”

*Adam Clarke Commentary* elaborates on this by saying: “How could Moses, who certainly was as humble and modest as he was meek, write this encomium upon himself? I think the word is not rightly understood; *aanaayw* ..., which we translate meek, comes from *aanah* ..., to act upon, to humble, depress, afflict, and is translated so in many places in the Old Testament; and in this sense it should be

<sup>198</sup> See Ex. 4:24-26

<sup>199</sup> Matt. 10:18-20



understood here: 'Now this man Moses was depressed or afflicted more than any man, *'aadaam*, of that land.' And why was he so? Because of the great burden he had to bear in the care and government of this people, and because of their ingratitude and rebellion both against God and himself: of this depression and affliction, see the fullest proof in the preceding chapter. The very power they envied was oppressive to its possessor, and was more than either of their shoulders could sustain."

It seems that *Adam Clarke*, like most people, misunderstands the concept of humility. First of all, the idea of Moses being depressed because "of the great burden he had to bear in the care and government of this people" does not seem to fit the context. It is clear that God takes up Moses' defence because Moses does not defend himself. This is, obviously, the fruit of Moses' humility, or meekness. Secondly, contrary to the popular concept, an admission of humility does not annul humility. Certainly, when Jesus said: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart," He did not become less humble. Humility is related to greatness; only the high ones can bow down low, and only the great can humble themselves. A confession of humility is not a denial of qualities or qualifications, we know we possess, but a simple recognition of the source of our greatness. We are humble when we confess, in Paul's words: "And who is equal to such a task? ... our competence comes from God."<sup>200</sup> Moses was the most humble man on earth, because he was overwhelmed with the thought that he would be nothing, if it were not for the fact that God had made him what he was.

Not only does God take up Moses' defence (and by inference of his wife!) but He reacts immediately. The NIV says "At once," for the Hebrew *pith'om*; the KJV renders it with "suddenly." The literal meaning is "instantly." God's punishment is swift. Moses, Aaron and Miriam are summoned to the tabernacle, and when God finishes speaking to them, Miriam is covered with leprosy. Her physical condition seems to portray her spiritual one, leprosy being the image "par excellence" of sin. Now, it is clear that no one on earth is without sin, not even Moses. If the content of our hearts would be visible to the naked eye, or if every human being could see what is in our hearts, as God can see it, we would all appear as lepers, "like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away." Is not that what Paul wants to say, when he speaks about his conversion: "and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born?"<sup>201</sup> The fact that, normally, our heart's conditions does not appear on our skin as leprosy, is due to the fact that God, in His grace, covers us with the righteousness of Christ. What God does here to Miriam is taking away the cover of her soul. This disgrace is the highest insult to our human dignity. But then, it does not take much to be disgraced, does it? God only has to show what is inside our hearts. That is why God compares what He has done to Miriam as the insult a father could inflict upon his daughter by spitting in her face. We read: "The LORD replied to Moses, 'If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days?' "

Before this open demonstration of Miriam's inner condition, God tells the brother and sister what their brother's relationship to Him really is. God's testimony about Moses is the most impressive one given about any human being in the whole Old Testament. It is only surpassed by what the Father testifies about His Son, Jesus Christ, when He spoke from heaven: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."<sup>202</sup> He said to Miriam and Aaron: "Listen to my words: When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

The keyword is "faithful." The Hebrew word is *'aman*, which *Strong* defines as: "to build up or support; to foster as a parent or nurse; figuratively to render (or be) firm or faithful, to trust or believe, to be permanent or quiet; morally to be true or certain." These alternatives do not seem to explain too well, what God is saying in the context of the comparison between Moses and other prophets. We understand the gist, of course, which is that God does not reveal Himself to Moses in a veiled or indirect way, as He does to other prophets, but directly, using the same mode of communication as is used in inter-human relations. We read: "With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD." Moses sees the form of the Lord and he hears a voice which speaks words in a human language. This seems to suggest an intimacy between God and man which was unparalleled in history. This is not the picture we get when reading the words: "he is faithful in all my house." It could very well be that the expression is proverbial and that the sentence says more in the original than the sum of its words.

<sup>200</sup> II Cor. 2:16; 3:5

<sup>201</sup> I Cor. 15:8

<sup>202</sup> Matt. 3:17

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews quotes this text when he compares Moses to Christ. He says: "Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast."<sup>203</sup> The emphasis in this quote in Hebrews is on the similarity and the difference in the relationship of these two, Moses and Jesus, with God, the Father. They were both faithful, and God trusted them both, but one was a servant and the other is the Son.

It may be helpful to turn to the story of Joseph in Egypt, to understand the confidence a master can have in his slave. We read about him: "When his master [that is Potiphar] saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate."<sup>204</sup> The story repeats itself when Joseph is put in prison, and we read: "But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did."<sup>205</sup> Moses' faithfulness in God's house consisted of the fact that God had the highest priority in his life; just as Jesus, who said to His disciples: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."<sup>206</sup>

But the fact remains that, however confidential a relationship may be, a slave is a slave and a son is a son. Moses may have known God as no other man did in the Old Testament dispensation; and we, in Christ, we know God on the basis of a blood relationship. This blood is thicker than water.

The key to a right understanding of God's words to Miriam and Aaron seems to be in the comparison between Moses and Christ. It was not merely the fact that Moses was more than conscientious in the way he carried out his task before God; it was what Moses portrayed, more than what he did. This, of course, was beyond the scope of Miriam and Aaron's vision, and even beyond that of Moses, but the Holy Spirit knew what He was saying and the writer to the Hebrews understood it correctly. God compares Moses to His Son, and that is why He bestows the grace of intimacy upon His servant. In the same way God would call David "a man after his own heart." Samuel says to king Saul: "Your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command."<sup>207</sup> God used this term for David, because he reminded him, so to speak, of His own Son.

There are in this portion of Scripture two sets of concentric circles: For Miriam and Aaron there is the smaller circle of friction between them and Zipporah, Moses' wife which triggers their feelings and thoughts to move to the larger circle of their status before the Lord. In this process they greatly deceive themselves. They compare themselves to another nation, from which Zipporah descended, and found themselves superior, and then moved into the circle of their spiritual call, and found themselves to be on the same level as their brother Moses, if not higher.

God's circles run from Moses to Christ and from the tabernacle, and the nation of Israel to the bride of Christ and the ultimate revelation of His glory. The human circles are puny and insignificant. The divine circles deal with eternity and the consummation of God's plan of salvation.

If we could lay the circles of our pride and prejudice upon the circles of God's revelation in Christ, ours would melt away as snow for the sun. Yet, our circles dominate our relationships with those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ and with the rest of humanity. In this story God shows us how ugly and

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<sup>203</sup> Heb. 3:1-6

<sup>204</sup> Gen. 39:1-6

<sup>205</sup> Gen. 39:20-23

<sup>206</sup> John 4:34

<sup>207</sup> I Sam. 13:14

repulsive this is to Him. Aaron puts it eloquently, when he says that Miriam looks like “a stillborn infant coming from its mother’s womb with its flesh half eaten away.” If we compare the birth of a normal healthy baby with this picture Aaron paints for us, we get a clear idea of what God wants us to be and what we make of ourselves. One of the most moving experiences is to assist to the birth of a child, especially one’s own child. One of the most heart renting experiences must be to see a miscarriage, such as the one Aaron describes, take place before our eyes.

The whole incident illustrates the tension between God’s love and His wrath. Miriam’s leprosy is, obviously, the result of God’s wrath. We read: “The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them.” Yet, the revelation of Miriam’s inner leprosy, the leprosy of her heart which became visible on her skin, is also a demonstration of God’s love. Aaron and Miriam now understand how ugly they had been in God’s sight. They saw themselves as they were; and Aaron was, of course, just as much of a leper as his sister. Aaron confesses their sin and they are both restored by means of Moses’ intercession for them.

Moses’ intercessory prayer completes the picture of the one he represents. Confession of sin in itself would have no salutary effect whatsoever. We are not saved, forgiven, and restored because we confess, but because of the intercession of our High Priest. The writer of the Hebrew Epistle makes this clear when, speaking about Jesus as High Priest, he says: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”<sup>208</sup> The basis and strength of Jesus’ prayer is the fact that He paid for our sins with His own blood. In the book of Revelation we read that the heavenly beings and the twenty-four elders sing this song before the Lamb: “With your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.”<sup>209</sup> This feature does not seem to be portrayed in this incident, unless we take it that Miriam’s quarantine included the ritual of purification which involved the sacrifice of the two birds in which one was killed and the other one released, as prescribed in the book of Leviticus.<sup>210</sup>

Moses’ prayer, “O God, please heal her!” is one of the shortest prayers in the Bible. It is also one of the most effective ones. We get the impression, although this is not stated specifically, that Miriam was healed instantly. Her quarantine was a ritual to remind her of the gravity and character of her sin, not a prerequisite for healing.

Apparently, Miriam is the only one who is the object of God’s anger. We do read though that Aaron was part of the plot against Moses also. Going over the Pentateuch with a fine tooth comb, we find that there are parts of Aaron’s life story that are not told. Recounting the incident with the Golden Calf, Moses says: “And the LORD was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron too.”<sup>211</sup> None of this comes out in the actual report about the making of the calf in Exodus. We may conclude that Moses did some editing in his own manuscript, which makes Aaron appear in a more favorable light than he actually merited. As we mentioned before, we get the impression of Aaron as being a person who was easily influenced by the stronger characters that surrounded him.

Aaron may also have been spared God’s punishment because of the immunity his office rendered him. Had he been afflicted with heresy, like his sister was, he would probably have been disqualified for life to serve as a high priest.

There is something very moving in the solidarity of the people with Miriam’s lot. We read: “So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back.” We could ask: “What about the cloud that determined whether the people moved or not?” If the cloud had remained stationary for seven days, we can hardly say that the people did not move because they waited for Miriam’s restoration. We may suppose, therefore, that the cloud lifted, but the people refused to go. If this is true, it throws an interesting light upon the relationship between divine guidance and the human response to it. The refusal of the people to move, out of consideration for Miriam’s condition, must have been pleasing to God. Jesus said: “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”<sup>212</sup> There are moments when we ought to choose for God and put father and mother at the second place. At other times we should not move, even if God’s guidance seems to nudge us to do so, until the one we love is restored. There is a

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<sup>208</sup> Heb. 7:25

<sup>209</sup> Rev. 5:9

<sup>210</sup> See Lev. 14:1-7

<sup>211</sup> Deut. 9:20

<sup>212</sup> Matt. 10:37

fine line between criminal behavior and civil disobedience, and we need a refined spirit of discernment to know the different. May God give us the gift to grasp this.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

II. *The Climactic Failure of Israel at Kadesh* 13:1-14:45A. **Investigation of the Promised Land** 13:1-33

As our outline suggests, we now enter into the part of the record that deals with the climactic failure of the people to reach the goal God had for them and that they, initially, had set out to reach. This failure was not a sudden change in attitude but the result of a gradual breakdown of the people's faith in God and in their morale. There had been complaints ever since the crossing of the Red Sea, but the major shift from confidence into doubt was when they began complaining, not about what was not there, but about what was available. We can understand and sympathize with the people's concern when they came to a place where there was no drinking water. We read in Exodus: "They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink."<sup>213</sup> The faith of the people was put to the test there, but we can understand their worry. But this is different from the mentality that was evinced at Taberah, where the people started saying: "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost-- also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"<sup>214</sup>

In order to put what is recorded here in the right perspective, we have to compare this section with Moses' words in the first chapter of Deuteronomy. Actually, we can put this chapter and the following one next to the last part of the first chapter of Deuteronomy, beginning with vs. 20. It appears that, originally, the suggestion to send out spies into the land came from the people themselves. We read that Moses says: "Then all of you came to me and said, 'Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us and bring back a report about the route we are to take and the towns we will come to.'"<sup>215</sup> This suggestion sounded like good strategy, and Moses must have consulted the Lord about this, who gave His approval.

There is nothing unusual in the fact that man's initiative and God's plan coincide. As a matter of fact, in a healthy spiritual relationship between God and man, this is common. Just as God's purpose is fulfilled through the prayers of man, so are man's plans put into practice by divine fiat. If the Holy Spirit fills our lives, there will be a sanctified intuition within that nudges us on.

This, however, is not the case here. Again, it seems we are not told the whole story. The context confirms that what looked like sound strategy was, in fact, a demonstration of doubt. The people must have had their doubts about God's good intentions. The people did not trust the Lord. Before any facts were gathered they had come to the conclusion: "The LORD hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us."<sup>216</sup>

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* agrees with this approach of the text. We read: "Orders given to send spies to search out the land of Canaan. It is here said, God directed Moses to send them (v. 1-2), but it appears by the repetition of the story afterwards <Deut. 1:22> that the motion came originally from the people; they came to Moses, and said, We will send men before us; and it was the fruit of their unbelief. They would not take God's word that it was a good land, and that he would, without fail, put them in possession of it. They could not trust the pillar of cloud and fire to show them the way to it, but had a better opinion of their own politics than of God's wisdom. How absurd was it for them to send to spy out a land which God himself had spied out for them, to enquire the way into it when God himself had undertaken to show them the way! But thus we ruin ourselves by giving more credit to the reports and representations of sense than to divine revelation; we walk by sight, not by faith; whereas, if we will receive the witness of men, without doubt the witness of God is greater. The people making this motion to Moses, he (perhaps not aware of the unbelief at the bottom of it) consulted God in the case, who bade him gratify the people in this matter, and send spies before them: "Let them walk in their own counsels." Yet God was no way accessory to the sin that followed, for the sending of these spies was so far from being the cause of the sin that if the spies had done their duty, and the people theirs, it might have been the confirmation of their faith, and of good service to them."

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<sup>213</sup> Ex. 17:1

<sup>214</sup> Ch. 11:4-6

<sup>215</sup> Deut. 1:22

<sup>216</sup> Deut. 1:27

We seldom realize that a lack of faith leads to the opposite of faith. If we do not trust the Lord we mistrust Him. If we do not believe that God is love, we believe that He hates us. Few people would admit that the Lord hates them, but they do not accept the fact that He loves them either. The devil encourages men to live in a gray area, which does not exist. Israel had moved out of this gray area into the blackness of hatred. They believed that God had brought them into the desert so He could kill them without the presence of witnesses. The intent behind the sending out of the spies must have been to gather proof that the land the Lord had promised them was not a land "flowing with milk and honey." When Moses says: "See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees on it or not?" he probably quoted some of the words of the people, who had expressed their doubt about the condition of the land, the soil and the cities. As the report of the returning spies brings out, they are wrong on every count, except for the size of the people. But then, this part too is twisted into the statement in vs. 32 that the land devours those living in it.

So, there is much more behind the opening statement of this chapter: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites,' " than meets the eye. I don't know if we can say that God sets the people up, but more is involved than sound military strategy.

When the suggestion came from the people to send out spies, we do not read that they wanted the twelve tribes to be represented. This wide representation seems to be what God commands here. We are given twelve names, and we are told that "all of them were leaders of the Israelites." *The Pulpit Commentary*, however, says: "This does not mean that they were to be the tribe princes (as the names show), for they would not be suitable in respect of age, nor could they be spared for this service. They were 'heads of the children of Israel' (vers. 3), *i.e.* men of position and repute, but also no doubt comparatively young and active, as befitted a toilsome and hazardous excursion."

Most of the names mentioned in vs. 4-16 occur only here in Scripture. Only Caleb and Joshua are mentioned elsewhere. All the tribes are represented, with the exception of Levi, who could not be excused from priestly duties, and also, they would not be able to claim any particular part of the promised land like the other tribes would. The tribe of Joseph is split up in two, Ephraim and Manasse, which brings the total to twelve.

About Caleb, son of Jephunneh, *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "In ch. xxxii. 12 he is called 'the Kenazite,' which appears in Gen. xv. 19 as the name of one of the ancient races inhabiting the promised land. It is possible that Jephunneh may have been connected by descent or otherwise with this race; it is more likely that the similarity of name was accidental."

The most interesting name in this chapter is the one in vs. 16, which is placed in parenthesis: "(Moses gave Hoshea son of Nun the name Joshua.)" Hoshea means "help" or "salvation." Joshua in Hebrew is *Jehoshua*, which is the same name with the prefix "Je" which is the first syllable of the name YHWH. This changes the meaning to Jahweh saves, or Jahweh is salvation. *The Septuagint* renders the name in Greek with Jesus. As such it is used in the New Testament.

About the name change mentioned here *The Pulpit Commentary* writes: "It is an obvious difficulty that Joshua has already been called by his new name at Exod. xvii. 9, and in every other place where he has been mentioned. In fact he is only once elsewhere called Hoshea, and that in a place (Deut. xxxii. 44) where we should certainly not have expected it. There are two ways of explaining the difficulty, such as it is. We may suppose that the change of name was really made at this time, as the narrative seems (on the face of it) to assert; and then the previous mentions of Joshua by his subsequent and more familiar name will be cases of that anticipation which is so common in Scripture (cf. *e. g.*, Matt. ix. 9 with Mark ii. 14). Or we may suppose, what is perhaps more in harmony with the course of Joshua's life, that the change had been already made at the time of the victory over Amalek. .... As to the significance of the change, it is not easy to estimate it aright. On the one hand, the sacred syllable entered into so many of the Jewish names that it could not have seemed a very marked change; on the other hand, the fact that our Saviour received the same name because he was our Saviour throws a halo of glory about it which we cannot ignore. In the Divine providence Hoshea became Joshua because he was destined to be the temporal saviour of his people, and to lead them into their promised rest."

The spies entered the land from the South, from the desert of Zin, and went all the way to Rehob, toward, what the NIV calls Lebo Hamath. Other translations, such as the RSV and ASV translate the words "Lebo Hamath" with entrance to Hamath. It is not clear why the NIV leaves the words un-translated. *Adam Clarke* remarks about the desert of Zin: "The place called *Tsin*, here, is different from that called *Sin*, Exod.

xvi. 1; the latter was nigh to Egypt, but the former was near Kadesh-barnea, not far from the borders of the Promised Land.”

It is difficult to make out the importance of the statement that the spies came to Hebron, where they saw the descendants of Anak, and that Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt. *The Pulpit Commentary* says the following about this statement: “Hebron was in existence at the time of Abraham. Zoan was Tanis, near the mouth of the eastern branch of the Nile. .... If it be true that the Pharaoh of the exodus had his royal residence at Zoan, Moses may have had access to the archives of the city, or he may have learnt the date of its foundation from the priests who gave him his Egyptian education. That there was any real connection between the two places is extremely problematical, nor is it possible to give any reason for the abrupt insertion here of a fragment of history so minute and in itself so unimportant. There is, however, no one but Moses to whom the statement can with any sort of likelihood be traced; a later writer could have had no authority for making the statement, and no possible reason for inventing it.”

It is, of course, easy to dismiss this insertion when we do not understand the purpose of it. It is also true that we are only left to speculation in our search for a meaning, but this does not mean that there would be no reason for the statement. It seems that the mention of the date of the building of Hebron and the comparison between Hebron and Zoan serves the purpose of establishing the fact that Hebron existed at the time of Abraham, which is approximately four centuries before the spies entered the land. From their residence in Egypt they remembered Zoan as an ancient city, and now they see a place that even predated Zoan. But the most important part may be the mention of the presence of the descendants of Anak, of whom nothing is mentioned at the time of Abraham. The presence of these giants may be connected to the prediction God made to Abraham about the fact that the sin of the Amorites would have reached its full measure when Israel would return to the land. God had said: “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”<sup>217</sup> These giants were evil giants and they impressed the spies as such.

We are told: “It was the season for the first ripe grapes.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* makes an interesting observation about the time of the year, and the duration of the spies’ expedition: “This was in August, when the first clusters are gathered, the second in September, and the third in October. The spies’ absence for a period of 40 days determine the grapes they brought from Eshcol to have been of the second period. Thus ‘the Israelites were in the Arabah, or great Arabian desert, at the most trying period of the year. Their journey to this point from Sinai might have been accomplished by easy marches in eighteen days. But probably they rested for some time at Akabah, and hence, five months were consumed with it. They sent forward the spies for the purpose of examining the character and state of the country, particularly of ascertaining the most practicable line of access into the promised land; and for 40 days they looked wistfully for the return of these messengers, because they were anxious to move out of the oppressive, stifling heat of the Arabah, on to the healthier as well as more abundant region, which was there above them, and which they already regarded as their own possession’ (Drew’s ‘Scripture Lands,’ p. 77).” The prolonged absence of the spies may well have contributed to the mood of irritation and frustration of the people, which set the stage for their rebellion.

When the spies return they report that the condition of the land in itself is good. “It does flow with milk and honey! But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there.” At the end of their report these “descendants of Anak” are called “the Nephilim.” We find the Nephilim mentioned in the account of the pre-flood condition of the world. We read in Genesis: “The Nephilim were on the earth in those days-- and also afterward-- when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.”<sup>218</sup> Who these Nephilim were nobody knows exactly. It seems obvious, however, that they were exterminated by the flood. All people dwelling on earth now, and at the time of Israel’s exodus, are descendants of Noah. So the name Nephilim may be a mythical reference to a pre-flood condition. By using this name the spies achieved the goal of conveying that Canaan was held in the power of some evil authority to which the people of Israel were no match.

In a sense they were more right than they knew! There is a parallel between the pre-flood condition of the earth and the condition of Canaan when the sin of the Amorites had reached its full measure; in both worlds there was strong demonic activity. But it is very doubtful that the same mysterious phenomenon had occurred in which “the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and

<sup>217</sup> Gen. 15:16

<sup>218</sup> Gen. 6:4

they married any of them they chose,”<sup>219</sup> which resulted in the appearance of the Nephilim. By using the term the spies appealed to the primitive fear of the unknown in the hearts of the people. Ignorance breeds the most extravagant rumors. The tribes people in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, adamantly proclaimed that a race of people, “only a few days’ marches away,” were humans with tails. The tail bearers always lived a little farther away than the explored areas. The Nephilim may have had the same connotation. They were the evil giants in some far away country, nobody had ever seen. Now they appeared to inhabit Canaan. The Nephilim perished in the flood, but their renown survived.

It is interesting to observe how God takes care of the giants in the land by the hand of a young man named David. We read that David says to king Saul: “The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” And to Goliath he says: “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.” Then the action begins: “Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground. So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him.”<sup>220</sup> This teenager knew better than the spies, and than the whole nation of Israel. Ultimately, Israel failed because they feared the enemy more than they feared the Lord.

Caleb’s effort to swing the mood of the nation was in vain. We do not read that Joshua spoke up at this point, but it is apparent that he was not among those who advised against the invasion. We read about the other ten spies that “they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored.” This may mean that they reversed themselves on the topic of the milk and honey. It also seems rather contradictory that, at same time “the land we explored devours those living in it,” and “all the people .... are of great size.” The size of the inhabitants would rather testify to the fact that the land was not that bad. As far as the land devouring its inhabitants is concerned, actually the opposite was true. The Lord had told Israel earlier that Canaan would vomit out its inhabitants because of their sin. In Leviticus we read that the Lord says to the people: “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.”<sup>221</sup> The people were in such a mood of rebellion, however, that the inconsistency of the report made no difference to them.

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<sup>219</sup> Gen. 6:2

<sup>220</sup> I Sam 17:37,45-47,49-50

<sup>221</sup> Lev. 18:24-25



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

This chapter deals with the remainder of what was called in our outline: “The Climactic Failure of Israel at Kadesh.” We will consider:

B. Israel Rebels against God 14:1-10

C. Moses Intercedes 14:11-19

D. God Judges Israel 14:20-38

E. Israel Rebels against the Judgment of God 14:39-45

### **B. Israel Rebels against God 14:1-10**

The reaction of the people is a pathetic, hysterical all-night-long crying session. About forty years later Moses recounts this episode to the next generation, saying: “You grumbled in your tents and said, ‘The LORD hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us. Where can we go? Our brothers have made us lose heart. They say, ‘The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky. We even saw the Anakites there.’”<sup>222</sup>

The key to this rebellion is the suggestion that God hated them. The Bible is full of proofs that attest to the opposite. John says: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,”<sup>223</sup> and: “God is love.”<sup>224</sup> And the apostle Paul says it over and over again: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”<sup>225</sup> Or in the benedictions he pronounced: “And the God of love and peace will be with you. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”<sup>226</sup> What God does for us, says Paul, is “because of his great love for us.”<sup>227</sup> These verses are just samples of the overwhelming proof of God’s love for us.

The Israelites attribute to God characteristics that make Him worse than sinful man. They insinuate that the whole exodus, with its demonstration of miraculous powers, was part of a ploy to bring them to a place where they would be exterminated. They imply that they are better than God. If they had said this to their fellowmen, they would have insulted them in the most serious manner. They suggest that Pharaoh was kinder to them than God is, for they propose that it would be better for them to return to Egypt. Everything they say seems to be demonically inspired. They believe the lie of the devil that darkness is better than light. God does not love them; He hates them! What they proclaim is completely opposite to Jesus’ teaching: “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”<sup>228</sup>

The outburst of the people is almost unbelievable. We may allow for some measure of fear for the unknown, but the accusations they hurl at God indicate that all the miracles of the exodus have been completely lost upon them. The suggestion to return to Egypt is completely unreasonable. Return to Egypt was not an option. Yet, they talk about choosing a leader to take them back to Egypt.

The reaction of Moses and Aaron is to seek the Lord in intercessory prayer. We read that they “fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there.” So, evidently, the people had come out of their tents and had come together in a public meeting to plan their next step.

At this point Joshua and Caleb get up and give a speech in which they urge the people to change their minds. Some commentators have asked the question why Joshua did not speak up earlier when Caleb spoke. Joshua’s silence does not imply, however, that he sided with the other spies and their negative report. Here he stands together with Caleb, and in a dramatic fashion they both rent their clothes. The gist of their speech is that the fear of the people is leading them into rebellion against God.

The words: “Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us,” are very revealing. The people in Canaan lived in fortified cities, and they were described as strong and big people. Yet, Joshua and Caleb

<sup>222</sup> Deut. 1:27-28

<sup>223</sup> John 3:16

<sup>224</sup> I John 4:8

<sup>225</sup> Rom. 5:8

<sup>226</sup> II Cor 13:11,14

<sup>227</sup> Eph. 2:4

<sup>228</sup> Matt. 7:9-11

call them unprotected. Protection is not a matter of city walls and fortifications, but of a supernatural shield. From a human viewpoint the people in Canaan were well protected by their fortifications, and Israel, camping in the open, was unprotected. But Joshua and Caleb show that the opposite is the case. The people in Canaan were not protected by the presence of the Lord, but Israel was. They says: "We will swallow them up. Their protection has been removed from them." The Hebrew word translated "protection" is *tsel* which is derived from *tsalal* meaning "shade." *Strong's Definition* speaks about: "the idea of hovering over." In animistic societies the shadow of a man is more than the image his body projects on the ground in the light; it is a spiritual phenomenon that accompanies him. If a shadow departs from a man, this means that his spirit becomes vulnerable. This may be the idea conveyed here also. David uses the same pictures when he says: "The LORD watches over you-- the LORD is your shade at your right hand."<sup>229</sup> And another psalmist says: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty."<sup>230</sup> Joshua and Caleb saw the difference between those who are protected by the Lord and those who are on their own, without any protection against the powers of evil. Fortified cities do not offer protection in spiritual battles.

All this is lost on the angry masses. They have worked themselves up to a level at which they are no longer responding to reason and reality. Masses can be dangerous entities, if manipulated by individuals with evil intent. Hitler was a master of this kind of manipulation, and it will probably also be the key to the success of the Antichrist that he will be able to get the masses behind him through clever oratory and mass psychosis. Here the people are ready to stone the only individuals who are in their right mind. The scene looks like a prelude to the time when the masses shouted in front of the only righteous one the world had ever known: "Crucify him!" and "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"<sup>231</sup>

At this point the Lord intervenes. We can understand how Joshua and Caleb must have felt at the very moment the glory of the Lord appeared. They must have thought that their lives had come to an end and that they were going to be killed by the angry mob. The appearance of God's glory saves their lives.

The coming of the glory of the Lord ought to be the ultimate and most ecstatic experience a human being can have. It is the hope of all those who love the Lord. But what must it have meant for those who were at the point of murdering Joshua and Caleb? We do not read how the people reacted, but we can probably describe it best with the words out of the book of Revelations: "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"<sup>232</sup>

### **C. Moses Intercedes 14:11-19**

In these verses we read the first part of a moving dialogue between God and Moses, that takes place at the appearance of the Lord's glory. God starts out by saying: "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?" We very rarely realize how God perceives our lack of faith in Him. In being afraid of the enemy, and failing to put their confidence in God, the Israelites treated God with contempt. In our human judicial system, contempt of court is a serious offence. Who much more severe is the offence against the Judge of all the earth?

The Israelites had this advantage over us that the Lord had revealed Himself to them in a way that was physically observable. His presence was undeniable in the form of the visible cloud, and sometimes even, the audible voice. The multitudes of proofs of God's power, both in Egypt and in the desert, gave them no excuse but to accept that fact that they were under the protection of the Almighty. As far as physical evidence is concerned, we are mostly groping in the dark. But we have been given something that the Israelites lacked: the assurance of the indwelling Spirit of God. Jesus said about the Holy Spirit: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you,"<sup>233</sup> and: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what

<sup>229</sup> Ps. 121:5

<sup>230</sup> Ps. 91:1

<sup>231</sup> Matt. 27:23, 25

<sup>232</sup> Rev. 6:15-17

<sup>233</sup> John 14:26

is yet to come.”<sup>234</sup> And Paul says: “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”<sup>235</sup> The Holy Spirit drives home to us the importance of the things God does for us. This testimony the Israelites did not have, and that contributes to their failure, in spite of the overwhelming physical evidence they possessed.

We may be sure that the Lord never seriously considered the possibility to annihilate the nation of Israel, as He proposed to Moses. We read that He said: “I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.” We must not underestimate the magnitude of this temptation for Moses to become the father of a new nation, greater and stronger than the offspring of Abraham. Yet, it seems that Moses never even considered the option to accept God’s offer to him. This fact testifies to the greatness of Moses. His only consideration is the glory of God, not his own glory.

Moses’ argument before God is most amazing. He reminds God of His testimony among the people who do not worship Him. In doing so, Moses brings out the fact that Israel’s position on earth was to be a kingdom of priests. He does say this in so many words, but it is obvious that the extermination of Israel would not only mean the wiping away of human beings from the face of the earth, but the breakdown of a vital link in God’s revelation in this world. Moses says to God: “Think of the reaction You would get among the Egyptians, from whose hands you delivered Israel, and among the inhabitants of Canaan, to whom you are sending them!” They would never understand the moral implications of God’s acts. The conclusion they would draw would be: “The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath; so he slaughtered them in the desert.”

If we pause and ponder how strange this scene must have been: one of God’s creature talking to the Almighty God and telling Him what people would think of Him if He acted in such and such a way; we can see that God must have been amused. God must have thought that Moses did very well in presenting his arguments.

Even more powerful becomes Moses’ plea before God, when he begins to quote the very words God used to reveal His glory to Moses in the book of Exodus. When Moses was hidden in the cleft of the rock, covered by God’s hand, God passed by him, proclaiming: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”<sup>236</sup> But the most wonderful part of this argument is the introductory sentence: “Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared.” According to Moses, God would display His strength, not by killing more than two million people in one blow, but by forgiving sin. These words indicate the depth of Moses’ insight into God’s character. Love is stronger than death, as the Song of Solomon proclaims.<sup>237</sup>

*Matthew Henry* comments at this point: “Here is a whole nation rescued from ruin by the effectual fervent prayer of one righteous man. See how ready God is to forgive sin, and how easy to be entreated: Pardon, says Moses (v. 19); I have pardoned, says God, v. 20.”

In his intercessory prayer Moses concentrated on the glory of God, and this gave him such an access into the heart of God that pardon was obtained instantaneously. Without any hesitation God answers Moses: “I have forgiven them, as you asked.” But obtaining forgiveness is not the same as being victorious. The Israelites did not die because of their sin, but they forfeited their entry into the promised land. The whole generation of adults that left Egypt would die in the desert during the forty year period in which they would roam around.

In quoting from God’s own words when He revealed His glory to Moses, he does not leave out the phrase: “Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished,” or the more mysterious clause, “he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” It seems contradictory that God forgives sin and, at the same time, “does not leave the guilty unpunished.” The only explanation of this paradox is in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, where God punished our sins by putting them on His Son. Unwittingly, Moses reminded God of what Jesus would do, and this swayed God to forgive so spontaneously. By saying this, we put a human frame of mind to the eternal God. But it is obvious that

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<sup>234</sup> John 16:13

<sup>235</sup> Rom. 8:16

<sup>236</sup> Ex. 34:6-7

<sup>237</sup> Song of Sol. 8:6

Moses does not tell God anything He did not know, and he did not move God to do things He did not want to do. God was always eager to forgive, but He waited for the intercessor to plead the cause before Him.

The reference to the punishment of certain sins of the fathers to their offspring to the third and fourth generation seems completely out of context here. The opposite is true; the way it works out, the next generation receives the blessing the fathers forfeited by their sins. The clause: “he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation,” originates from the Ten Commandments. God says there: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.”<sup>238</sup> There, the context is idolatry, through which the people would open themselves to the influence of demons, which would be felt in the next three or four generations, unless the children would purposely break the chain by putting themselves under the protection of the blood of the Lamb. The reference to this clause here, could be an indication that Moses was aware of demonic influences that demonstrated themselves in the rebellion of the people.

#### **D. God Judges Israel. 14:20-38**

God answers Moses with an oath. By saying: “Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, ...” God swears by Himself. The decision is irreversible: “Not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times-- not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.” God puts the rebellion in its right perspective. He compares the sin of the people with His glory. The glory of the Lord will fill the whole earth, and the men who rebelled against God had seen His glory. Paul defines sin as falling short of the glory of God.<sup>239</sup> In the face of the people’s rebellion God dresses Himself to His full height, so to speak. “As surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, ...” are awesome words. The people treated with contempt Him who lives for ever and ever, and they despised the glory of God which will fill the whole earth.

The filling of the earth with the glory of the Lord is given as a promise by the prophets Isaiah and Habakkuk. “The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”<sup>240</sup> “As surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth,” are in the present tense in the NIV. Most other translations put the phrase in the future, which seems to agree more with the Hebrew. The truth that the earth is presently filled with God’s glory is a biblical concept. Man may not see the earth, in its present condition, filled with God’s glory, but that does not mean that the glory is not there. The Seraphim in Isaiah’s vision called to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”<sup>241</sup> If man does not see this, it means that he is blinded by sin. The time will come when the human race will drown, so to speak, in the glory of God, when “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

So, here is this nation that holds God in contempt, surrounded by the glory of God. They are completely blind to the reality in which they live. The apostle Paul said to the philosophers gathered at the Areopagus, who had no idea who God was: “For in him we live and move and have our being.”<sup>242</sup> The Israelites lived and moved and had their being in God, just as much as the Greek of Paul’s time, but they did not know it. Yet, the concept of glory was familiar to them. They saw the cloud, they had heard the voice, and they had witnessed the miracles that brought them out of Egypt and kept them alive in the desert.

A superficial reading would leave us with the impression that there are two reports of God’s conversation with Moses: one from vs. 20-25 and the other from vs. 26-35. In the first part only Caleb’s name is mentioned as the exception of the ones to be punished, and in the second part both Caleb and Joshua are mentioned. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: “Caleb alone is mentioned here, as if he were the only exception to the sentence just passed upon the generation which came out of Egypt. Taken in connection with ch. xiii. 30, and in contrast with ch. xiv. 6, 30, 38, it has been supposed to point to the interweaving here of two narratives, from the one of which the name of Joshua was intentionally omitted

<sup>238</sup> Ex. 20:4-6

<sup>239</sup> Rom. 3:23

<sup>240</sup> Isaiah 11:9; Hab. 2:14

<sup>241</sup> Isaiah 6:3

<sup>242</sup> Acts 17:28

.... The fact, however, is that Joshua is not the only, nor the most remarkable, exception to the general sentence which is not specified here. Moses and Aaron themselves were undoubtedly not included in that sentence at this time, although they afterwards came under the severity of it .... Eleazer, the priest, was one of those who entered with Joshua (Josh. xiv. 1), and it is vain to argue that he might have been under twenty at the time of the numbering (cf. ch. iv. 16). There is, indeed, every reason to believe that the whole tribe of Levi were excepted from the punishment, because they were not compromised in the guilt. They had no representatives among the spies, nor were they called upon to go up and fight; moreover, they had been steadily loyal to Moses since the matter of the gold calf. But if the exception of the Levites was taken for granted, and passed without mention, much more might the exception of Joshua. He did not stand by any means in the same position as Caleb and the other spies; he was the 'minister' and lieutenant of Moses, whose fortunes were obviously bound up, not with those of his tribe, but with those of his master. If Moses had accepted the Divine offer to make him the head of a new chosen race, no doubt Joshua would have been given to him. His subsequent separation as leader, not of Ephraim, but of Israel, was already anticipated in the singularity, at least, of his position. Caleb, on the other hand, was merely a chieftain of the tribe of Judah, with nothing to distinguish him from the mass of the people but his own good conduct. There is, therefore, nothing perplexing in the fact that Caleb alone is mentioned in this place, and nothing to warrant the assumption of a double narrative."

Caleb is worth a character study by itself. He stands out as one Israelite who believed God and acted upon his believe. He should have been representative of the Israelites in general. He was, however, an exception. He is a model in the Bible of what a man of God should look like.

It seems strange that, on the one hand God says to Moses: "I have forgiven them, as you asked." But, immediately following this statement, the punishment for the sins of the people is announced. The Bible teaches that there is a final day of reckoning when all the sins of mankind will be punished once and for all. What we may consider punishment on earth is only an image of the judgment to come. We believe that God punished Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins but turning the cities upside down and covering them with the waters of the Dead Sea. Jesus says to the Galilean cities of His day: "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."<sup>243</sup> From these words, we understand that what happened at the day of the destruction of Tyre and Sidon, and of Sodom, was not the ultimate punishment. Otherwise the phrase "more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you," would make no sense. So when God says to Moses: "I have forgiven them, as you asked," He promised that, on the day of judgment, this rebellion would not be brought up as an accusation against Israel. But this did not take away the temporary judgment of imprisonment in the desert for a term of forty years.

Vs. 25 presents us with a few problems. The first one is, obviously, that the reference to the Amalekites and Canaanites as living in the valleys cannot be the reason for which the Israelites had to turn back to the desert. The people were forbidden to enter Canaan because of their rebellion, not because of the presence of those Canaanite tribes. *The Pulpit Commentary* says on this point: "It is scarcely credible that an observation of this sort, which would seem unusual and abrupt in any speech, should have formed a part of God's message to Moses. It has no apparent connection with the context. It does not (as often alleged) afford a reason for the command which follows; it was not at all because enemies were already in possession before them that the Israelites had to turn their backs upon the promised land, but because God had withdrawn for the time his promised aid. If the 'valley' be the Rakhmah plateau, they had always known that hostile tribes held it, and that they would have to conquer them. That the words are an interpolation, as the A. V. represent them, seems as certain as internal evidence can make it; but by whom made, and with what intent, is a question which will probably never be answered. It may be worth while to hazard a conjecture that the interpolated words are really connected with what goes before, viz., the promise of inheritance to Caleb. Now that promise was fulfilled in the gift of Hebron to Caleb and his seed (Josh. xiv. 14)."

The second problem is that the text seems to change the location of the Amalekites and the Canaanites, who were supposed to live along the seashore and not in the Southern lowlands. The Pulpit

<sup>243</sup> Matt. 11:21-24

Commentary concludes that roving Amalekites and Canaanites had established themselves in the Southern parts also, in some parts of what was called "the Wady."

Apparently, the verses 26-35 are a double of the previous section of vs. 21-24, or, at least the content is the same. It could be that God repeated what He had said to Moses in private in the presence of Aaron, although we read in vs. 5 that "Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there."

The punishment is meant for the men twenty years old or more who were counted in the census of ch. 1:18, 19. In ch. 1:3 we read: "You [Moses] and Aaron are to number by their divisions all the men in Israel twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army." *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: "All that had been enrolled as the soldiers of the Lord, to fight his battles and their own, but had refused, and had incurred the guilt of mutiny." God court-martialed the whole army because of the general mutiny of which there were guilty. But as always, one never sins alone. Others are always dragged into our crime and punishment. The whole nation of Israel would suffer for forty years, older people, women and children included. The whole conscripted army is condemned to death in the desert. The youngest, who would have been twenty years old at the census, would die at the age of sixty, or before.

In their mutiny the people had said: "Our wives and children will be taken as plunder." The Lord uses those very words, saying: "As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected." He adds to this: "Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert." The KJV renders vs. 33 as: "And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness." The Hebrew word is *ra'ah*, which *Strong's* defines as "to tend a flock; i.e. pasture it; intransitively, to graze." The intent is, probably, no so much that they will tend their flocks in the desert, but that they will be the flock themselves. There is a soft and sweet suggestion in these words that the Lord will be their shepherd and that, consequently, they will not lack anything.

Lest we think that the concept of a generation gap is a modern one, God shows us here a picture of a generation gap. The second generation of those who left Egypt was handed a spiritual debt that far surpassed any budget deficit that we leave to our children. God had lead the fathers out of Egypt in order to bring them to the promised land, but they rebelled against the Lord. Those men left a heritage of rebellion to their children; but, miraculously, God takes over the younger generation, shepherds them for forty years in a place of death, the place Moses called: "that vast and dreadful desert,"<sup>244</sup> and God says: "I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected." The God of our fathers is also the God of the next generation. If we take Peter's words for ourselves that we "were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers," we may also believe that God's promises are valid for our children, and that He will bring them where He wants them to be, in spite of our failures.

In vs. 34 God says: "you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you." The last part of this sentence has been the object of controversies. The KJV says here: "ye shall know my breach of promise," which gives the impression that God would have broken His promises toward Israel. It is clear, however, that the people were not prevented from entering Canaan because God changed His mind, or broke His promise, but because they themselves refused to enter in.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says about this clause: "[My breach of promise]-- i. e., that in consequence of your violation of the covenant between you and me, by breaking the terms of it, it shall be null and void on my part, as I shall withhold the blessings I promised in that covenant to confer on you on condition of your obedience. [*Wiyda'tem ... 'et ... t'nuw'aatiy ...*, and ye shall know my withdrawal, my alienation, my holding back.] 'The translation in the present King James Version is harsh, and merely conjectural, not warranted by the Hebrew original. Some of our older English translators had a more inoffensive and a juster rendering than our last version here happens to have. Coverdale's Bible of 1535 renders, "ye may know what it is, when I withdraw my hand." Matthewe's Bible of 1537 has, "ye shall fele my vengeance." The Great Bible of 1539, "ye shall know my displeasure. The Geneva translators of 1560 first ventured to say, "ye shall fele my breach of promise;" but then they added a marginal note to soften it-- namely, "whether my promise is true or no." Dr. Parker's Bible of 1568 altered it into, "ye shall know my breach of promise," leaving no note at all in the margin; and the last translation, following Parker's, reads the text as before, only throwing in another softer version into the margin-- namely, "altering of my purpose" ' (Waterlands' 'Scripture Vindicated'). The Hebrew word occurs only in one

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<sup>244</sup> Deut. 1:19

other passage, namely, <Job 33:10>, where it is rendered by our translators, “occasion against” (‘disallowances against me’) (Carey’s ‘Job’).”

*The Interlinear Bible* uses “my breach of promise,” following the rendering of the KJV. But *Strong’s* defines the Hebrew term *t’nuw’aatiy* as derived from *’tenuw’ah* ... alienation; by implication, enmity.” *The Brown Driver Brigg’s Definition* gives: “opposition, alienation, enmity.”

“You will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.” Those are terrible words. This is the essence of the suffering of hell to see that God against us, and to realize that God holds us in contempt if we hold Him in contempt. On the other hand, how comforting it is to know that God is for us. The Apostle Paul expresses this assurance beautifully when he says: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”<sup>245</sup> We may travel safely through the desert if we know that nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ.

Having God against us reduces our lives to meaninglessness. There is no clearer picture of the emptiness of human existence than the forty years wandering of Israel in the desert. The only goal of this travel for those who had rebelled was to die, and the only hope of the younger generation was the death of the older generation. What a terrible atmosphere this must have created among the nation; and that for forty long years!

I believe it was in this period of meaninglessness and emptiness of life that Moses wrote the ninetieth psalm: “You turn men back to dust, saying, ‘Return to dust, O sons of men.’ For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning-- though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered. We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. The length of our days is seventy years-- or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Relent, O LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble.”<sup>246</sup> The heart of wisdom, as a result of the numbering aright of our days, is the heart of repentance and confession of sin.

*Matthew Henry’s Commentary* says about the punishment: “That all those who had now grown up to men’s estate should die in the wilderness, not all at once, but by degrees. They wished that they might die in the wilderness, and God said Amen to their passionate wish, and made their sin their ruin, snared them in the words of their mouth, and caused their own tongue to fall upon them, took them at their word, and determined that their carcasses should fall in the wilderness, v. 28, 29, and again, v. 32, 35. See with what contempt they are spoken of, now that they had by their sin made themselves vile; the mighty men of valour were but carcasses, when the Spirit of the Lord had departed from them. They were all as dead men. Their fathers had such a value for Canaan that they desired to have their dead bodies carried thither to be buried, in token of their dependence upon God’s promise that they should have that land for a possession: but these, having despised that good land and disbelieved the promise of it, shall not have the honour to be buried in it, but shall have their graves in the wilderness.” It is true that the presence of Joseph’s coffin among them was a strong reminder of the faith the forefathers of this generation of Israelites had had in the fulfillment of God’s promises. But as is often the case, the spiritual heritage of ages past was considered to be irrelevant to the present.

There is no greater discrepancy imaginable than between the glory of the Lord that fills the whole earth and this band of aimless wanderers in the desert. The difference is in the vision of man. All these people wanted to do was die in the wilderness, and die they did, with the exception of Caleb, Joshua and most of the Levites. The difference was the spirit that indwelt them. God said about Caleb: “But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he

<sup>245</sup> Rom. 8:31-34

<sup>246</sup> Ps. 90:3-15

went to, and his descendants will inherit it.” Those words applied to all those who would enter the promised land: they had a different spirit and they followed the Lord.

The writer of the Hebrew epistle captures the essence of the moment when he says: “So, as the Holy Spirit says: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.’ So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.’ Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, ‘So I declared on oath in my anger, They shall never enter my rest.’ And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: ‘And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.’ And again in the passage above he says, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.”<sup>247</sup>

This quote from Hebrews gives a new spiritual dimension to what happens here at the border of Canaan. The Israelites were given the opportunity to enter a land with geographical borders, inhabited by human being that would oppose them. God wants us to enter into a land with spiritual borders, which is called “God’s rest,” of which the Sabbath was a shadow. Our reaction to the preaching of the Gospel should be that we enter into the rest of God. The result of this is that we cease to live the way we used to live. As the author of the Hebrew epistle said: “for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.” Entering into God’s rest by faith means: enjoying God’s creation, both old and new.

The verses 36-38 tell us that the spies were punished instantly, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua. We are not told exactly what happened, only that they “were struck down and died of a plague before the LORD.” The word “plague” can, of course, mean different kinds of disaster; not necessarily the fatal sickness that goes by that name. Since the order God had given was to turn around the next day, those men must have died that same day, which, probably, meant that they did not die of a sickness. Before we question the justice of this swift punishment, we have to remember that those men were guilty of treason. They had not given an honest, objective report about the land, which turned out to be negative, but they had willfully and maliciously twisted the facts. They had said: “The land we explored devours those living in it,” and “we saw the Nephilim there.” Thus they suggested that the promised land was not what it had been made out to be. God had been trying to sell them a piece of marshland. Their sin was not just a lack of faith, but slander of the integrity of God.

#### **E. Israel Rebels against the Judgment of God 14:39-45**

The first reaction of the people upon hearing God’s verdict is that they mourned bitterly. But this mourning is followed immediately by another act of rebellion; instead of obeying the command of the Lord and return to the desert, they decided to try to enter the promised land. God told them to go back, but they go forward. The Bible calls this presumption. It was not only an act of disobedience, but in going against the Lord’s specific orders, they presumed that the presence of the Lord was not indispensable to conquer the enemy. Before, they overestimated the enemy, by calling them “Nephilim,” now they underestimate

<sup>247</sup> Heb. 3:7-4:11



him. The Apostle John says: "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."<sup>248</sup> But Peter warns us, saying: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."<sup>249</sup> We do well to picture our spiritual enemy as a roaring lion, but if the Holy Spirit is in us we have nothing to fear. The danger is the presumption that God is in us when He is not, or to believe that we would be able to face the lion in our own strength. Paul advises us: "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you-- unless, of course, you fail the test?"<sup>250</sup> This presumption cost Samson his eyes, and, eventually, his life. We read that when he was betrayed by Delilah: "He awoke from his sleep and thought, 'I'll go out as before and shake myself free.' But he did not know that the LORD had left him."<sup>251</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* says about the action of the Israelites: "Thus they added to an evil distrust in the power of God an almost more evil trust in their own power. It does not seem correct to say that 'unbelief' was the real cause of both errors – unbelief, first in God's promises, and secondly in his threats. It was rather one of those many cases in which men seek to atone for a fault on one side by rushing into as great a fault on the other side. They spoke brave words about the place which the Lord hath promised, as though it were indeed obedience and trust which spurred them on, instead of presumption and selfishness."

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments on vs. 40: "Nature, poor, fallen human nature, is ever running into extremes. This miserable people, a short time ago, thought that though they had Omnipotence with them they could not conquer and possess the land! Now they imagine that though God himself go not with them, yet they shall be sufficient to drive out the inhabitants and take possession of their country! Man is ever supposing he can either do all things or do nothing; he is therefore sometimes presumptuous, and at other times in despair."

The expedition ends in a humiliating defeat. Recounting the event forty years later, Moses says: "The Amorites who lived in those hills came out against you; they chased you like a swarm of bees and beat you down from Seir all the way to Hormah."<sup>252</sup> "They chased you like a swarm of bees!" There was not even a resemblance of a fight.

The place name "Hormah" has caused endless problems for Bible scholars. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "This mention of Hormah is extremely perplexing." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says: "The name was afterward given to that place in memory of the immense slaughter of the Israelites on this occasion." Nobody has been able to pinpoint the location of the place with any amount of certainty, and it seems that the places that have been suggested do not fit the vague description in the text.

*The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* translates the name Hormah as "a devoted place, destruction." And it adds: "Hormah has not been positively identified, and several leading scholars have their candidates." The point of identification of the local is, of course, of no great importance to our study. Suffice it to understand that Israel was soundly defeated when it tried to enter Canaan in its own strength.

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<sup>248</sup> I John 4:4

<sup>249</sup> I Pet. 5:8

<sup>250</sup> II Cor. 13:5

<sup>251</sup> Judg. 16:20

<sup>252</sup> Deut. 1:44

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In this chapter we enter into the new phase of Israel's experience, that it the forty year period of wandering in the desert. Our outline gives the following captions to this section:

### *III. The Failure of Israel in the Wilderness 15:1-19:22*

#### **A. Review of the Offerings 15:1-41**

The transition between the preceding chapter with its tumultuous events and this one, describing certain kinds of sacrifices to be brought once the people had entered the promised land, is great indeed. It seems like the narration simply stops, and with a few exception, we find a huge gap of silence, lasting thirty-eight years. It is the same gap we find in Hebrews ch. 11, between vs. 29 and 30, where the author jumps from the crossing of the Red Sea to the fall of Jericho. The thirty-eight years of wandering through the desert were years of virtual silence. Some centuries later we learn from the prophets Ezekiel and Amos that the moral decline of the generation that was doomed to die in the desert continued to the point where some of them, at least, became idol worshipers of the lowest rank, who murdered their own children. In Ezekiel God says: "Therefore I led them out of Egypt and brought them into the desert. I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy. Yet the people of Israel rebelled against me in the desert. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws-- although the man who obeys them will live by them-- and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the desert. But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would not bring them into the land I had given them-- a land flowing with milk and honey, most beautiful of all lands-- because they rejected my laws and did not follow my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols. Yet I looked on them with pity and did not destroy them or put an end to them in the desert. I said to their children in the desert, 'Do not follow the statutes of your fathers or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols. I am the LORD your God; follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.' But the children rebelled against me: They did not follow my decrees, they were not careful to keep my laws-- although the man who obeys them will live by them-- and they desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in the desert. But I withheld my hand, and for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries, because they had not obeyed my laws but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths, and their eyes [lusted] after their fathers' idols. I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by; I let them become defiled through their gifts-- the sacrifice of every firstborn-- that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the LORD."<sup>253</sup> And in Amos we read: "Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god-- which you made for yourselves."<sup>254</sup> God, in His grace, remains silent about this shameful period in the history of His people.

Chapter fifteen is addressed to the younger generation that will enter the promised land. There is tremendous hope in the words: "After you enter the land I am giving you as a home..." These words were spoken in the desert, while Israel was wandering around aimlessly. The majority of the nation was doomed to die, and the younger ones, who were less than twenty years old when the great rebellion took place, must have lived under the same cloud of emptiness and expectation of death under which their parents moved through life. When God speaks to them here a ray of light breaks through the darkness. There was a generation that was like a child born in prison. They had never had a home of their own, but God promises them life.

These words are spoken as if the conquest of Canaan had already taken place. Their parents had stood at the borders of Canaan and they had come to the conclusion that it was impossible to enter. They

<sup>253</sup> Ezek. 20:10-26

<sup>254</sup> Amos 5:25-26

had said: “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are,”<sup>255</sup> and: “Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder.”<sup>256</sup> Here God says: “After you enter the land I am giving you as a home...”

We should be able to identify with those words, because for us too, the victory is something that is already behind us. The problem of our sins is solved, as we read in Hebrews: “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven,”<sup>257</sup> and Paul says: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”<sup>258</sup> This victory sets the stage of God’s stipulations regarding offerings that will be brought to God “as a pleasing aroma to the Lord.”

These offerings could not be made in the desert, because the required ingredients of flour and wine were not available. One had to be home, in the place of God’s promise in order to be able to bring these sacrifices.

We do not know when these words were spoken, probably several decades before the time of arrival at the borders of Canaan. We would think that God spoke rather prematurely; He could have waited till the people had arrived. Evidently, He could not! He wanted His people to think about what lay ahead. This generation of young people who saw their parents die off in the desert needed to dream about the future, about the fellowship with God that awaited them after the victory was won. God did not want them to fall victim to a desert syndrome. He wanted them to have a vision of the victory and beyond. In the same vein the Apostle Paul says to us: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”<sup>259</sup> God wants us to see beyond the boundaries of this life and dream about life at home, lest we fall victim to the desert syndrome of this world.

*The Pulpit Commentary* denies that the purpose of the insertion of these commands at this point was to show the younger generation there was light at the end of the tunnel. We read: “It must have been during the years of wandering, but within those limits it is impossible even to conjecture the probably date. There is no external evidence, and the internal evidence is wholly indecisive. Neither can it be reasonably maintained that these regulations were designed to revive the hope and sustain the faith of the rising generation. Incidentally they may have had some effect in that way, but it is evident that the primary object of their promulgation was simply to supply certain defects and omission in the Levitical legislation. Why that legislation should have had the fragmentary and unfinished character which it so evidently bears, requiring to be supplemented, here by and isolated commandment, and there by oral tradition, is an interesting and difficult question; but there can be no doubt as to the fact, and it is superfluous to look any further for the reason of the enactments here following.”

The opening words are also found in Leviticus in connection with the law on the first fruits.<sup>260</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* assumes that the burnt offerings and sacrifices mentioned here were not brought during the remainder of the years in the desert. The text does not mention this. It is obvious that the additional parts of the offerings, the flour, the oil and the wine were not available in the desert. Whatever stocks the Israelites had brought out of Egypt did not last forty years. It could very well be, though, that these years in the desert were marked by a general decline of religious practices. We know for sure that the rite of circumcision was not practiced. We learn this from the mention of it in Joshua. We read there: “At that time the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites again.’ So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath Haaraloth. Now this is why he did so: All those who came out of Egypt-- all the men of military age-- died in the desert on the way after leaving Egypt. All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the desert during the journey from Egypt had not.”<sup>261</sup> We may suppose that the priests and Levites continued their duties at the tabernacle, and that those sacrifices that were not dependent upon the private initiative were continued, but freewill offerings made

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<sup>255</sup> Num. 13:31

<sup>256</sup> Num. 14:3

<sup>257</sup> Heb. 1:3

<sup>258</sup> Col. 2:15

<sup>259</sup> Col. 3:1-4

<sup>260</sup> See Lev. 23:10

<sup>261</sup> Josh. 5:2-5

by individuals could well have diminished, and, eventually discontinued. But to interpret this chapter as a legislation for discontinuation does not make much sense.

Amos' indictment: "You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god-- which you made for yourselves,"<sup>262</sup> and Stephen's quote, "You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship," suggests strongly that the practice of worshipping YHWH declined considerably during this period. It is impossible to serve God and Satan simultaneously. We can picture the condition of the generation of those who refused to obey the Lord.

The sacrifices referred to in these verses had already been regulated in the book of Leviticus, and, no doubt, had been brought in some form or another even before the construction of the tabernacle. All this chapter does is add features of ingredients that would not be available until the arrival in the promised land. Leviticus distinguishes between five basic types of sacrifices: the burnt offering,<sup>263</sup> the grain offering,<sup>264</sup> the fellowship offering,<sup>265</sup> the sin offering,<sup>266</sup> and the guilt offering.<sup>267</sup> Only the last two of these kinds of sacrifices were directly connected to sin. The verses 1-12 of our text seem to apply only to the burnt offering and the fellowship offering, and they add bread, wine, and oil to the bloody sacrifices.

It is hard to miss the symbolic significance of these additions, especially if we look at the sacrifices in the light of New Testament revelation. All bloody sacrifices reflect the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. He is "the Lamb that was slain."<sup>268</sup> At the Last Supper, the Passover Jesus celebrated with His disciples, we read that He took bread and wine and told them to eat and drink in remembrance of Him. This seems to be the significance of the supplementary offerings in the verses before us. With the ordinance of the Passover God instituted the Feast of Unleavened Bread, in which the Israelites had to eat break without yeast for one whole week. It was a practical application to daily life of the redemption provided by the blood of the Passover lamb. When Jesus took the bread, He said: "Take and eat; this is my body,"<sup>269</sup> and about the wine, He said: "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>270</sup>

It should strike us as odd that Jesus did not take the meat of the Passover lamb and said: "take, eat, this is my body," but He took the emblems of the Feast of Unleavened Bread to indicate that the results of His death on the cross had to be applied to a lifetime of sincerity and truth. That is why the Apostle Paul says: "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth."<sup>271</sup>

The addition of oil to be mixed with the flour can be seen as a reference to the ministry of the Holy spirit, both in the sacrifice as well as in the application. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews mentions the role the Holy Spirit played in Jesus' death on the cross, when he says: "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"<sup>272</sup>

The point of these supplementary offerings is the application of the substitutionary death of the sacrificial animal to the daily life of the Israelite. Over against the rebellion of the older generation God puts the example of a life of sincerity and truth.

The offerings that are specified are those which are "an aroma pleasing to the Lord," which, basically, limits them to the burnt offering and the fellowship offering. The only exception could be the sin offering brought by a member of the community for an unintentionally committed sin. This kind of sacrifice is dealt with separately in the verses 22-29 of this chapter.

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<sup>262</sup> Amos 5:26

<sup>263</sup> Lev. 1:1-17; 6:8-13

<sup>264</sup> Lev. 2:1-61; 6:14-23

<sup>265</sup> Lev. 3:1-16; 7:11-21

<sup>266</sup> Lev. 4:1-5:13; 6:24-29

<sup>267</sup> Lev. 5:14-6:7; 7:1-10

<sup>268</sup> Rev. 5:12

<sup>269</sup> Matt. 26:26

<sup>270</sup> Matt. 26:27-28

<sup>271</sup> I Cor. 5:7<sup>b</sup>-8

<sup>272</sup> Heb. 9:14

The addition to these sacrifices consists of part of an ephah of fine flour mixed with part of a hin of oil. A footnote in the NIV explains the measure of the ephah and the hin. One tenth of an ephah of fine flour amounts two quarts of flour, and a quarter of a hin of oil is translated as four quarts of wine. The supplementary offerings increase with the size of the animal. For a ram the amount of fine flour is doubled from one tenth of an ephah to two tenths, or two quarts to four quarts, and the oil from a quarter of a hin to a third of a hin, or one quart to one and a quarter quarts. The amount of wine is increase the same. The fact that amount of oil does not increase in proportion to the flour would result in a different kind of mixture; the dough presented with the lamb would be thinner than that brought with the ram. The kind of dough presented with a bull would even be more solid, since the amount of flour is tripled from one tenth of an ephah to three tenths, that is from two quarts to six, and the oil only from a quarter of a hin, or one quart, to half of a hin, or two quarts. The disproportionate increase of the wine does, of course, not influence the dough, since the wine was kept separate. No explanation for the disproportion is given and I cannot think of any lesson to be drawn from it. It is true that the flour represents the human element in the sacrifice and the oil the divine. But it would be speculation to draw too many conclusion from this.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* says about this: "The meat-offerings were of two sorts; some were offered alone, and we have the law concerning those, <Lev. 2:1>, etc. Others were added to the burnt-offerings and peace-offerings, and constantly attended them, and about these direction is here given. It was requisite, since the sacrifices of acknowledgment (specified in v. 3) were intended as the food of God's table, that there should be a constant provision of bread, oil, and wine, whatever the flesh-meat was. The caterers or purveyors for Solomon's temple provided fine flour, <1 Kin. 4:22>. And it was fit that God should keep a good house, that his table should be furnished with bread as well as flesh, and that his cup should run over. In my Father's house there is bread enough. Now the intent of this law is to direct what proportion the meat-offering and drink-offering should bear to several sacrifices to which they were annexed."

The choice of the sacrificial animal would be up to the person who brought the sacrifice. The only option excluded, or at least not mentioned here, was the sacrifice of two birds as a burnt offering.<sup>273</sup> Whether this meant that this sacrifice was not accompanied with a supplementary offering, we are not told.

The verses 13-16 divert the attention from the offering to the offerer. The main thrust of these verses seems to be the inclusion of foreigners who resided in Israel. Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and the house of the Lord was to be a house of prayer for all nations. Isaiah says: "And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant-- these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."<sup>274</sup> Jesus quotes these words in Mark: "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"<sup>275</sup> There is a glimpse of missionary vision in these verses. The altar in Israel was to be an altar for the whole world.

The verses 17-21 deal with the offerings of the first fruit of the land, that is at the time of the harvest. The introductory phrase: "When you enter the land to which I am taking you and you eat the food of the land, ..." must have had the same psychological effect upon the younger generation as the word of promise that opened this chapter. God was taking them to the land of promise and they were going to eat bread, real bread which most of them had probably never tasted.

But there was an even deeper meaning in the words God speaks to Moses here at this point in time. Israel was wandering through the desert, surrounded by death. God had spoken to the people about the significance of bread, oil, and wine in connection with some bloody sacrifices to be brought. That also spoke of death, but of the redeeming feature of death in God's plan of salvation. In bringing up the subject of the harvest, and of the first fruit of the promised land, however, God speaks of resurrection from the dead. The bringing of an offering of the first fruit of the land was a symbolic expression of the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ over sin and death in our behalf. The Apostle Paul says: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him."<sup>276</sup> The majority of the Israelites could see no

<sup>273</sup> See Lev. 1:14-17

<sup>274</sup> Isa. 56:6-7

<sup>275</sup> Mark 11:17

<sup>276</sup> I Cor. 15:20,23

farther than the horizon of the desert in which they would die. God looks beyond the horizon, not only into the promised land, but beyond death to the eternal kingdom to come. All this was, obviously, beyond the scope of anyone's vision at that time. Not even Moses could fathom the depths of the things God was communicating to him. The hope God places before His people in the desert surpasses their wildest dreams. To quote Paul's words: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>277</sup> That is the way God wants us to travel through the desert of life on earth.

The next section of this chapter deals with sins of omission and of commission. The verses 22-26 deal with unintentional sins committed by the whole congregation; the verses 27-29 with the unintentional sin of an individual; the verses 30, 31 with a sin that is committed intentionally, and the verses 32-36 give an example of such a kind of sin that was committed defiantly and intentionally, and how the nation was to deal with this. The chapter ends with a reminder, in the form of an object lesson: tassels at the corner of each garment.

The verses 22-26 run more or less parallel to Lev. 4:1-35, although, as *The Pulpit Commentary* points out, the sins in Leviticus are sins of commission and the sins in these verses are sins of omission.

Just as in the parallel passage in Lev. 4:13-35 the sin in question is something which made the whole nation guilty before God. No specific act is indicated; God only wants them to be aware of the fact that sin is not only something that people commit consciously. When a person leans against a freshly painted wall, the paint will soil his clothing whether he is aware of this or not. So we can be polluted morally and not even know it. Sin only becomes apparent in a comparison with the holiness of God. God's holiness is the yardstick for all moral behavior. The Apostle Paul gives us the clearest definition of sin by saying: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."<sup>278</sup> Whether we sin unintentionally by not doing what we ought to do, or by doing what we ought not to do does not make much difference; we fall short of God's glory.

Most people drift along happily through life without realizing that they go down the stream that will throw them over the fatal cliff. Even people who begin to understand something of God's holiness show a great degree of density in the understanding of their own moral condition. I have been appalled when God brought certain sins to my attention, to realize how long it took me before my eyes were opened to things that had been wrong in my life for years. Jesus calls this blindness to our own faults hypocrisy. In Matthew's Gospel He says: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."<sup>279</sup> Maybe we are less innocent than we think with our unintentional sins.

If it were not for the fact that our passage deals with the ways of atonement for unintentional sins and not with punishments, we would be in a dire strait indeed. For the stress in these verses is not upon the sin, but upon the atonement. That is why God accepts the sacrifice as "an aroma pleasing to the Lord." People may be guilty, even when it is not their fault. This fact becomes even more apparent when we speak about collective guilt. To quote some examples: the whole German nation was guilty of the sin of "the final solution," and the other atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, but the majority of that nation may not even have been aware of what went on at that time. Some guilt may stick to a nation collectively for sins committed by previous generations. The guilt of what the white race did to the black race in the various aspects of slavery is a stain that has never been completely removed yet. As Daniel of old, we ought to confess the sins of previous generations before the Lord. We read that Daniel "prayed to the LORD [his] God and confessed: 'O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame-- the men of Judah and people of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. O LORD, we and our kings, our princes and our fathers are covered with shame

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<sup>277</sup> Rom. 15:13

<sup>278</sup> Rom. 3:23

<sup>279</sup> Matt. 7:3-5

because we have sinned against you.”<sup>280</sup> The least we can do is make this kind of confession to disassociate us from the guilt of our forefathers, lest we would be branded “the descendants of those who murdered the prophets,” as Jesus reproached the Pharisees of His time. We read that Jesus said: “So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!”<sup>281</sup>

The lesson we can learn from this passage is that we live in a world that is polluted by sin. The very air we breath is morally unclean. Sanctification consists in disassociating us from all the filth and dirt that surrounds us and clings to us. God does not accept excuses such as “I did not do it,” or “I did not know it.” He only accepts the sacrifice of His Son, which cleanses us from all sins, the sins of commission and of omission, the conscious ones and the unconscious ones.

In this context we read again the words: “One and the same law applies to everyone who sins unintentionally, whether he is a native-born Israelite or an alien.” I suppose this means that, in case of collective guilt, we cannot even plead ignorance on the basis that we do not belong to the people in whose land we live. The alien also had to disassociate himself by confession from the sins that were committed around him.

The tone of the next section, the verses 30-36, is quite different. The law in vs. 30 and 31 deals with sins that are committed intentionally, and the verses 32-36 illustrate what this law means by quoting an incident that took place at that time, to which this law was applied.

Vs. 30 reads: “But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes the LORD, and that person must be cut off from his people.” This is not a case in which a person sin unintentionally, where ignorance or negligence can be pleaded, but it is an act of defiance; it is open rebellion to God. God considers this to be blasphemy. The Hebrew word is *gadaph*, which *Strong’s Dictionary* defines as “to hack (with words), i.e. revile.” The KJV translates it with “to blaspheme, reproach.” It is not the same word Jesus uses, though, when He says: “And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”<sup>282</sup> The Greek word in the New Testament is not the same as the one the Septuagint uses to translate “blaspheme” in Numbers.<sup>283</sup>

The underlying thought, however, is the same. The sin is a sin of defiance, that is not a of transgression of God’s will alone, but a rejection of God’s grace. This is the same kind of sin the author of the Hebrew epistle deals with when he says: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?”<sup>284</sup> The sin in question is not the breaking of the moral law, but of the ceremonial law, which is the law on the sacrifices that stand for confession and pardon of sin. This sin shuts the door to the atonement, which means that, in the words of Hebrew “no sacrifice for sins is left.” Or, in the language of Numbers: “his guilt remains on him.”

What is meant by this, is illustrated in the verses 32-36. A man was apprehended while gathering wood on the Sabbath. The act of gathering wood was not punishable, but the fact that it was done on the Sabbath was. The Sabbath command, as given in the Ten Commandments, read: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”<sup>285</sup> The explanatory clause in Deuteronomy links the Sabbath command to the deliverance from the slavery in Egypt, instead of to creation. We read there: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a

<sup>280</sup> Dan. 9:4-8

<sup>281</sup> Matt. 23:31-32

<sup>282</sup> Matt. 12:31,32

<sup>283</sup> Septuagint: parozunei; NT: blasphemia.

<sup>284</sup> Heb. 10:26-29

<sup>285</sup> Ex. 20:8-11

mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”<sup>286</sup>

Gathering wood on the Sabbath seems a trivial offense to us; certainly nothing that would warrant the death penalty. But then, eating a fruit from a tree seems an even lesser offence, and that caused death to enter the whole of creation. The magnitude of the act is in the defiance of it. The man who did this despised God’s creation, which was commemorated in the Sabbath, and he belittled his deliverance from the slavery in Egypt. He demonstrated in a small and puny way that God’s creation, and, to use the New Testament concept, God’s new creation in Christ were of no consequence to him. By rejecting the Sabbath he withdrew from the protection God had provided for Israel in the blood of the Passover lamb, and consequently, he bore the responsibility for his sin.

The Israelites seem to have been at loss when the offender was apprehended. We read: “Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him.” When God pronounced the death sentence on him, the whole nation must have been in shock. In a human court the man would have gotten away with a warning, or a suspended sentence as a first time offender. God’s judgment sounds harsh to us; as if God overreacted to the situation. We can be assured, however, that God’s judgment was just. In the words of Abraham: “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”<sup>287</sup> God judged the man’s motives, not just the act.

The incident becomes even more troubling when we compare this judgment to Jesus’ transgressions of the Sabbath. We read the following story in Mark’s Gospel: “One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?’ He answered, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.’ Then he said to them, The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”<sup>288</sup>

We have to admit that the man who gathered wood in the book of Numbers did not do so, because he considered himself “Lord of the Sabbath,” or maybe he did! If he did so, he did so defiantly, and opposing God. Jesus declared Himself “Lord of the Sabbath,” because he reinstated the Sabbath to what God originally intended it to be: a day of celebration of creation, both old and new. Jesus purchased the Sabbath back when He died on the cross and paid with His blood.

We have trouble with the Sabbath and its interpretation in the context of the New Testament, because it does not fit in either category of the law; it cannot be taken as a moral law, nor as part of the ceremonial law. It is a category by itself. It is clear that Jesus is the end of the law, as far as the ceremonial part is concerned. This is what Paul means when he says: “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”<sup>289</sup> He does not mean to imply that the New Testament believer would be free to murder, steal, or commit adultery, but that he does not have to rely any longer on the blood of a sacrificial animal to cover his sins before God, since he is washed in the blood of the Lamb.

All of the Ten Commandments on the two stone tablets are repeated in the New Testament, with the exception of the Sabbath Command. Yet, many Christians try to fit the Sabbath in to their new life style, either by transferring the command to the Sunday, for which there is no biblical ground, or by observing the Sabbath, like the Seventh Day Adventists do.

According the writer to the Hebrews, the Sabbath is no longer a day we observe, but a rest we enter in to. We read: “Now we who have believed enter that rest,” and “Anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”<sup>290</sup> That is why this portion of Numbers is so hard for us to accept and to understand, since we have grown into a stage where the former condition no longer exists and that law no longer applies. The difference is between defiance and surrender. Entering into God’s rest is incompatible with defiance.

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<sup>286</sup> Deut. 5:15

<sup>287</sup> Gen. 18:25

<sup>288</sup> Mark 2:23-28

<sup>289</sup> Rom. 10:4

<sup>290</sup> Heb. 4:3, 10



This is the only instance, with one in Leviticus,<sup>291</sup> where a person is put in custody under the Levitical law. In his *Commentary On The Psalms*, George Knight remarks that the Israelite law knew no prison sentence, as our Western judiciary system practices it. People were only put in custody awaiting sentencing. Punishment were meted out in fines to be paid and death sentences. No one ever served a prison term legally. Imprisonment was known in Egypt, and was later practiced in Israel, but it was never sanctioned by the law of the Lord. Some persons were confined to cities of refuge in cases of manslaughter, but that was all.

The last five verses of this chapter deal with the addition of a tassel to the garments as a reminder of Israelite identity in reference to God's purpose for His people. The tassel was to be made of blue cord. It gave a "heavenly touch" to the clothing of the people.

The Hebrew word which is translated by "tassel" is *tsiytsith*, which is defined in Strong's with "a floral or wing-like projection, i.e. a forelock of hair, a tassel." *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that the same word was used for the shining plate of gold upon Aaron's head-band.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* says about this: "Provision had been just now made by the law for the pardon of sins of ignorance and infirmity; now here is an expedient provided for the preventing of such sins. They are ordered to make fringes upon the borders of their garments, which were to be memorandums to them of their duty, that they might not sin through forgetfulness.... The sign appointed is a fringe of silk, or thread, or worsted, or the garment itself ravelled at the bottom, and a blue riband bound on the top of it to keep it tight, v. 38. The Jews being a peculiar people, they were thus distinguished from their neighbours in their dress, as well as in their diet, and taught by such little instances of singularity not to be conformed to the way of the heathen in greater things. Thus likewise they proclaimed themselves Jews wherever they were, as those that were not ashamed of God and his law. Our Saviour, being made under the law, wore these fringes; hence we read of the hem or border, of his garment, <Mt. 9:20>. These borders the Pharisees enlarged, that they might be thought more holy and devout than other people. The phylacteries were different things; these were their own invention, the fringes were a divine institution. The Jews at this day wear them, saying, when they put them on, Blessed be he who has sanctified us unto himself, and commanded us to wear fringes."

The phylacteries, *Matthew Henry* mentions are "small square leather boxes containing slips inscribed with scripture passages and traditionally worn on the left arm and forehead by Jewish men during morning weekday prayers," according to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Whether these were merely human inventions, as *Matthew Henry* suggest, is debatable.

The idea introduced here, is that the obedience of the Israelites was something that did not come naturally to them. They had to be forced into it. They needed props in order to remind themselves of the necessity to obey, lest they die. The tassels are, therefore, both a reminder of God's law and of their own fallen nature.

Vs. 39 suggests that, if they would be left to themselves they would prostitute themselves by going after the lusts of their own hearts and eyes. The use of the word "prostitute" suggests a connection with idolatry. Their natural tendency is to make their own gods, lifeless statues that can be manipulated by man. There is, probably, also a reference in these words to the immoral practices that accompanied the worship of idols. Man is in a sad state if he has to force himself to obey God's law in order to live. Sin, left to itself brings death. G. K. Chesterton uses the image of a fence post. He says that a fence post left by itself will deteriorate and rot over the years. In order to preserve a fence post it has to be painted and protected. Such is human nature, left by itself rot and corruption will do its work.

As New Testament Christians we should not need tassels to remind us of the need to obey. Jesus says: "If you love me, you will obey what I command."<sup>292</sup> Tassels are a reminder of our disobedience. We can say, though, that the command to make tassels is an illustration of the fact that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness." We do need reminders and props. We have to realize that we are frail human beings, not only physically, but spiritually as well. Just as in our daily life we can write notes to help us remember what we should not forget, God wants us to make reminders that help us to love and obey Him. This may not necessarily be in the form of a tassel or any other outward sign. Scripture memorization, for instance, is a very good equivalent of a tassel.

Regarding the blue cord, *The Pulpit Commentary* writes: "This may have been a blue string with which to fasten the tassel to the corner of the garment, as if it were the stalk on which this flower grew; or it

<sup>291</sup> Lev. 24:12

<sup>292</sup> John 14:15

may have been a prominent blue thread in the tassel itself. The later Jews seem to have understood it in this sense, and concerned themselves greatly with the symbolical arrangements of the blue and other threads, and the method in which they were knotted together, so as to set forth the whole law with all its several commandments. The latter Jews, however, have always contrived, with all their minute observance, to break the plain letter of the law; thus the modern *talith* is an under, and not an upper, garment.”

The chapter ends with the magnificent statement: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD your God.” Again, we copy from *The Pulpit Commentary* the following beautiful remarks: “This intensely solemn formula, here twice repeated, may serve to show how intimately the smallest observances of the Law were connected with the profoundest and most comforting of spiritual truths, if only observed in faith and true obedience. The whole of religion, theoretical and practical, lay in those words, and that whole was hung upon a tassel.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

This chapter continues the account of what our outline called:

III. The Failure of Israel in the Wilderness 15:1-19:22

### B. Rebellion of Korah 16:1-40

The incident of Korah's insurrection is referred to twice in Scripture. Moses mentions it again in ch. 26:10 and Jude in vs. 11 of his epistle. Jude places Korah's rebellion in the same category as Cain's murder of Abel, and Balaam's greed. The judgment of the Bible upon this rebellion is very severe. It involves much more than an incident of political friction or a challenge to one man's authority. Korah revolted against the core of God's revelation of Himself. And he did this while using the words and phrases that were politically correct: "The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them."

The accusation against Moses was that he had gone too far. He had been corrupted by the power he wielded. Lord Acton's dictum was being applied to Moses: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." This was a serious accusation, because it affected not merely Israel's political life, but its religion. Korah was a Levite, who proposed that the priesthood be opened up to the whole nation of Israel, not just to one family of his own clan. Korah favored a more democratic way of running church and state. His platform would give him a landslide victory in our day and age.

Who was Korah? Scripture identifies him as the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi. He descended from Levi via Kohath, who was the brother of Amram, Moses' father. So, Korah was Moses' cousin. It may be, however, that the genealogy of the family is incomplete in Scripture and that some names are passed over, which would make the family relationship more removed than apparent.

Who were Korah's followers? Dathan and Abiram are mentioned, from the clan of Reuben. *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that: "The encampment of their tribe was on the south side of the tabernacle in the outer line (ch. ii. 10), while that of the Kohathites was on the same side in the inner line. Thus they were to some extent neighbours."

What was the issue? We get the impression that Korah's contentions was about the priesthood, and the fact that Aaron and his family were monopolizing it. It could be that the qualm of the Reubenites was more of a political nature; they accused Moses of using his powers in a dictatorial way. It seems that their platforms were not the same, but that they were bound together because they both focused on Moses and his immediate family.

As is often the case, there were some correct points in Korah's argumentation. It was true that, "the whole community [of Israel was] holy, every one of them, and the LORD [was] with them." But, although this was the line of reasoning that was presented, it was not the real issue. Korah did not say that Aaron's position as High Priest ought to be abolished, because the whole nation was a nation of priests. He wanted the priesthood for himself. In later ages the post of High Priest in Israel became an issue of political struggle and intrigue. People bought themselves into the post, sometimes for a year, sometimes longer. Priesthood became subjected to the power of the state, which in New Testament times, was the Roman Empire. Korah recognized the principle that Israel was a kingdom of priest, because it had one person who represented the nation to God as High Priest. The point of contention boiled down to this: Who had the right to choose this representative, God or man? If the office of High Priest would become a man-appointed office, it lost its value, and consequently the holiness of the whole nation would be forfeited.

The holiness of the New Testament church and the priesthood of every believer of Jesus Christ, hinges on the fact that "We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man."<sup>293</sup> Jesus answer to Korah is: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Ultimately, it is against this statement that Korah rebelled, although he could not see the historical perspective we have.

The text offers various problems in the original. The NIV simply states that Korah, with some other people started an insurrection. Some of the older versions says that Korah "took men." The word "men" does not, however, appear in the original. The NAS translates it with "took action." *The Pulpit*

<sup>293</sup> Heb. 8:1,2

*Commentary* says in its introduction to verse 1: "It seems best to say that the construction is broken and cannot be satisfactorily explained. Indeed there can be no question that the whole narrative, like the construction of the opening verses, is very confused, and leaves on the mind the impression that it has been altered, not very skilfully, from its original form. The two parts of the tragedy, that concerning the company of Korah, and that concerning the Reubenites, although mingled in the narrative, do not adjust themselves in the mind, and the general effect is obscure. It is sufficient to point out here that no one can certainly tell what became of the ringleader himself, who was obviously the head and front of the whole business. Some are strenuously of the opinion that he was swallowed up alive, others as strenuously that he was consumed with the fire; but the simple fact is that his death is not recorded in this chapter at all, although he is assumed to have perished. The obscurity that hangs over this passage cannot be traced to any certain cause; the discrepancies and contradictions which have been discovered in it are due to mistake or misrepresentation; nor can any evil motive be plausibly assigned for the interpolation (if it be such) of that part of the story which concerns the Reubenites. If, for some reason unknown to us, an original narrative of Korah's rebellion was enlarged so as to include the simultaneous mutiny of the Reubenites and their fate; and if, further, that enlargement was so unskilfully made as to leave considerable confusion in the narrative, wherein does that affect either its truth or its inspiration? The supernatural influence which watched over the production of the sacred narrative certainly did not interfere with any of those natural causes which affected its composition, its style, its clearness or obscurity."

What the learned commentary says amounts, in simpler prose, to a suggestion that there could have been two insurrections: one by Korah and a group of people, and one by the Reubenites, and that two different stories are fused into one account in this chapter. We rather believe, though, that there was one revolt, involving both the Levites, represented by Korah and the Reubenites, led by Dathan, Abiram and On, and that the report is incomplete, or at least, that some of the details are omitted. We find the same occurrence in the report of the making of the Golden Calf, where Aaron's role is not elaborated on.<sup>294</sup> It could be that Moses used discretion in reporting on people to whom he was closely related. Blood is thicker than water!

The NIV says that Korah and his group became insolent against Moses. This is the translation of the Hebrew word *laqach* which means to take. As we saw above, other translations insert the word "men" here to indicate that Korah gathered following in his insurrection. "Insolent" infers that Korah treated Moses in a disrespectful way, insultingly.

From the context we get the impression that the insurrection was triggered by the failure of the people to enter Canaan. None of these men took the blame for their lack of faith in God and for their disobedience. Moses is not only blamed for the exodus from Egypt and the failure to reach the promised goal, but also for the intimacy of his relationship with God. The accusations regarding the exodus and the failed conquest were serious enough, but the attack upon Moses' piety is the basest form of insurrection we can imagine. They say to Moses: "Who do you think you are? Do you have a hot line to heaven?"

Evil people often experience the piety of real believers as a personal insult. The Apostle Paul says: "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life."<sup>295</sup> Moses' relationship with God was "the smell of death" to Korah.

This part of our Christian testimony is hard to accept for us. We do not mind being "the fragrance of life," but to be "the smell of death" is hard to bear. It accentuated the seriousness of perishing of the unbeliever. We are not talking here about priggish piety that is insincere in the advertisement of itself. That stinks in everyone's nostrils. This is the real thing that makes a person the aroma of Christ to God. More than any other accusation against him, this reproach on his piety must have brought Moses flat on his face. We read: "When Moses heard this, he fell facedown."

The accusation against Moses is that he has gone too far. The Hebrew says literally *Rab-laakem*, which means "too much taken upon you." This is the way the NKJ translates the phrase: "You take too much upon yourselves." TLB says: "We have had enough of your presumption; you are no better than anyone else." The inference is, on the one hand, that the whole plan of the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan, would have been Moses' idea, a purely human scheme. On the other hand, the accusation implies that Moses has usurped power, which should have been in the hands of the general

<sup>294</sup> See Ex. 32

<sup>295</sup> II Cor. 2:15,16

public. All the supernatural elements in the recent history of Israel are conveniently forgotten. It is as if these people have never seen the demonstration of God's power, or the revelation of His glory.

Moses' reaction to this accusation is a refusal to refute any of it. He throws himself upon the Lord for his defense. Accusations are always hard to accept, even if there is some truth in them. But false accusations tend to stir up very conflicting emotions inside us. The desire to clear our name and to justify ourselves can become overwhelming. The Bible advises against this kind of reaction. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."<sup>296</sup> Peter calls it "grace" when we suffer unjustly. He says: "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God."<sup>297</sup> The Greek word translated here with "commendable" is *charis*, which literally means "grace." If we have identified ourselves with God and His cause, He pledges to take our defense upon Himself. When David was accused wrongly, he wrote in one of the psalms: "But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head."<sup>298</sup> Moses sets the example here, by not answering his accusers, but by turning his case over to his Paraclete, his great lawyer.

The suggestion that Korah and his followers come the next morning with a censer and incense and place themselves before the Lord, must have come to Moses in answer to the prayer he said when he fell down before the Lord. Apparently, the proposition was accepted, because the next day we do find a group of men, with censers and incense, in front of the tabernacle.

This proposition shift the accent from Moses to Aaron. It is true that the opposition was against both Moses and Aaron, but we do get the impression that Moses was the primary target. Moses, rather penetratingly, answers in a way that exposes the intent of Korah, that it was the office of high priest he was coveting, more than the leadership of the nation. Moses answers his accusers with the same words they used to accuse him: *Rab-laakem*, "You have gone too far." Moses shows deep insight into human nature when he says: "He [God] has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. It is against the LORD that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?"

There is a commendable urge to "eagerly desire the greater gifts," as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth.<sup>299</sup> But there is a difference between the legitimate striving after all that God wants us to have, and the carnal wish to enhance our public standing by obtaining a church office. The Levites who backed up Korah were not satisfied with the privileged place God had given them. Their rebellion was not against Moses or Aaron but against God. They were not satisfied with the place God had assigned them in life. The secret of a satisfied life is to accept that God made us what we are meant to be, and that He placed us where we are meant to be. Very few people know this kind of satisfaction. The human tendency is to plan our own course in life, and nurse a poor self-image while doing it. As long as we are not what God wants us to be, and we are not at the place He made for us in this world, we cannot be a testimony to the world around us; a shining light in the darkness.

In the verses 12-15 Moses tries to deal with the Reubenites. He summons them to a meeting, but they refuse to come. For some unknown reason only Dathan and Abiram are mentioned from this point on. On has faded out of the picture. The accusations these people hurl at Moses are very ugly indeed. They accuse Moses of all the things they have brought upon themselves through their own disobedience and unbelief. They use the terminology God had reserved for the land He had promised the people for the place of horror they had left. They call Egypt, the place of their slavery and shame, "a land flowing with milk and honey." They attribute their failure to enter Canaan to Moses who deceived them and broke his promise. There is no indication that they take any responsibility for their own sins. They accuse Moses of the basest intentions, insinuating that the exodus was not a plan of redemption but a ploy to bring about their extermination. TLB gives a very vivid impression of their attitude by paraphrasing the verses as follows: "'Is it a small thing,' they mimicked, 'that you brought us out of lovely Egypt to kill us here in this terrible wilderness, and that now you want to make yourself our king? What's more, you haven't brought us into

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<sup>296</sup> Matt. 5:11,12

<sup>297</sup> I Pet 2:19,20

<sup>298</sup> Ps. 3:3

<sup>299</sup> I Cor. 12:31

the wonderful country you promised, nor given us fields and vineyards. Whom are you trying to fool? We refuse to come.' ” Their dirty insinuations hit Moses even harder than the attack of Korah upon his personal relationship with God. Moses becomes angry, and in anger he prays: “Do not accept their offering. I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them.”

Calling Egypt “a land flowing with milk and honey” indicates that the only thing that counted for them was their stomach. Earlier they had complained about the lack of food items that were readily available in Egypt. They had said: “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost-- also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.”<sup>300</sup> Slavery, mistreatment, infanticide, and humiliation were conveniently forgotten. We can clearly distinguish the presence of the enemy in the background, who tries to sell a piece of swamp as prime real estate. He uses the vocabulary of God’s promises for the conditions of sin and death. Egypt was the land where their children were murdered; Egypt, “a land flowing with milk and honey!” Already centuries ago Satan was lord of the advertising business.

Behind their accusation is the insinuation that Moses was corrupt; that he had enriched himself by means of his position of leadership. We do not read that they say this in so many words, but Moses’ answer: “I have not taken so much as a donkey from them,” indicates that either this was in the back of their minds, or that they actually verbalized this, but that it is not included in the record.

The expression the Reubenites use: “Will you gouge out the eyes of these men?” must be a idiomatic expression, which we would not use in this context in our time. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains it with: “Wilt thou blind them to the utter failure of their plans and promises? Wilt thou throw dust in their eyes?” TLB renders it with, what is probably the most modern equivalent: “Whom are you trying to fool?” After using so cleverly the tools of marketing techniques themselves, they accuse Moses of false advertising. Moses lured them out of Egypt with the promise of “a pie in the sky.” In their utter blindness to the reality of God’s guidance and miraculous interventions, they have completely fallen victim to satanic propaganda. Moses pleads innocence to all of their charges.

Apparently, after this Moses turns again to Korah with the Lord’s instructions to appear the following morning in front of the tabernacle with a censor and incense. It is not too clear what happens the next day. As mentioned before, the death of Korah is not specifically mentioned. He does not seem to be among those who were swallowed up alive in the ensuing earthquake, but we do not read either that he was killed in the fire that consumed the men who had presented themselves before the Lord with their censors. The latter seems to be understood, however. The incomplete and fragmented account of what happened conveys, at least, the confusion that must have been caused by the rapid succession of catastrophes. From vs. 19 it is clear, however, that Korah was present with the group the stood in front of the tabernacle.

When the next morning Korah and 250 of his followers are gathered in front of the tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord appears, the Lord says to Moses: “Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.” Whether it was really the Lord’s intention to wipe out the whole nation of Israel in one blow, or whether this was said to test Moses, is not clear.

What is clear, however, is that God would not be able to do as He said as long as certain individuals, that is Moses, Aaron, and, undoubtedly some others, were still present among them. These limitations that God puts upon Himself reveal the marvelous principle of the positive influence the righteous have upon the condition of this world. When God reveals to Abraham His plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham answers God with: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing-- to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”<sup>301</sup> Abraham then enters into his famous prayer of intercession for the cities. He ends with the request that the Lord would withhold judgment if there were ten righteous. God went must farther than Abraham ever dared to go. When the angels force Lot and his family out of Sodom, the leader says: “But flee there [to Zoar] quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it.” Sodom and Gomorrah could not have been destroyed if only Lot had been present. One righteous man can save the world!

When Moses and Aaron hear of God’s plan to wipe out the whole nation, they fall down on the ground and cry: “O God, God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?” The rebellion was more general than the insurrection of one man, and we have to understand this as a euphemism, in which one stands for many. God is addressed in a unique way as

<sup>300</sup> ch. 11:5

<sup>301</sup> Gen. 18:23-25

“God of the spirits of all mankind.” This expression is used nowhere else in the Bible. Other translations, such as the RSV, KJV, ASV render the phrase with: “O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh.” *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this profound exclamation: “The *ruach* is the spirit of life which the Creator has imparted unto perishable flesh, and made it live. In some sense it belongs to beasts as well as to men (Eccles. iii. 19, 21); but in the common use of the word men only are thought of, as having received it by a special communication of a higher order (Gen. ii. 7; 1 Cor. xv. 45). Moses, therefore, really appeals to God, as the Author and Giver of that imperishable life-principle which is lodged in the mortal flesh of all men, not to destroy the works of his own hands, the creatures made in his own image. Here we have in its germ that idea of the universal fatherhood of God which remained undeveloped in Jewish thought until Judaism itself expanded into Christianity.”

This appellation of God as “the God of the spirits of all flesh” is the more significant as we look at what follows, when the offenders “go down alive into the grave.” Israel is warned to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and not to touch anything that belongs to them. In other words they had to disassociate themselves from this rebellion, and by their moving away from it, indicate that they had no part in the insurrection. As mentioned before, it is not clearly stated what happened to Korah. There is no doubt about it that he died, but whether he was swallowed up by the earth, like Dathan and Abiram, or perished in the fire with those who were in front of the tent, we do not know.

What follows can be seen as a natural phenomenon caused by an earthquake, or as a supernatural event in which people enter death by a different way than most people do. The way it is predicted by Moses gives the impression that these people enter the kingdom of death without dying. The prophecy says that “they go down alive into the grave.” The Hebrew word for “grave” here is *Sheol*. The popular concept of what happens to man after his death is not necessarily God’s revealed truth on the subject. When we read that the people went down into sheol alive, it may simply mean that they died by being swallowed up by the earth.

*Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says about sheol: “SHEOL- (meaning unknown)-- in Old Testament thought, the abode of the dead. Sheol is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek Hades, which means ‘the unseen world.’ Sheol was regarded as an underground region <Num. 16:30,33; Amos 9:2>, shadowy and gloomy, where disembodied souls had a conscious but dull and inactive existence <2 Sam. 22:6; Eccl. 9:10>. The Hebrew people regarded Sheol as a place to which both the righteous and unrighteous go at death <Gen. 37:35; Ps. 9:17; Is. 38:10>, a place where punishment is received and rewards are enjoyed. Sheol is pictured as having an insatiable appetite <Is. 5:14; Hab. 2:5>. However, God is present in sheol <Ps. 139:8>; (hell, NKJV). It is open and known to Him <Job 26:6; Prov. 15:11>. This suggests that in death God’s people remain under His care, and the wicked never escape His judgment. Sheol gives meaning to <Psalm 16:10>. Peter saw the fulfillment of this messianic psalm in Jesus’ resurrection <Acts 2:27>.” Obviously, we should not see in this section a mythological story, such as the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The most logical explanation seems that the ground was split open by an earthquake, that Dathan and Abiram with everyone and every thing that belonged to them were sucked into the chasm and that, subsequently, the fissure closed again. The supernatural feature of the phenomenon was that it happened exactly as predicated and at the moment it was foretold. The popular concept the people may have had regarding life after death, will have heightened the impact of this happening upon their minds.

*The Pulpit Commentary* has a lengthy paragraph dealing with the problem of the tents of Dathan and Abiram being swallowed up together with the tent of Korah. It seems to me, however, that the fact that the location of the tents of the tribe of Reuben was adjacent to that of Judah would offer a plausible explanation to the simultaneous disappearance of three tents, if the two of Reuben would be at the edge of the territory of Reuben and Korah’s tent on the other side of the fence.

Although we do not read that God instructed Moses to announce the way in which the rebels would die, it is obvious that the mode of execution was not Moses’ own idea. God told him what would happen, and that is what he passed on to the people in this prophetic announcement. The point around which the whole uprising evolved was, whether Moses had become the leader of the nation, because he had “run for office,” or by divine appointment. If Moses had become the top man because of his own initiative, then Aaron’s appointment had been the result of human planning also. But if Moses’ and Aaron’s offices were part of God’s plan for Israel and for the salvation of the world, the opposition of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram was the most serious offense possible. The verdict turns out to be “that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.”

The drawing of the line between what is the Lord's doing and what amount to human initiative is a delicate matter. The men God chooses and uses never become puppets in His hands, and the work of God often overlaps with the acts of men. On the other hand, there is a great danger to those God uses that they act at certain moments without a divine fiat. The incident at Meriba, where Moses and Aaron struck the rock, instead of speaking to it, was a point in case.<sup>302</sup> Korah's criticism of Moses could have been valid, if his motives would have been pure.

We could object to the NIV's use of the phrase "a natural death." The KJV uses the words "a common death." We should never consider death as a natural phenomenon; it is the most unnatural thing that can befall a living being. Man was never meant to die. The fact that it is common for man to die, should not blur our view.

Punishment is swift. Two things, evidently, happen at the same time: the earth opens and Dathan, Abiram and a group of followers of Korah are swallowed up by the grave, and fire comes out of the Lord's presence in the tabernacle and consumes the 250 men who were standing there with the censor and incense. The fire from the Lord was probably the same radiation of God's holiness that killed the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, who recklessly entered into the tabernacle with their censor and "unauthorized fire."<sup>303</sup> In the whole clerical and political intrigue that had filled the minds of the people during the previous days, they had lost touch with reality to the point where they did not consider the holiness of the Lord anything to be approached but with the utmost caution. Even in the New Testament dispensation in which we live, we should always hold before us the words of the writer to the Hebrews: "Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."<sup>304</sup>

In the verses 37 and 38 the Lord orders Eleazar, Aaron's son, the one who would succeed him as High Priest, to collect the censors from the smoldering remains. *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks that this task was probably given to Eleazar, and not to Aaron, because it would involve touching dead bodies, and, consequently, would defile the person. The description of the place where the 250 men had stood before the Lord, swinging their censors, as "smoldering remains" makes us understand that those men were probably killed instantly by one massive bolt of lightening that reduced their bodies to ashes. The fact, however, that the censors had been brought into the Lord's presence meant that they had become holy, and they could never again be used for any other purposes. Therefore, they are not to be returned to the families of the victims, although that would have been the logical thing to do. The Lord gives instructions that they are to be beaten out into sheets of metal that would cover the altar. Which altar is meant is not specified here. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "The altar of burnt incense." But this would mean that the golden altar that stood in front of the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holiest would be covered with plates of brass, and that seems hardly plausible. Also, the fact that this was done to serve as a "sign to the Israelites" would make us think that the brass burnt offering altar, which was in the court yard and visible to all, would be the one meant here.

If we see the brass burnt offering altar as a picture of the cross of Christ, we can say that the brass plates that symbolizes Korah's rebellion were nailed to the cross. In the context of this chapter the extra layer of brass plates was meant as a reminder of the rebellion, and, consequently, as a warning to the people not to repeat this kind of insurrection. But in the wider context of the whole Bible this symbolic act acquires a deeper meaning. That which is nailed to the cross is abolished. What Paul says about our guilt before God, in his epistle to the Colossians, puts this incident in a clearer perspective also. We read: "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."<sup>305</sup> In order the censors to be hammered into plates of brass to cover the altar, God indicated that He put the rebellion behind Him. If only Israel would have understood this!

When Dathan and Abiram and their families were swallowed up by the grave, the people fled the scene with shouts of: "The earth is going to swallow us too!" This fear, however, did not last long. Only the next day the people turn on Moses and Aaron with the accusation: "You have killed the LORD's people." They act as if the Lord had nothing to do with this, as if it was all Moses' act. What they say, in fact, is that

<sup>302</sup> See Num. 20:8-13

<sup>303</sup> See Lev. 10:1,2

<sup>304</sup> Heb. 12:28,29

<sup>305</sup> Col. 2:13-15



Korah was right and Moses was wrong. This mentality is hard to grasp. The reason Korah, Dathan and Abiram came to such a tragic and dramatic end of their lives was to prove that God had called Moses. Moses had said clearly, before anything happened: "This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt." Jesus met with this same mentality and unbelief when He gave proof of the fact that the Father had sent Him with great signs and miracles of healings and resurrections. The Apostle John comments on this by saying: "Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him."<sup>306</sup> It was this spirit of unbelief that led to the crucifixion of the Lord of glory.

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* adds: "It is very likely that the people persuaded themselves that Moses and Aaron had used some cunning in this business, and that the earthquake and fire were artificial; else, had they discerned the hand of God in this punishment, could they have dared the anger of the Lord in the very face of justice?"

About the accusation of the people, *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "They did not know, or did not heed, that their own immunity was due to the intercession of those whom they thus charged with sacrilegious murder."

The most passionate comment comes from *Matthew Henry's Commentary*: "Here is, I. A new rebellion raised the very next day against Moses and Aaron. Be astonished, O heavens, at this, and wonder, O earth! Was there ever such an instance of the incurable corruption of sinners? On the morrow (v. 41) the body of the people mutinied. 1. Though they were so lately terrified by the sight of the punishment of the rebels. The shrieks of those sinking sinners, those sinners against their own souls, were yet sounding in their ears, the smell of the fire yet remained, and the gaping earth was scarcely thoroughly closed, and yet the same sins were re-acted and all these warnings slighted. 2. Though they were so lately saved from sharing in the same punishment, and the survivors were as brands plucked out of the burning, yet they fly in the face of Moses and Aaron, to whose intercession they owed their preservation. Their charge runs very high: You have killed the people of the Lord. Could any thing have been said more unjustly and maliciously? They canonize the rebels, calling those the people of the Lord who died in arms against him. They stigmatize divine justice itself. It was plain enough that Moses and Aaron had no hand in their death (they did what they could to save them), so that in charging them with murder they did in effect charge God himself with it. The continued obstinacy of this people, notwithstanding the terrors of God's law as it was given on Mount Sinai, and the terrors of his judgments as they were here executed on the disobedient, shows how necessary the grace of God is to the effectual change of men's hearts and lives, without which the most likely means will never attain the end. Love will do what fear could not."

*Matthew Henry* is correct in his conclusion that the main problem with Israel was that their hearts had not been changed in their encounter with God. The people were still being manipulated by the enemy, who has no intention to surrender and who does not allow those in his power to admit defeat. The clever use of the religiously correct terminology points to demonic influences among the nation.

It is obvious that the devil has no respect for justice, yet he very cleverly uses the concepts of justice to undermine justice itself. Some of the greatest crimes in the history of the world were committed under the cover of the process of the law. Christians were burned at the stake, after being condemned in a court of law. The Nazis in Germany and some communist regimes were very meticulous in observing the outer forms of justice in committing crimes against humanity. All those pretexts will be unmasked at the end of time. The Apostle John sees it happen, and he writes: "And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown."<sup>307</sup>

The reaction of the Lord is swift. He orders Moses and Aaron to move out of the way so that the rebels would be destroyed instantly. The two brothers disobey this order, and instead they fall flat on their faces before the Lord in passionate intercession for the people. There are times when disobedience is the only moral option. This also is true in worldly matters: the Bible orders us to obey the government. Paul allows for no exceptions when he says: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and

<sup>306</sup> John 12:37

<sup>307</sup> Rev. 20:10

those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience."<sup>308</sup> Yet, Peter and John openly defy the authority of the Sanhedrin, and they say: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God." The examples of conscientious disobedience to God's command are rare in Scripture, but they do exist. Jacob defied God when he said to the angel who had told him to let go: "I will not let you go unless you bless me."<sup>309</sup> And here, Moses and Aaron disobey God's command. In both instances we get the impression that God accepted the resistance of His servants; it is almost as if God would rather that His command were disobeyed than obeyed.

For people who want to "go by the book" this presents serious problems. How can one know that God wants to be disobeyed when obedience is the key to fellowship with Him and the proof of our love for Him? One cannot know without an intimacy of fellowship with God that goes beyond the average. Moses and Aaron knew that God would rather not destroy than destroy. They understood the conflict between God's righteousness and His love, and they threw themselves on the side of His love.

God honored this by giving Moses some prophetic insight. We gather this from what Moses says to Aaron: "Take your censer and put incense in it, along with fire from the altar, and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the LORD; the plague has started." The only way Moses could have known that the plague had started was because God told him so, and God wanted him to do something about it.

Also, the mode of atonement to be made was contrary to everything that had been done before. The law says: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."<sup>310</sup> Yet, there is no mention of any bloody sacrifice being made in this instance. The censor with incense symbolizes the prayers of the saints. We gather this from John's words in the book of Revelation. "The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints."<sup>311</sup> The exceptional command God gives to Moses in this revelation indicates that the Father had in mind the scene which John describes in Heaven, when the Lamb takes the scroll out of the hands of Him who sits on the throne of the universe in order to open the final chapter of world history, the chapter of "the Day of Wrath." What happens here in the desert is a small sample of what will happen at the end of time, when God's wrath will be revealed and when the prayers of the saints will play a decisive role.

*The Pulpit Commentary* says about this incident: "There was no precedent for making an incense offering after this fashion, but it was on the analogy of the rite performed within the tabernacle on the day of atonement (Levit. xvi.). Whether Moses received any intimation that the wrath might be thus averted, or whether it was the daring thought of a devoted heart when all else failed, it is impossible to say. As it had no precedent, so it never seems to have been repeated; nor is the name or idea of atonement anywhere else connected with the offering of incense apart from the shedding of blood."

Several commentators see in Aaron's activity a proof of the vindication of his priesthood. The fact that his standing between the dead and the living with his censor stayed the plague made him God's man for that time. From *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's Commentary* we copy the following: "The plague seems to have begun in the extremities of the camp. Aaron, in this remarkable act, was a type of Christ. This memorable incident was followed by permanent effects; because it established once and for all the position of the Aaronic priesthood among the national institutions of Israel." Not only did Aaron endanger his own life by running to the place where people mysteriously died without any apparent physical reason, but he exemplified the One who would take upon Himself the punishment for the sin of the world."

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* draws even more profound lessons from this event by saying: "If Aaron the high priest, with his censer and incense, could disarm the wrath of an insulted, angry Deity, so that a guilty people, who deserved nothing but destruction, should be spared; how much more effectual may we expect the great atonement to be which was made by the Lord Jesus Christ, of whom Aaron was

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<sup>308</sup> Rom. 13:1-5

<sup>309</sup> Gen. 32:26

<sup>310</sup> Heb. 9:22

<sup>311</sup> Rev. 5:8

only the type! The sacrifices of living animals pointed out the death of Christ on the cross, the incense, his intercession. Through his death salvation is purchased for the world; by his intercession the offending children of men are spared. Hence, Paul, <Rom. 5:10>, says: 'If, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved **THROUGH HIS LIFE**,' i. e., by the prevalence of his continual intercession. <2 Cor. 5:18-19>: 'and all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.' "

The saving of lives was caused by, both the offering of the incense, and the speed with which Aaron ran to the place where God's wrath was being revealed. Speed was usually not one of the characteristics of Aaron's office. We can see him move toward the tabernacle and perform his duties with appropriate calm and dignity. But here we read that "Aaron did as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly." This makes this incident so unusual in the history of salvation. God calls to intercessory prayer, as symbolized in the use of the censor, and sometimes He does not give us much time to perform the duties of our royal priesthood.

The picture that Scripture paints of this incident is very moving: "He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped. But 14,700 people died from the plague." We can see Aaron standing stunned, trying to take in what had happened. On one side of him a whole army of dead people, on the other side those who were saved at the last moment. After running in the midst of the assembly, he stands there frozen, and the camera, so to speak, catches him as the horror of it all penetrates to him. Within minutes a group of people, almost the size of one third of the tribe of Reuben had been wiped out. We can understand that Aaron was never the same again after this experience. Being a priest before the Lord is an awesome task; human lives are at stake, and prayers are able to stay the wrath of God.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### D. Role of the Priesthood 17:1-19:22

This section consists of three parts:

1. Aaron's budding staff 17:1-13
2. The task description of the Levites 18:1-32
3. The water of purification 19:1-22

#### 1. Aaron's budding staff 17:1-13

After the war scene with which the previous chapter ends, there is the sweet interlude of a stick of dead wood that turns into a blooming almond tree. There can have been no doubt about it that Aaron's staff was a piece of dead wood, but overnight it turns into a living tree. This is resurrection! From that day on there were two almond trees in the tabernacle: Aaron's staff, and the lampstand, which was made in the form of a almond tree. The two symbols stand for victory over death and the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

*The Pulpit Commentary* seems to suggest that Aaron's rod may have been a freshly cut branch from an almond tree. This could be the meaning of the paragraph: "This particular rod had been cut from an almond tree, and it would seem probable that it had on it shoots and flowers and fruit at once, so that the various stages of its natural growth were all exemplified together." But maybe the commentary speaks about the condition of the rod after it bloomed. As stated above, there is no doubt in my mind that Aaron's rod, as the other rods presently before the Lord, were walking sticks that were in daily use, and could therefore not arouse any suspicion that life juices that could cause sprouting were still present. As in the opening words of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, (Marley was dead to begin with, there was no doubt whatsoever about it. He was as dead as a doornail); by which introduction the author wants to say, that if Marley were still alive, the story would loose its intrinsic value; so we can safely say, that if Aaron's rod was not dead, there was no miracle either. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* agrees with this: "It is probable that they were not now fresh cut out of a tree, for then the miracle would not have been so great; but that they were the staves which the princes ordinarily used as ensigns of their authority (of which we read <Num 21:18>), old dry staves, that had no sap in them, and it is probable that they were all made of the almond-tree."

The Hebrew word for staff is *matteh*, which according to *Strong's Definitions* can mean: "a branch (as extending); figuratively, a tribe; also a rod, whether for chastising (figuratively, correction), ruling (a sceptre), throwing (a lance), or walking (a staff; figuratively, a support of life, e. g. bread)." The KJV renders it variously with: "rod, staff," or "tribe." The sentence structure of vs. 2 is interesting also; it reads literally: "Take of them a rod, a rod." We are not told whether all the staffs were originally cut off from almond trees, but this could very well be the case.

There is in the use of the staff, made from the branch of a almond tree more than meets the eye, since the word almond has a special meaning in Hebrew also. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says: "The Hebrew word for almond means 'awakening,' an allusion to the almond blossom, which is first to bloom in the spring. The almond's pinkish-white blossoms always appear before its leaves. The decorations on the lampstands were modeled after the almond blossom <Ex. 25:33>, and Aaron's rod was an almond twig <Num. 17:8>. The almond also symbolized the dependability of God <Jer. 1:11-12>."

From *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* we copy: "The almond nut is remarkably graceful. This naturally led to its selection for ornamental carved work; and it was the pattern selected for the bowls of the golden lampstand <Exo. 25:33-34; 37:19>, 'symbolizing the speedy and powerful result of light' (Keil, Arch., 1:146).... In <Jer. 1:11-12> there is an allusion to another of the meanings of the Heb. root, which is to hasten. In the first of the two verses the almond tree is mentioned by its name *shaged*, and in the second it is said 'for I am watching My word,' watching being from the same root as almond. The almond was chosen to symbolize God's haste in fulfilling His promises." None of these various shades of meaning come through, of course, in any of the translations. But the Israelites in the desert understood much more of what God was saying to them in the blooming of Aaron's staff than we do in reading the report of it.

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* says of the staffs: "*MaTeh*, the staff or sceptre, which the prince or chief of each tribe bore, and which was the sign of office or royalty among almost all the people of the earth." And *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* adds to this: "Moses was ordered to see that the

name of each was inscribed upon his rod or wand of office-- a practice borrowed from the Egyptians. The Babylonians had the same (Rawlinson's 'Herodotus,' b. i., ch. xix., sec. 5, note 3)." So the staff stood for the dignity of the office of the leaders of the tribes, and the double meaning of the word suggested that the staff represented the whole tribe.

Moses has to get a staff from the leader of each tribe, twelve in all. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: "Of all their princes ... twelve rods. These princes must be those named in ch. ii and vii. Since among these are to be found the tribe princes of Ephraim and Manasseh, standing upon a perfect equality with the rest, it is evident that the twelve rods were exclusive of the of Aaron." So, according to this commentary, there was a total of thirteen rods. *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown* does not agree with this, and thinks that the total was twelve and that Ephraim and Manasseh were counted as one tribe for this purpose. This is also *Matthew Henry's* opinion, who writes: "It should seem they were but twelve in all, with Aaron's, for, when Levi comes into the account, Ephraim and Manasseh make but one, under the name of Joseph." The assumption of *The Pulpit Commentary* seems to me the more logical one. Vs. 6 reads: "So Moses spoke to the Israelites, and their leaders gave him twelve staffs, one for the leader of each of their ancestral tribes, and Aaron's staff was among them." The Hebrew word translated "among" is *tavek*, which means "among," or at "the center," or "in the middle of." The text does not necessarily include Aaron's staff in the number twelve.

The staffs are all placed overnight by Moses inside the tabernacle, where exactly is not mentioned. "In front of the Testimony, where I meet with you," would make us suppose that it was in front of the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holiest. The next morning Moses "saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the house of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds." In the tropical regions of the world some trees produce blossoms, buds, and fruit simultaneously at different branches. But the almond tree in the Middle East produces blossoms in early January of the year, before even the leaves start sprouting. So the staff of Aaron, with buds, blossoms and ripe fruit presented a double miracle. *The Pulpit Commentary* uses the Greek word *semeion*, to describe the demonstration of God's power. We read: "In any case the flowering and fruiting of Aaron's rod, while it was an unquestionable miracle (for if not a miracle, it could only have been a disgraceful imposture), was a *semeion* in the true sense, i. e. a miracle which was also a parable. Aaron's rod could no more blossom and fruit by nature than any of the others, since it also had been severed from the living tree; and so in Aaron himself was no more power or goodness than in the rest of Israel. But as the rod germinated and matured its fruit by the power of God, supernaturally starting and accelerating the natural forces of vegetable life, even so in Aaron the grace of God was quick and fruitful to put forth, not the signs only and promise of spiritual gifts and energies, but the ripened fruits as well." The whole incident is pregnant with meaning that goes beyond the actual words of the text. It could be called a parable, as *The Pulpit Commentary* calls it, if we do not imply with this designation that the story had no historical basis.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* sees here a proof "that there should be a succession of priests. Here were not only almonds for the present, but buds and blossoms promising more hereafter."

The leaders of the tribes had been told what to expect. God had said to Moses: "The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout." And the purpose of this demonstration was, in God's words: "I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites." The grumbling had been against Moses, but God had taken this personally. He did not say: "I will help you to rid yourself," but "I will rid myself." The Israelites had never said that God chose the wrong man for the priesthood, but they had implied that God had not spoken; it was all Moses' idea. The miracle did put an end to "this constant grumbling." The issue was never brought up again afterwards.

God ordered Moses to put Aaron's staff back before the ark, that is, apparently, before the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holiest. Thus it became a constant reminder for the people that God had spoken, and that the institution of the Levitical priesthood was no mere human invention.

The placement of the staff seems to be a point of contention in Scripture. The writer of the Hebrew epistle states: "This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant."<sup>312</sup> But when the ark is placed in Solomon's newly constructed temple we read: "There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the Israelites after they came out of Egypt."<sup>313</sup> Hebrews speaks primarily about the ark as it was in the days of Moses and in the period following the conquest of Canaan. The fact

<sup>312</sup> Heb. 9:4

<sup>313</sup> I Kings 8:9

that the jar of manna and Aaron's staff had disappeared in the days of Solomon presents no problem. The question remains whether the staff was placed inside the ark, or in front of it. The writer of Hebrews designates the place of the staff by using the Greek words *en he*, (feminine of *hos*) which, according to *Strong's Definitions*, can mean "in, at, on, by, etc." There is, therefore, no grammatical problem that forces us to believe that the staff was actually placed inside the ark. The size of the ark, 3 ¾ feet by 2 ¼ feet, by 2 ¼ feet<sup>314</sup>, would hardly have allowed enough space for a walking stick of normal dimensions. The important feature of the act of connecting Aaron's staff, the jar of manna and the tablets with the Ten Commandments with the presence of God may not escape us. It gives to Aaron's staff, and everything it stands for the same eternal value as to the Ten Commandments and God's supernatural intervention in the daily life of His children, symbolized by the jar of manna.

The chapter ends on a jarred note. Thus far the picture had been one of hope and beauty. God's holiness and the call to priesthood had been represented under the image of a blooming and fruit bearing almond tree. But instead of rejoicing in the beauty of God's holiness, the Israelites panic. We can clearly hear their nervous exclamations: "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD will die. Are we all going to die?" They completely misunderstood what God had tried to tell them. It is true that terrible things had happened among them. Almost fifteen thousand people had died within the span of a few days only. That the cause of this disaster was their own rebellion does not seem to have penetrated. They blame God for what happened. "Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD will die," puts the burden upon the holiness of God instead of on their own sin. They not only say "We will die," but also "we are lost, we perish." The Hebrew word used is *'abad*, which is defined by *Strong's* as "to wander away, i.e. lose oneself; by implication to perish." This could mean that God's holiness had made an impression on them similar to that of Isaiah when he saw the Lord and he cried out: " 'Woe to me! ... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.' "<sup>315</sup> But, seen in the context of the preceding chapter, we may assume that the cries of the people are the smoldering remains of the fire of rebellion. Even if there was a trace of conviction of sin in their cry, they did not understand that God had a plan of redemption and forgiveness; that their lives could be touched by coals from the altar, like Isaiah's lips were. They did not know the Lord, nor did they love Him, otherwise they would not have panicked in this way.

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<sup>314</sup> See Ex. 25:10 (TLB)

<sup>315</sup> Isa. 6:5

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### D. Role of the Priesthood 17:1-19:22

This section consists of three parts:

4. Aaron's budding staff 17:1-13
5. The task description of the Levites 18:1-32
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The Hebrew word for staff is *matteh*, which according to *Strong's Definitions* can mean: "a branch (as extending); figuratively, a tribe; also a rod, whether for chastising (figuratively, correction), ruling (a sceptre), throwing (a lance), or walking (a staff; figuratively, a support of life, e. g. bread)." The KJV renders it variously with: "rod, staff," or "tribe." The sentence structure of vs. 2 is interesting also; it reads literally: "Take of them a rod, a rod." We are not told whether all the staffs were originally cut off from almond trees, but this could very well be the case.

There is in the use of the staff, made from the branch of a almond tree more than meets the eye, since the word almond has a special meaning in Hebrew also. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says: "The Hebrew word for almond means 'awakening,' an allusion to the almond blossom, which is first to bloom in the spring. The almond's pinkish-white blossoms always appear before its leaves. The decorations on the lampstands were modeled after the almond blossom <Ex. 25:33>, and Aaron's rod was an almond twig <Num. 17:8>. The almond also symbolized the dependability of God <Jer. 1:11-12>."

From *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* we copy: "The almond nut is remarkably graceful. This naturally led to its selection for ornamental carved work; and it was the pattern selected for the bowls of the golden lampstand <Exo. 25:33-34; 37:19>, 'symbolizing the speedy and powerful result of light' (Keil, Arch., 1:146).... In <Jer. 1:11-12> there is an allusion to another of the meanings of the Heb. root, which is to hasten. In the first of the two verses the almond tree is mentioned by its name *shaged*, and in the second it is said 'for I am watching My word,' watching being from the same root as almond. The almond was chosen to symbolize God's haste in fulfilling His promises." None of these various shades of meaning come through, of course, in any of the translations. But the Israelites in the desert understood much more of what God was saying to them in the blooming of Aaron's staff than we do in reading the report of it.

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* says of the staffs: "*MaTeh*, the staff or sceptre, which the prince or chief of each tribe bore, and which was the sign of office or royalty among almost all the people of the earth." And *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* adds to this: "Moses was ordered to see that the

name of each was inscribed upon his rod or wand of office-- a practice borrowed from the Egyptians. The Babylonians had the same (Rawlinson's 'Herodotus,' b. i., ch. xix., sec. 5, note 3)." So the staff stood for the dignity of the office of the leaders of the tribes, and the double meaning of the word suggested that the staff represented the whole tribe.

Moses has to get a staff from the leader of each tribe, twelve in all. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: "Of all their princes ... twelve rods. These princes must be those named in ch. ii and vii. Since among these are to be found the tribe princes of Ephraim and Manasseh, standing upon a perfect equality with the rest, it is evident that the twelve rods were exclusive of the of Aaron." So, according to this commentary, there was a total of thirteen rods. *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown* does not agree with this, and thinks that the total was twelve and that Ephraim and Manasseh were counted as one tribe for this purpose. This is also *Matthew Henry's* opinion, who writes: "It should seem they were but twelve in all, with Aaron's, for, when Levi comes into the account, Ephraim and Manasseh make but one, under the name of Joseph." The assumption of *The Pulpit Commentary* seems to me the more logical one. Vs. 6 reads: "So Moses spoke to the Israelites, and their leaders gave him twelve staffs, one for the leader of each of their ancestral tribes, and Aaron's staff was among them." The Hebrew word translated "among" is *tavek*, which means "among," or at "the center," or "in the middle of." The text does not necessarily include Aaron's staff in the number twelve.

The staffs are all placed overnight by Moses inside the tabernacle, where exactly is not mentioned. "In front of the Testimony, where I meet with you," would make us suppose that it was in front of the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holiest. The next morning Moses "saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the house of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds." In the tropical regions of the world some trees produce blossoms, buds, and fruit simultaneously at different branches. But the almond tree in the Middle East produces blossoms in early January of the year, before even the leaves start sprouting. So the staff of Aaron, with buds, blossoms and ripe fruit presented a double miracle. *The Pulpit Commentary* uses the Greek word *semeion*, to describe the demonstration of God's power. We read: "In any case the flowering and fruiting of Aaron's rod, while it was an unquestionable miracle (for if not a miracle, it could only have been a disgraceful imposture), was a *semeion* in the true sense, i. e. a miracle which was also a parable. Aaron's rod could no more blossom and fruit by nature than any of the others, since it also had been severed from the living tree; and so in Aaron himself was no more power or goodness than in the rest of Israel. But as the rod germinated and matured its fruit by the power of God, supernaturally starting and accelerating the natural forces of vegetable life, even so in Aaron the grace of God was quick and fruitful to put forth, not the signs only and promise of spiritual gifts and energies, but the ripened fruits as well." The whole incident is pregnant with meaning that goes beyond the actual words of the text. It could be called a parable, as *The Pulpit Commentary* calls it, if we do not imply with this designation that the story had no historical basis.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* sees here a proof "that there should be a succession of priests. Here were not only almonds for the present, but buds and blossoms promising more hereafter."

The leaders of the tribes had been told what to expect. God had said to Moses: "The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout." And the purpose of this demonstration was, in God's words: "I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites." The grumbling had been against Moses, but God had taken this personally. He did not say: "I will help you to rid yourself," but "I will rid myself." The Israelites had never said that God chose the wrong man for the priesthood, but they had implied that God had not spoken; it was all Moses' idea. The miracle did put an end to "this constant grumbling." The issue was never brought up again afterwards.

God ordered Moses to put Aaron's staff back before the ark, that is, apparently, before the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holiest. Thus it became a constant reminder for the people that God had spoken, and that the institution of the Levitical priesthood was no mere human invention.

The placement of the staff seems to be a point of contention in Scripture. The writer of the Hebrew epistle states: "This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant."<sup>316</sup> But when the ark is placed in Solomon's newly constructed temple we read: "There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the Israelites after they came out of Egypt."<sup>317</sup> Hebrews speaks primarily about the ark as it was in the days of Moses and in the period following the conquest of Canaan. The fact

<sup>316</sup> Heb. 9:4

<sup>317</sup> I Kings 8:9



that the jar of manna and Aaron's staff had disappeared in the days of Solomon presents no problem. The question remains whether the staff was placed inside the ark, or in front of it. The writer of Hebrews designates the place of the staff by using the Greek words *en he*, (feminine of *hos*) which, according to *Strongs Definitions*, can mean "in, at, on, by, etc." There is, therefore, no grammatical problem that forces us to believe that the staff was actually placed inside the ark. The size of the ark, 3 ¾ feet by 2 ¼ feet, by 2 ¼ feet<sup>318</sup>, would hardly have allowed enough space for a walking stick of normal dimensions. The important feature of the act of connecting Aaron's staff, the jar of manna and the tablets with the Ten Commandments with the presence of God may not escape us. It gives to Aaron's staff, and everything it stands for the same eternal value as to the Ten Commandments and God's supernatural intervention in the daily life of His children, symbolized by the jar of manna.

The chapter ends on a jarred note. Thus far the picture had been one of hope and beauty. God's holiness and the call to priesthood had been represented under the image of a blooming and fruit bearing almond tree. But instead of rejoicing in the beauty of God's holiness, the Israelites panic. We can clearly hear their nervous exclamations: "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD will die. Are we all going to die?" They completely misunderstood what God had tried to tell them. It is true that terrible things had happened among them. Almost fifteen thousand people had died within the span of a few days only. That the cause of this disaster was their own rebellion does not seem to have penetrated. They blame God for what happened. "Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD will die," puts the burden upon the holiness of God instead of on their own sin. They not only say "We will die," but also "we are lost, we perish." The Hebrew word used is *'abad*, which is defined by *Strongs* as "to wander away, i.e. lose oneself; by implication to perish." This could mean that God's holiness had made an impression on them similar to that of Isaiah when he saw the Lord and he cried out: " 'Woe to me! ... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.' "<sup>319</sup> But, seen in the context of the preceding chapter, we may assume that the cries of the people are the smoldering remains of the fire of rebellion. Even if there was a trace of conviction of sin in their cry, they did not understand that God had a plan of redemption and forgiveness; that their lives could be touched by coals from the altar, like Isaiah's lips were. They did not know the Lord, nor did they love Him, otherwise they would not have panicked in this way.

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<sup>318</sup> See Ex. 25:10 (TLB)

<sup>319</sup> Isa. 6:5

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

**D. Role of the Priesthood (continued) 17:1-19:22****2. The task description of the Levites 18:1-32**

In this chapter God, first of all, further limits the damage done by the people to themselves in holding the priests and Levites solely responsible for offenses committed against the sanctuary (vs. 1-7). Secondly, He fixed the wages of the priests (vs. 8-19). Thirdly, the Lord explains to Aaron and his sons the difference between his inheritance and that of the other Israelites (vs. 20-24). And, finally, the Levites are told what to do with their tithes (vs. 25-32).

This is the first and only instance in Scripture where God addresses Aaron directly and exclusively. Thus far we only read: "The Lord said to Moses," or at most "the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron." *The Pulpit Commentary* sees in this a possibility that these verses may be of a later date, when the rebellion of Korah had died away completely, and Aaron's position as the High Priest had been firmly established in the minds of the people. It is not clear to me, however, why the Almighty would be influenced by the thoughts of the people about the priesthood before He would address Aaron personally.

God says to Aaron: "You, your sons and your father's family are to bear the responsibility for offenses against the sanctuary, and you and your sons alone are to bear the responsibility for offenses against the priesthood." The key word in this sentence is obviously "responsibility."

From a linguistic point of view this could mean several things. We could understand that the Lord gave Aaron the task to prevent future rebellions such as had just taken place under the instigation of Korah, or it could mean that Aaron and his immediate family would take the brunt of God's wrath in case such offenses occurred. In the light of biblical revelation, however, we understand that the charge given to Aaron was to be a picture of the office of our Lord Jesus Christ, in that He took upon Himself the sin of the world. *The Pulpit Commentary* concurs with this, by saying: "The general sense of the phrase is, 'to be responsible for the iniquity,' i. e. for anything which caused displeasure in the eyes of God, 'in connection with the sacred things and the service of them;' hence it meant either to be responsible for such iniquity, as being held accountable for it, and having to endure the penalty, or as being permitted and enabled to take such accountability on oneself, and so discharge it from others. This double sense is exactly reflected in the Greek word *airein*, as applied to our Lord (John i. 29)." We are reminded of Isaiah's words: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."<sup>320</sup>

We should also see what God says here, not only against the background of Korah's recent insurrection, but of the offense of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, who paid for their insolence with their own lives.<sup>321</sup> When God places Aaron in this position, he does exemplify the essence of Christ's ministry on earth, but it is the dark side of the image. In the most literal sense of the word Aaron becomes God's scapegoat. The difference between Aaron and Christ was, among many others, that Aaron was held responsible for the sins of Israel, and Christ carried away the sin of the world. In the words of John the Baptist: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"<sup>322</sup> So Aaron became one of the first persons in the world to identify with the death of Christ. Aaron was put in the position in which we all are put by God, once we acknowledge Christ as our Lord and Savior. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection."<sup>323</sup>

In a sense, Aaron's position was not a new one. His priestly garments, which included the shoulder pieces and the breastplate engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel, made him the one who carried the burden of the people before the Lord. He was their intercessor; he stood between the Lord and the people, as a buffer between both parties. God would, from now on consider insurrections such as Korah's as Aaron's revolt, and Aaron would save the people from the wrath of God. Some of this he had

<sup>320</sup> Isa. 53:6

<sup>321</sup> See Lev. 10:1,2

<sup>322</sup> John 1:29

<sup>323</sup> Rom. 6:3-5

done already when he atoned for the people's sin by standing between the living and the dead with his censor of incense, as we read in the previous chapter.

But Aaron was not to carry his burden alone. God called the Levites to his side who, although not in the same degree as Aaron, would share responsibility for the tent and its furnishings and stand between the Lord and the nation. This command does not break any new ground. The various clans of the tribe of Levi had already been assigned their different responsibilities in regard to the tabernacle and what it contained.

There is a play on words that is lost in the translation in the phrase: "Bring your fellow Levites from your ancestral tribe to join you and assist you." From *Adam Clarke's Commentary* we copy: "There is a fine paronomasia, or play upon words, in the original. Leewiy ... comes from the root laawah ..., to join to, couple, associate: hence, Moses says, the Levites, yilaawuw ..., shall be joined, or associated with the priests; they shall conjointly perform the whole of the sacred office, but the priests shall be principal, the Levites only their associates or assistants."

It seems that this chapter expounds a principle that is lost in our New Testament dispensation and that could still have practical value if present day Christians would begin to practice it anew. This responsibility for offenses committed against the sanctuary and the priesthood that Aaron and his sons, as well as the other Levites had to bear, was, obviously, the core of their ministry unto the Lord. Outwardly, it expressed itself in the service of the tabernacle which included the various sacrifices of atonement. But the phrase "bear the responsibility" seems to require a mental and emotional attitude also, a feeling of responsibility for the moral behavior of their fellow man and a yearning to see the Lord's sanctification take hold of the people. Job felt responsible for the behavior of his children. We read: "His sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' This was Job's regular custom."<sup>324</sup> We find the same passion in Paul's intercession for his spiritual children. To the Galatians he writes: "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!"<sup>325</sup> God wants us to be deeply emotionally involved when we intercede for the lives of others, but even more than emotionally only. What God required of Aaron was the ultimate sacrifice, it was death to himself; God demanded Aaron's life and that of his fellow Levites instead of the lives of the other Israelites. The Apostle Paul draws the ultimate conclusion of the ministry God had given him, when he wrote about his intercession for his fellowmen, the Jewish nation: "I speak the truth in Christ-- I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit-- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel."<sup>326</sup>

It is difficult for us to understand the depth of death that was hidden in the ministry God had given to Aaron and the Levites as a gift. It was, primarily, a ministry of death. The fact that ultimately it was a death by substitution, and that under that Old Testament dispensation the blood of the sacrificial animal was taken instead of the life of the sinner, made the issue of death not less serious.

The first lesson God wanted to imprint upon the minds of His people was the awesomeness of His holiness. For sinful human being God's holiness meant death. But even more, God had in mind the death of His own Son, who would ultimately carry away the sins of the world on the cross. He wanted Aaron and the Levites to know how it felt to be cursed and cut off from God for the sake of their brothers, to use Paul's words. In the same way God had shared before with His friend Abraham the emotions of a father who gives his only son, the one he loves, into death.<sup>327</sup>

This does not mean, of course, that death is the end. God is the source of life, and blessing, and fullness. But the path to this source leads first through death. Aaron's ministry was, ultimately, a glorious ministry, represented by a blooming and fruit bearing cutting of an almond tree. But the branch that bloomed was the branch that had been cut of the tree, it died first.

The second lesson God wanted to teach, both to Aaron and to the whole nation of Israel, was that the responsibility for sin would ultimately be carried by one man alone. Aaron was a type of Christ, not

<sup>324</sup> Job 1:4,5

<sup>325</sup> Gal. 4:19,20

<sup>326</sup> Rom. 9:1-4

<sup>327</sup> See Gen. 22:1-14

only as the High Priest who stood between God and the people, but also as the lamb with which he identified himself when he laid his hands on its head before it was slain. Sin came into the world through one man; sin would be taken out of the world by one man. The Apostle Paul explains this clearly in his epistle to the Romans.<sup>328</sup>

In the context of Israel's journey through the desert this responsibility was shared by Aaron's sons and by the whole tribe of Levi and it was expressed in the division of tasks to which each branch was assigned. Those tasks pertaining to the transportation of the tabernacle and its furniture ended, of course, once Israel was settled in Canaan. The details of the various responsibilities are spelled out in ch. 4.

Twice in talking about the responsibilities of the priests and the Levites, the Lord uses the word "gift." He says to Aaron: "I am giving you the service of the priesthood as a gift," and "I myself have selected your fellow Levites from among the Israelites as a gift to you, dedicated to the LORD to do the work at the Tent of Meeting."

In view of the fact that the priesthood involved a responsibility that endangered the very lives of the priests and the Levites, "gift" seems to be a strange word to use in this context. The majority of people in this world believe that the most important thing in this world is to stay alive. Most of us would not hesitate to turn down God's "gift of death." As New Testament Christians we have a hard time seeing God's call to a life threatening ministry as a gift of grace. Yet, the Bible calls it grace when we risk our lives in the service of the Lord. Paul quotes from the psalms when he says: "As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." <sup>329</sup> And to the friends in Caesarea he said: "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." <sup>330</sup> A closer look at God's gift to Aaron makes us realize that the grace that is involved in the acceptance transcends all human philosophy of life. Aaron's willingness to die for his God became the key to his resurrection. Aaron's blood, which he was willing to shed was an image of the blood of the eternal covenant through which our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, was brought back from the dead, as the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews put it so beautifully. <sup>331</sup> Aaron's priesthood also exemplifies the priesthood of every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. As priests in the Kingdom of Heaven, we will "want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." <sup>332</sup> God's gift of death is the key to our resurrection.

In the second part of this chapter, vs. 8-19, God fixed the wages of the priests. The allowance God allots to the priests is a very generous one: the best portions of almost all the sacrifices that are brought in the tabernacle will be rightfully theirs. It should be noted that the priests did not live of the alms of the people. Their support comes from the Lord, not from men. The sacrifices and offerings were presented by the people to God, and it was God who gave them back to Aaron. The Lord says clearly: "All the holy offerings the Israelites give me I give to you and your sons as your portion and regular share." In practice it amounted to the same thing whether the people gave their offerings to Aaron, or that they were given to the Lord and the Lord gave them back to Aaron, but the difference in principle is enormous. Aaron was paid by the Lord, not by his fellow Israelites. This means that he had to trust the Lord for his support, and he could act independently from the people, since he did not depend upon them financially. If this same principle were to be applied to the pastorate of the New Testament dispensation, the difference in the relationship between a pastor and his church would change dramatically. The apostle Paul was quite aware of the fact that there are strings attached to any financial support and, consequently, he took great pains to remain financially independent of the churches he planted and to which he ministered. The Apostle draws a parallel between the Old Testament arrangements for the priests and the New Testament prerogatives of the preachers of the Gospel. To the Christians in Corinth he writes: "Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel." <sup>333</sup> But, immediately following this, he says: "But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than

<sup>328</sup> See Rom. 5:12-21

<sup>329</sup> Rom. 8:36, see also Ps. 44:22

<sup>330</sup> Acts 21:13

<sup>331</sup> Heb. 13:20

<sup>332</sup> Phil. 3:10,11

<sup>333</sup> I Cor. 9:13,14

have anyone deprive me of this boast.... What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.”<sup>334</sup>

It also means that tithing is done to the Lord and not to a church or ministry. The Israelites did not bring their offerings to the tabernacle as a payment for Aaron and his family, but as part of the obligations they had to fulfill before the Lord. God put Aaron in charge of these offerings; he was to receive them and pass them on, and God paid him for his services. This arrangement created a philosophy of giving to the Lord which was quite different from the raising of support for missionaries, and of funds for projects, and payments of salaries to pastors that we see in today’s church. It is true that we do not receive pardon of our sins because we bring a sacrificial animal and give it to the Lord, so that the church and its ministries can receive an allowance in the form of meat and produce. The fact that Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins abolished all animal sacrifices did, however, not bring about a change in our relationship to the Lord as it is expressed in the way in which we administer the wealth of earthly possessions He has entrusted to us. This is what many people fail to understand. Jesus’ death on the cross in our stead does not mean that our lives have become our own, or that what we possess would not be on loan to us. We still owe ourselves and all that is ours to the Lord, and we demonstrate that by dedicating our tithes to Him as a minimum.

The basic difference between Aaron’s support and the support of the Lord’s servants in the New Testament dispensation is that Aaron benefited from the fact that the people were sinners and that the only way to receive pardon was to bring the required sacrifice. He received a portion of both the sin offerings and the freewill offerings. The Lord’s servants of today do no longer thrive on the payments sinners have to make for their sins.

As was to be expected, the priests, being sinners themselves, did not always see what was coming to them as a payment from the Lord; some of them looked to the people for their support, and some even became totally corrupt in the way they handled their responsibilities. We read about Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli that they were wicked people, who were only interested in what they could get out of the service of the Lord. Samuel reports: “Now it was the practice of the priests with the people that whenever anyone offered a sacrifice and while the meat was being boiled, the servant of the priest would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand. He would plunge it into the pan or kettle or caldron or pot, and the priest would take for himself whatever the fork brought up. This is how they treated all the Israelites who came to Shiloh. But even before the fat was burned, the servant of the priest would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, ‘Give the priest some meat to roast; he won’t accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.’ If the man said to him, ‘Let the fat be burned up first, and then take whatever you want,’ the servant would then answer, ‘No, hand it over now; if you don’t, I’ll take it by force.’”<sup>335</sup>

In order to help Aaron and his family remember the holiness of their charge the Lord ordered them to eat the meals that were provided by the sacrifices in “the most holy place.” The NIV does not bring this out in the rendering: “Eat it as something most holy.” Most other translations, such as the RSV, say: “In a most holy place shall you eat of it.” TLB says: “They are to be eaten only in a most holy place, and only by males.” *The Pulpit Commentary* says about the phrase, “In the most holy place thou shalt eat it”: “This expression is somewhat perplexing, because it stands commonly for the holy of holies (Exod. xxvi. 33). As it cannot possibly have that meaning here, two interpretations have been proposed. 1. That it means in the court of the tabernacle, called ‘the holy place’ in Levit. vi. 16,26; vii. 6, and there specified as the only place in which the meat offerings, the sin offerings, and trespass offerings might be eaten. There is no reason why this court should not be called ‘most holy,’ as well as ‘holy;’ if it was ‘holy’ with respect to the camp, or the holy city, it was ‘most holy’ with respect to all without the camp, or without the gate. 2. That the expression does not mean ‘in the most holy place,’ but ‘amongst the most holy things,’ as it does in ch. iv. 4, and above in ver. 9. a distinction is clearly intended between the ‘most holy things,’ which only the priests and their sons might eat, and the ‘holy things,’ of which the rest of their families might partake also. It is difficult to decide between these renderings, although there can be no doubt that the ‘most holy’ things were actually to be consumed within the tabernacle precincts.” The danger that “familiarity breeds contempt” is ever present, and we do well to cultivate our sense of awe about all things divine, lest we lose the fear of the Lord in our lives.

The items to be eaten at this secluded place are specified in vs. 9. We read that God said to Aaron: “You are to have the part of the most holy offerings that is kept from the fire. From all the gifts they bring

<sup>334</sup> I Cor. 9:15,18,19

<sup>335</sup> I Sam. 2:13-16

me as most holy offerings, whether grain or sin or guilt offerings, that part belongs to you and your sons.” *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: “The burnt offering is not mentioned because it was wholly consumed, and only the skin fell to the priest. The sin offerings for the priest or for the congregation were also wholly consumed (Levit. iv. 12, 21), but the sin offerings of private individuals, although in no case partaken of by the offerers, were available for the priests (Levit. vi. 26), and this was the ordinary case.”

Beginning with vs. 11 we find another list of what befell the priests and that could be consumed by the all the members of his family, which means that they could be taken out of the tabernacle to the priest’s home. Here *The Pulpit Commentary* writes: “The included (1) all wave offerings, especially the wave breast and heave shoulder of the peace offerings; (2) all first-fruits of every kind; (3) all that was devoted; (4) all the first-born, or their substitutes. The first and third must have been very variable in amount, but the second and fourth, if honestly rendered, must have brought in a vast amount both of produce and of revenue.” We may conclude from the above that God provided for His servants in a very generous way; He did not expect them “to live on a shoestring.”

*Matthew Henry’s Commentary* says about the provisions for the Levites and the priests: “That they had not only a good table kept for them, but money likewise in their pockets for the redemption of the first-born, and those firstlings of cattle which might not be offered in sacrifice. Thus their maintenance was such as left them altogether disentangled from the affairs of this life; they had no grounds to occupy, no land to till, no vineyards to dress, no cattle to tend, no visible estate to take care of, and yet had a more plentiful income than any other families whatsoever. Thus God ordered it that they might be the more entirely addicted to their ministry, and not diverted from it, nor disturbed in it, by any worldly care or business (the ministry requires a whole man); and that they might be examples of living by faith, not only in God’s providence, but in his ordinance. They lived from hand to mouth, that they might learn to take no thought for the morrow; sufficient for the day would be the provision thereof: and they had no estates to leave their children, that they might by faith leave their children, that they might by faith leave them to the care of that God who had fed them all their lives long.”

This brings up the interesting topic of what we can expect if we serve the Lord and trust Him for our sustenance. Jesus says to those who serve God instead of “Mammon,” that they should live one day at the time, and that there is no need to worry whether God will fulfill His obligations to us. In Matthew’s Gospel we read these words: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”<sup>336</sup>

On the other hand, Jesus considered Himself homeless, and went often without food. At one time He said: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”<sup>337</sup> And sometimes His heavenly Father denied Him breakfast, like in the incident Matthew reports: “Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, ‘May you never bear fruit again!’ Immediately the tree withered.”<sup>338</sup>

We have to bear in mind that the priests were well provided for as long as the whole nation of Israel was faithful in following the Lord. At times when they turned away from God, and began worshipping idols, when the temple worship fell in discredit, the priest were reduced to poverty. The servant of the Lord in our present day may discover, though, that God can provide in spite of the apostasy of the ones who are supposed to provide.

<sup>336</sup> Matt. 6:25-34

<sup>337</sup> Matt. 8:20

<sup>338</sup> Matt. 21:18,19

It is important to strike the right balance in the remuneration of the Lord's servants between extreme poverty and lavishness. The Lord gives us certain guarantees regarding our basic needs if we serve Him. In our own experience He has gone well beyond supplying for basic needs alone. If we lose sight of the fact that the Lord is our riches, and we begin to look around to fix our attention upon material things, we are in danger of losing out. God says to us, what He said to Aaron: "I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites." God can teach us the secret He taught Paul, who said: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."<sup>339</sup>

When God says in the verses 12 and 13: "I give you all the finest olive oil and all the finest new wine and grain they give the LORD as the firstfruits of their harvest. All the land's firstfruits that they bring to the LORD will be yours," He is, obviously, talking about the time when Israel enters the promised land. Considering the situation in which these words were spoken, that is somewhere during the period of the forty-year's wandering through the desert, at which the only prospect the people had was death, these words are like a trumpet blast that shatter the silence of death. At this point Aaron did not know yet that entrance into Canaan would be denied to him also.<sup>340</sup> The other Levites, however, knew that they would die before the forty years were finished. So in this command God wants the priests and Levites to look over the horizon of their own lives into the future. This must have given them a strange sense of awareness of the difference between God's perspective and man's. In the midst of an arid desert God speaks about "the finest olive oil and all the finest new wine and grain ... [and] the firstfruits of [the] harvest." In the midst of death and dying, God speaks about life.

The command about the first-born also, speaks of life. People and animals are born in this wilderness. The aimlessness and despair that marked the desert journey is interrupted, over and over again, by the miracle of birth.

*Adam Clarke* has an interesting description of a rite in the Jewish synagogue, as it was performed in the nineteenth century, that is based on this passage in Numbers. We copy: "[Shalt thou redeem, according to thine estimation, for the money of five shekels] Redemption of the first-born is one of the rites which is still practiced among the Jews. According to Leo of Modena, it is performed in the following manner:-- When the child is thirty days old, the father sends for one of the descendants of Aaron: several persons being assembled on the occasion, the father brings a cup containing several pieces of gold and silver coin. The priest then takes the child into his arms, and addressing himself to the mother, says: Is this thy son?-- MOTHER. Yes.-- PRIEST. Hast thou never had another child male or female, a miscarriage or untimely birth?-- MOTHER. No.-- PRIEST. This being the case, this child, as first-born, belongs to me. Then, turning to the father, he says: If it be thy desire to have this child, thou must redeem it.-- FATHER. I present thee with this gold and silver for this purpose.-- PRIEST. Thou dost wish, therefore, to redeem the child?-- FATHER. I do wish so to do.-- The priest then, turning himself to the assembly, says: Very well; this child, as first-born, is mine, as it is written in Bemidbar, <Num. 18:16>, Thou shalt redeem the first-born of a month old for five shekels, but I shall content myself with this in exchange. He then takes two gold crowns, or thereabouts, and returns the child to his parents."

The evaluation price for a child had already been fixed in Leviticus. We read there: "If it is a person between one month and five years, set the value of a male at five shekels of silver and that of a female at three shekels of silver."<sup>341</sup> But this evaluation was not linked to the redemption of a first-born son. The Good News Bible translates the verse with: "Children shall be bought back at the age of one month for the fixed price of five pieces of silver, according to the official standard." Converting the shekel into US currency, TLB says: "There must be a payment of two and a half dollars made for each firstborn child." The fixation of this price in modern currency is, of course, quite arbitrary, but it gives us an idea of how much money could be involved. It was, obviously, not a huge sum. But many small payments add up to a sizable amount. *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "It is extremely difficult to estimate the number of first-born, but it is evident that in any case a large income must have accrued to the priest in this way."

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* gives the following remarks and applications to the remuneration to the priest: "1. That much of the provision that was made for them arose out of the sacrifices which they themselves were employed to offer. They had the skins of almost all the sacrifices, which they might sell,

<sup>339</sup> Phil. 4:12,13

<sup>340</sup> See Num. 20:12

<sup>341</sup> Lev. 27:6

and they had a considerable share out of the meat-offerings, sin-offerings, etc. Those that had the charge of the offerings had the benefit, v. 8. Note, God's work is its own wages, and his service carries its recompense along with it. Even in keeping God's commandments there is great reward. The present pleasures of religion are part of its pay. 2. That they had not only a good table kept for them, but money likewise in their pockets for the redemption of the first-born, and those firstlings of cattle which might not be offered in sacrifice. Thus their maintenance was such as left them altogether disentangled from the affairs of this life; they had no grounds to occupy, no land to till, no vineyards to dress, no cattle to tend, no visible estate to take care of, and yet had a more plentiful income than any other families whatsoever. Thus God ordered it that they might be the more entirely addicted to their ministry, and not diverted from it, nor disturbed in it, by any worldly care or business (the ministry requires a whole man); and that they might be examples of living by faith, not only in God's providence, but in his ordinance. They lived from hand to mouth, that they might learn to take no thought for the morrow; sufficient for the day would be the provision thereof: and they had no estates to leave their children, that they might by faith leave their children, that they might by faith leave them to the care of that God who had fed them all their lives long."

In a sense the money paid to redeem a first-born child was blood money. In the case of a first-born animal we read: "But you must not redeem the firstborn of an ox, a sheep or a goat; they are holy. Sprinkle their blood on the altar and burn their fat as an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD." The five shekels represented the child's blood. Since the child was the bearer of his Creator's image, his blood could not be spilled, but because of the fact that he was born from human sinful parents, he had forfeited his life the moment he entered this world. Although we read that the offering of a first-born clean animal was "an aroma pleasing to the LORD," this did not mean that God was blood thirsty. Death is as much against God's nature as it is against ours. What was pleasing to God was not the death of the animal, but the reminder of the death of His Son, who would show His love for the Father and for mankind fallen into sin, by dying in their stead. God must have as many conflicting emotions about this subject as we do. The greatest satisfaction must have been in the fact that because of the substitution of one creature by another, man could be saved from death.

Also, this law on the first-born contains a promise of victory over death in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says about our Lord's resurrection: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."<sup>342</sup> In the Apostolic Confession of Nicea Christ is called "the first-born of the dead." The ministry of a priest in the Old Testament consisted of a strange mixture of death and life. His own life was in danger because of the fact that he moved about on holy precincts, but in the daily sacrifices of animals he saved the lives of numerous people who would otherwise have died because of their sins.

In laying down these rules for the sustenance of the priests, the Lord says: "It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the LORD for both you and your offspring." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on this: "[It is a covenant of salt]-- i. e., a perpetual ordinance. This figurative form of expression was evidently founded on the conservative properties of salt, which keeps meat from corruption; and hence, it became an emblem of inviolability and permanence. It is a common phrase among Oriental people, who consider the eating of salt a pledge of fidelity, binding there in a covenant of friendship; and hence, the partaking of the altar meats, which were appropriated to the priests on condition of their services, and of which salt formed a necessary accompaniment, was naturally called a covenant of salt <Lev. 2:13>."

The translation "covenant of salt" reads in Hebrew *b<sup>a</sup>riyt melach*. *B<sup>a</sup>riyt* comes from *beriyth* which is used, according to *Strong's Definitions*: "in the sense of cutting ... a compact (because made by passing between pieces of flesh)." We see this concept of a covenant illustrated in the encounter between God and Abraham. We read in Genesis: "So the LORD said to him, 'Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.' Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half.... When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates....'"<sup>343</sup>

<sup>342</sup> I Cor. 15:20

<sup>343</sup> Gen. 15:9,10,17,18



According to Abijah the monarchy of the house of David was based on such a covenant. He sent a message to king Jeroboam of Israel, saying: "Don't you know that the LORD, the God of Israel, has given the kingship of Israel to David and his descendants forever by a covenant of salt?"

We know, of course, that this "everlasting covenant of salt" concerning the support of the priests no longer exists. The priesthood, as it existed from the time of the giving of the law till the beginning of the Christian era, has disappeared. We understand that the covenant dealing with the monarchy of David is perpetuated in the person of Jesus Christ. We may assume that the same is true, at least in a spiritual sense, about the covenant regarding the sustenance of the priests. But it is more difficult to follow this line from the nation of Israel into the Church of Christ.

In vs. 20 we come to the core of this chapter. "The LORD said to Aaron, 'You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.' " These words cut through the images with which human life is surrounded to the reality they represent. There used to be a time when all paper money issued by a government was backed up by a reserve of gold. The bills only had value because of the presence of this gold. This gold standard was dropped in the early thirties of the twentieth century. God wanted the Israelites to know that their earthly possessions were only images of God's glory. If God does not back up what we call our own, our possessions are worthless. What we call riches is temporary and illusionary. Real riches is not expressed in dollar signs. The person who has God as his inheritance is richer than the richest billionaire. In essence God says to Aaron: "I do not give you the paper money, but I give you the gold."

Man's vision is nowhere as distorted as on the point of possessions. We tend to see money, not in terms of means to have lodging and sustenance, but as security and power, and therefore we reach for it and try to amass it where we can. The devil knows how to manipulate human greed very cleverly. The Apostle Paul gives some very pertinent and realistic warnings on the subject. To Timothy he wrote: "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."<sup>344</sup> The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, both of capitalism as well as communism. The Scottish writer George MacDonald says in his book *Fairy Tales*: "Do you believe God can punish someone by making him rich? I believe He can." Most people are eager to take this punishment without thinking of the consequences.

God wanted Aaron and his fellow Levites to live by faith. This thought evokes almost automatically images of people who have to scrape the bottom to make ends meet. As we have seen before, it meant for the priests and Levites a generous allowance of food and money, but it would never make them millionaires.

*Adam Clarke* does not enter into the spiritual ramifications of the text but he gives a very clear indication what the priests' provisions amounted to in practice. We read: "The principal part of what was offered to God was the portion of the priests, therefore they had no inheritance of land in Israel; independently of that they had a very ample provision for their support. The rabbis say twenty-four gifts were given to the priests, and they are all expressed in the law. Eight of those gifts the priests ate nowhere but in the sanctuary: these eight are the following:--

1. The flesh of the SIN-OFFERING, whether of beasts or fowls, <Lev. 6:25-26>
2. The flesh of the TRESPASS-OFFERING, <Lev. 7:1,6>
3. The PEACE-OFFERINGS of the congregation, <Lev. 23:19-20>
4. The remainder of the OMER or SHEAF, <Lev. 23:10>, etc.
5. The remnants of the MEAT-OFFERINGS of the Israelites, <Lev. 6:16>
6. The two LOAVES, <Lev. 23:17>
7. The SHEW-BREAD, <Lev. 24:9>
8. The LOG OF OIL offered by the leper, <Lev. 14:10>, etc.

Five of those gifts they ate only in Jerusalem:--

1. The breast and shoulder of the PEACE-OFFERINGS, <Lev. 7:31,34>
2. The HEAVE-OFFERING of the sacrifice of confession, <Lev. 7:12-14>
3. The HEAVE-OFFERING of the Nazarite's ram, <Lev. 6:17-20>
4. The FIRSTLING of the clean beast, <Num. 18:15; Deut. 15:19-20>

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<sup>344</sup> I Tim. 6:7-10

## 5. The FIRST-FRUITS, &lt;Num. 18:13&gt;

FIVE gifts were not due unto them by the law, but in the land of Israel only:

1. The heave-offering or FIRST-FRUITS, <Num. 18:12>
2. The heave-offering of the TITHE, <Num. 18:28>
3. The CAKE, <Num. 15:20>. These three were holy.
4. The first-fruits of the FLEECE, <Deut. 18:4>
5. The FIELD of POSSESSION, <Num. 35>. These two were common.

FIVE gifts were due unto them both within and without the land:

1. The gifts of the BEASTS SLAIN, <Deut. 18:3>
2. The redemption of the FIRST-BORN SON, <Num. 18:15>
3. The LAMB for the firstling of an ass, <Exo. 4:20; Num. 18>
4. The restitution of that taken by violence from a stranger, <Num. 5:8>
6. All DEVOTED things, <Num. 18:14>

ONE gift was due unto them from the sanctuary:

1. The skins of the burnt-offering, and all the skins of the other most holy things, <Lev. 7:8>. In all, 24. See Ainsworth.

The gifts which the females of the priests' families had a part in were these:

1. The heave-offering, or first-fruits.
2. The heave-offering of the tithe.
3. The cake.
4. The gifts of the beast, <Deut. 18:3>
5. The first of the fleece.-- See the Mishnah, Tract. Bicurim, and Ainsworth on the Pentateuch.

Besides all this the priests had the tribute money mentioned <Num. 31:28-29>."

Moses repeats the injunction in Deuteronomy, where we read: "The priests, who are Levites-- indeed the whole tribe of Levi-- are to have no allotment or inheritance with Israel. They shall live on the offerings made to the LORD by fire, for that is their inheritance. They shall have no inheritance among their brothers; the LORD is their inheritance, as he promised them."<sup>345</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* remarks beautifully: "This is not to be explained away, as if it meant only that they were to live 'of the altar.' Just as the priests (and in a lesser sense all the Levites) were the special possession of the Lord, so the Lord was the special possession of the priests; and inasmuch as the whole earth belonged to him, the portion of the priests was, potentially in all cases, actually for those who were capable of realizing it, infinitely more desirable than any other portion. The spiritual meaning of the promise was so clearly felt that it was constantly claimed by the devout in Israel, irrespective of their ecclesiastical status (cf. Ps. xvi. 5; Lam. iii. 24, &c.)."

This is one of the great truths of the Bible: If we belong to God, He belongs to us. God surrenders Himself just as much to us as we do to Him. Our love relationship with God is a bond of marriage in the truest sense of the word. If we serve God, He serves us. Jesus said: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."<sup>346</sup> If we honor God, He will honor us: "My Father will honor the one who serves me."<sup>347</sup> If God is Lord of our lives, we are the richest people in the world, and also the happiest, the most fulfilled. The priests and Levites served the Lord in the tabernacle, and put their lives at stake on a daily basis, yet they received the greatest guarantee and security a person can have in this world: the Lord was their inheritance.

It is easy to calculate that if the Levites received the tithes of all the tribes of Israel, they, being one out of thirteen tribes, would receive a more than average income. Besides this, they also received parts of the offerings which were not included in the tithes. If the Israelites were faithful in tithing, this would give them a very comfortable living allowance.

The verses 26-32 command that the Levites, who receive the tithes of the people, give their tithes in turn to the Lord. God wants them to remember that He has a claim to all their possession also, and, therefore, they have to tithe their income. The elevated position of the Levites made them prone to believe that they would be above the law, and that they were not accountable to God. The tithes would be an antidote against the corruption of power. In Jesus' days, the leaders of the people managed to turn the tables, and use tithing as a reason to affirm their position in society. In telling the story of the Pharisee and

<sup>345</sup> Deut. 18:1,2

<sup>346</sup> Matt. 20:28

<sup>347</sup> John 12:26

the tax collector.: Jesus said: “The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men-- robbers, evildoers, adulterers-- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ ”<sup>348</sup>

Vs. 32 is interesting in this regard. The Lord says: “By presenting the best part of it you will not be guilty in this matter; then you will not defile the holy offerings of the Israelites, and you will not die.” The Levites had to realize that the people’s tithes were not given to them but to the Lord. God put them in charge of the offerings, but the offerings did not belong to them. They were rewarded generously, but the were not the primary recipients.

For some people it is hard to receive gifts; others act as if they have a right to charity. The arrangements God made for the Levites dealt with both problems. In tithing of what they received, the Levites recognized God’s claim. It was not their right to receive, it was God’s. To those who had a problem living of charity, He said: “When you present the best part, it will be reckoned to you as the product of the threshing floor or the winepress. You and your households may eat the rest of it anywhere, for it is your wages for your work at the Tent of Meeting.”

For the Levites tithing, was a matter of life and death. If they would not tithe they defiled the holy offerings of the Israelites, and they forfeited their lives. The Lord said: “By presenting the best part of it you will not be guilty in this matter; then you will not defile the holy offerings of the Israelites, and you will not die.” This shows us how important it is to keep the right perspective. God will hold us responsible for what we do with everything He entrusts to us. We will have to give account.

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<sup>348</sup> Luke 18:11,12

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### D. Role of the Priesthood (continued) 17:1-19:22

#### The Red Heifer

This chapter describes the preparation and application of a rather unusual rite of purification in case of defilement by death. In its introduction to this chapter, *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "There is no note of time in connection with this chapter, but internal evidence points strongly to the supposition that it belongs to the early days of wandering after the ban. It belongs to a period when death had resumed his normal, and more than his normal, power over the children of Israel; when, having been for a short time expelled ..., he had come back with frightful rigor to reign over a doomed generation.... If only the elder generation died off in the wilderness, this alone would yield nearly 100 victims every day, and by each of these a considerable number of the survivors must have been defiled. Thus, in the absence of special provision, one of two things must have happened: either the unhappy people would have grown callous and indifferent to the awful presence of death; or, more probably, a dark cloud of religious horror and depression would have permanently enveloped them."

The same commentary further states: "This offering was obviously intended, apart from its symbolic significance, to be studiously simple and cheap. In contradiction to the many and costly and ever-repeated sacrifices of the Sinaitic legislation, this was a single individual, a female, and of the most common description: red is the most ordinary colour of cattle, and a young heifer is of less value than any other beast of its kind. The ingenuity indeed of the Jews heaped around the choice of this animal a multitude of precise requirements, and supplemented the prescribed ritual with many ceremonies, some of which are incorporated by the Targums with the sacred text; but even so they could not destroy the remarkable contrast between the simplicity of this offering and the elaborate complexity of those ordained at Sinai. Only six red heifers are said to have been needed during the whole of Jewish history, so far-reaching and so long-enduring were the uses and advantages of a single immolation. It is evident that this ordinance had for its distinguishing character oneness as opposed to multiplicity, simplicity contrasted with elaborateness." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* disagrees with the logistics of *The Pulpit Commentary* by saying: "To afford the necessary supply of the cleansing mixture, the Jewish writers say that red heifer was sacrificed every year, and that the ashes, mingled with the sprinkling ingredients, were distributed through all the cities and towns of Israel." Obviously, they cannot both be right. It is hard to determine who is.

Against this background, as painted for us by *The Pulpit Commentary*, of the overwhelming presence of "the Grim Reaper" the provision of the ashes of the red heifer does, indeed, acquire special significance. We should not, however, only look at this chapter as a means God provided to survivors of the desert crossing, to boost their sagging morale. The death and burning to ashes of the red heifer is, in a way, God's own protest against death, corruption and defilement. He wanted to be known to His people "not the God of the dead but of the living."<sup>349</sup>

The first lesson we learn from this chapter is that death defiles us. Anyone who touched a dead body would be unclean for seven days; anyone who entered the tent in which someone had died, would be unclean for seven days; anyone who touched someone killed with a sword or who touches a human bone or a grave, would be unclean for seven days. Seven days is symbolic for a lifetime. Even those involved in the slaughter and burning of the red heifer would be unclean for the rest of the day.

The second lesson is that the negative effects of death are eliminated by the death of a substitute. In *Matthew Henry's Commentary* we read: "This burning of the heifer, though it was not properly a sacrifice of expiation, being not performed at the altar, yet was typical of the death and sufferings of Christ, by which he intended, not only to satisfy God's justice, but to purify and pacify our consciences, that we may have peace with God and also peace in our own bosoms, to prepare for which Christ died, not only like the bulls and goats at the altar, but like the heifer without the camp."

The writer of the Hebrew Epistle mentions this rite, together with the other sacrifices, and connects it with Christ's sacrifice for our sins. We read: "The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.

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<sup>349</sup> Matt. 22:32

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"<sup>350</sup>

*Adam Clarke* makes the following observations about this rite: "We may remark several curious particulars in this ordinance.

1. A heifer was appointed for a sacrifice, probably, in opposition to the Egyptian superstition which held these sacred, and actually worshipped their great goddess Isis under this form; and this appears the more likely because males in general were preferred for sacrifice, yet here the female is chosen.

2. It was to be a red heifer, because red bulls were sacrificed to appease the evil demon Typhon, worshipped among the Egyptians....

3. The heifer was to be without spot-- having no mixture of any other colour. Plutarch remarks, *De Iside et de Osiride*, that if there was a single hair in the animal either white or black, it marred the sacrifice....

4. Without blemish-- having no kind of imperfection in her body; the other, probably, applying to the hair or colour.

5. On which never came yoke, because any animal which had been used for any common purpose was deemed improper to be offered in sacrifice to God. The heathens, who appear to have borrowed much from the Hebrews, were very scrupulous in this particular. Neither the Greeks nor Romans, nor indeed the Egyptians, would offer an animal in sacrifice that had been employed for agricultural purposes. Of this we have the most positive evidence from Homer, Porphyry, Virgil, and Macrobius."

From *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* we copy: "This is the only case in which the colour of the victim is specified; and it has been supposed the ordinance was designed in opposition to the superstitious notions of the Egyptians.... That people never offered a vow but they sacrificed a red bull, the greatest care being taken by their priests in examining whether it possessed the requisite characteristics; and it was an annual offering to Typhon, their evil being. By the choice, both of the sex and the colour, provision was made for eradicating from the minds of the Israelites a favorite Egyptian superstition regarding two objects of their animal worship. 'The truth probably is, ' says Hardwick ('Christ and other Masters, ' vol. ii., p. 338), 'that the adoption of the red colour in both cases corresponded only because of its inherent fitness to express the thought which it was made to symbolize in each community. It was the colour of blood; and while in Egypt the idea was readily connected with the deadly, scathing, sanguinary powers of Typhon, it became in the more ethical system of the Hebrews a remembrance of moral evil flowing out into its penal consequences, or an image of unpardoned sin (cf. <Isa. 1:15,18>)."

As the above quotes indicate, the killing of the red heifer was not a sacrifice in the normal sense of the word. The animal was not killed in the presence of the Lord, but outside the camp, and no part of the animal was burned on the altar. The red heifer was an outcast, like the leper. The obvious implication is that God could not accept the heifer, and what it stood for, that is the defilement of death. Yet, the ashes of the animal were used to undo this defilement. It was through the death of the heifer that the effects of death were eliminated. The writer to the Hebrews makes a clear application of this pictures when He says: "And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood."<sup>351</sup>

Yet, the death of the heifer was connected to the sanctuary, because we read that "the priest is to take some of its blood on his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting." The application of the water of purification would have had no effect upon the defiled person if the blood had not been sprinkled in front of the sanctuary. What happens in Heaven determines what happens on earth. The blood of Christ can be applied to human lives, and sins on earth can be forgiven, only because His blood was applied to the throne of God. Again, we read in Hebrews: "When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption."<sup>352</sup>

While the heifer is being burnt the priest had to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer. The use of these three items also occurs in the ceremony for the cleansing of a leper. In Leviticus we read: "These are the regulations for the diseased person at the time of his ceremonial cleansing, when he is brought to the priest: The priest is to go outside the camp and examine

<sup>350</sup> Heb. 9:13,14

<sup>351</sup> Heb. 13:12

<sup>352</sup> Heb. 9:11,12

him. If the person has been healed of his infectious skin disease, the priest shall order that two live clean birds and some cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop be brought for the one to be cleansed.<sup>353</sup> That ceremony also was symbolic for victory over death, exemplified by the use of the two birds, one of which was killed and one that flew away alive covered by the blood of the first bird. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about the added ingredients: "The antiseptic and medicinal qualities of the cedar ... and hyssop ... make their use readily intelligible; the symbolism of the 'scarlet' is much more obscure." It seems strange that this, otherwise excellent, commentary does not attribute anything but antiseptic and medicinal qualities to the cedar and the hyssop, but then looks for a symbolic significance for the scarlet. After all, the fire would burn all medicinal qualities out of the first two ingredients, so their meaning could only be symbolic. From our New Testament perspective, the cedar wood suggest the wood of the cross upon which our Savior died, and the hyssop the fact that the blood was applied to our lives, as the blood was applied with hyssop on the top and on both sides of the door frame of the houses of the Israelites in Egypt during the first Passover.<sup>354</sup>

Scarlet was one of the colors used in the curtains of the tabernacle, and in the making of the priestly garments.<sup>355</sup> Some of the furniture of the tabernacle was cover with a scarlet cloth during the desert journey.<sup>356</sup>

Scarlet was also the color of the rich and affluent. In his lament on the death of Saul, David wrote: "O daughters of Israel, weep for Saul, who clothed you in scarlet and finery, who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold."<sup>357</sup> But Isaiah calls it the color of sin, by saying: " 'Come now, let us reason together,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.' "<sup>358</sup> We could see in the scarlet, primarily, the representation of that which is divine and glorious, and at the same time see scarlet as a symbol of human sin. Man took what was heavenly and utterly corrupted it, and here God burns it in order to provide man with a means of cleaning himself from the stench of death that has polluted him.

The priest, who witnessed the killing and burning of the heifer, became unclean himself. He had to wash his clothes and would not be clean again until sundown. Yet, he had never been in close contact with the animal, except for the sprinkling of some of its blood in the direction of the tabernacle. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: "Every one of these details was devised in order to express the intensely infectious character of death in its moral aspect. The very ashes, which were so widely potent for cleansing (ver. 10), and the cleansing water itself (ver. 19), made every one that touched them, even for the purifying of another, himself unclean. At the same time the ashes, while, as it were, so redolent of death that they must be kept outside the camp, were most holy, and were to be laid up by a clean man in a clean place (ver. 9). These contradictions find their true explanation only when we consider them as foreshadowing the mysteries of the atonement."

Besides the priest, two other men were involved in this rite: one who burned the heifer, who was probably the same person who killed the animal, and one who gathered the ashes. Both became unclean in the process and had to purify themselves by washing their clothes and wait until the evening before doing anything that required ceremonial purity. The ashes, the source of purification for persons defiled by death, were to be stored outside the camp, emphasizing the fact that for the Israelites purification from the pollution of death came from the outside, not from among themselves, not even from the tabernacle, God's dwelling place, but from the region of the outcasts, where death was conquered by one who died in the place of others.

Vs. 10 tell us: "This will be a lasting ordinance both for the Israelites and for the aliens living among them." In our present day the rite has ceased to be performed; the image is no longer necessary, since the reality it portrayed has come. So the ordinance remains in effect, but in a deeper, and truer sense. The effect of Jesus' death on the cross, applied to our lives will purify us from the pollution of death.

It is interesting to observe that the aliens are mentioned in this context. The cleansing was not only meant for Israel, but for the whole world. The Apostle John brings this out in his Gospel when he writes about the prophecy of Caiphas, saying: " 'You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.' He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he

<sup>353</sup> Lev. 14:2-4

<sup>354</sup> See Ex. 12:22

<sup>355</sup> See Ex. 26:1; 39:1

<sup>356</sup> See Num. 4:7,8

<sup>357</sup> II Sam. 1:24

<sup>358</sup> Isa. 1:18

prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.”<sup>359</sup>

Vs. 11-16 detail to whom this cleansing water is to be applied, and vs. 17-22 show how it is applied. Anyone who had in any way come into close contact with death was in need of the application of the water of cleansing. Even if a person entered the tent in which someone had died, he became unclean. Uncovered containers were unclean.

Death is one of the great mysteries we face while we live on earth. There is no explanation of the fact that our bodies develop up to a certain age, and that after we reach a certain stage we begin to deteriorate, at a slower or faster rate. Science has so far been unable to determine what triggers the reversal from life to death. Even without sickness and accidents people die because their organs wear out and cease to function. Since we are familiar with these facts we have accepted that man must die, without really wanted to accept the phenomenon of death. Death is unnatural and abnormal, however common it may be.

What happens after death is even more mysterious and has caused all kinds of speculations in the human mind. Shakespeare spoke about “the undiscovered country from which bourn no traveler returns.”<sup>360</sup> Some people believe that death means annihilation, a complete ceasing of existence, but most people allow for some continuation of life, under different conditions, either better or worse than on earth. The Stone Age tribes of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, believed that the souls of the dead departed for the shores of the Pacific or Indian Ocean and continued to exist in the vague blue, sometimes returning to their villages as evil spirits that had to be pacified. This made death a phenomenon to be feared. The fact that bodies that were not disposed of immediately by burial or cremation became breeding grounds of contagious diseases reinforced this fear. Dead people could make others sick!

None of these imperfect philosophies can be taken as being the basis of the command God gives to the Israelites here. The Bible teaches clearly that death is related to sin; that is a temporal separation of the soul and spirit from the human body, and that it is opposed to God, as sin is opposed to Him. God hates death as much as He hates sin. Sin and death are both elements of rebellion against God, working on different levels: sin on the spiritual level and death on the physical. This makes the fact of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ the more amazing. Because of His eternal love for His creation, the Father allowed His Son to die, to overcome death in His own death, so that the effect of Jesus’ death could be applied to people who live under the dark cloud of death. No one put this more beautifully than the writer to the Hebrews, when he said: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”<sup>361</sup> Those who are in Christ are not sprinkled by the ashes of a dead heifer, but they are touched by the resurrected Lord, who cleanses them from the pollution of death. When John received his vision of the resurrected Lord, he wrote: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: ‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.’”<sup>362</sup>

*Matthew Henry’s Commentary* asks the question: “But why did the law make a dead corpse such a defiling thing? (1.) because death is the wages of sin, entered into the world by it, and reigns by the power of it. Death to mankind is another thing from what it is to other creatures: it is a curse, it is the execution of the law, and therefore the defilement of death signifies the defilement of sin.

(2.) because the law could not conquer death, nor abolish it and alter the property of it, as the gospel does by bringing life and immortality to light, and so introducing a better hope. Since our Redeemer was dead and buried, death is no more destroying to the Israel of God, and therefore dead bodies are no more defiling; but while the church was under the law, to show that it made not the comers thereunto perfect, the pollution contracted by dead bodies could not but form in their minds melancholy and uncomfortable notions concerning death, while believers now through Christ can triumph over it. O grave! where is thy victory? Where is thy pollution?”

The cleaning of a man polluted by death was done in two stages, first on the third, and then on the seventh day. The two days reflect the two events in the history of salvation that would bring about the

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<sup>359</sup> John 11:50-52

<sup>360</sup> Hamlet’s monologue

<sup>361</sup> Heb. 2:14,15

<sup>362</sup> Rev. 1:17,18

complete victory over death: the resurrection of Christ, and the final Sabbath, or seventh day, on which death will be hurled into the lake of fire.<sup>363</sup>

Another interesting feature in this chapter is that, if a man would not submit to the rite of purification on those two days, he would not only remain in his unclean condition himself, but he would defile the sanctuary. *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: "On the bearing of this remarkable announcement see Levit. xv. 31. The uncleanness of death was not simply a personal matter, in involved, if not duly purged, the whole congregation, and reached even to God himself, for its defilement spread to the sanctuary." The text in Leviticus reads: "You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them."

*Adam Clarke* presents us with an interesting word study: "[He shall purify himself with it] *YitchaTaa'* ...bow ..., literally, he shall sin himself with it. This Hebrew form of speech is common enough among us in other matters. Thus to fleece, to bark, and to skin, do not signify to add a fleece, another bark, or a skin, but to take one away; therefore, to sin himself, in the Hebrew idiom, is not to add sin, but to take it away, to purify. The verb *chaaTa'* ... signifies to miss the mark, to sin, to purify from sin, and to make a sin-offering."

The last six verses of the chapter deal with the application of the water to the unclean person. As certain amount of ashes is put in a jar and mixed with pure water. The water is sprinkled upon the unclean person by someone else who is ritually pure. The rite does not require the presence of a priest, any lay person can perform it. This fact makes the rite stand out in the complex of Levitical law, where everything else connected to the relationship between a man and God was done by a priest. This reinforces the meaning of the rite as a prophetic statement about the new dispensation, where anyone who has been cleansed by the blood of Christ become a priests who serves God and his neighbor. The application of the water was done by dipping hyssop in the water and sprinkle the person to be cleansed. Hyssop was the most available and most common means of sprinkling. It may have been scarce in the desert, but it grew everywhere in Egypt and in Canaan. The Israelites must have taken some along on their journey through the desert. The very fact that a person polluted by death was touched by water to which the substance of death had been added, meant victory over the pollution. The cleansed person only had to wash his clothes, as a sign of a new beginning, to be acceptable to the Lord.

Vs. 21 is one of the most puzzling verses in this chapter: "The man who sprinkles the water of cleansing must also wash his clothes, and anyone who touches the water of cleansing will be unclean till evening." The water cleansed the unclean and it defiles the clean! No satisfactory explanation for this contradiction has been found. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says about this: "The opposite effects ascribed to the water of separation-- of cleansing one person and defiling another-- are very singular, and not capable of very satisfactory explanation. One important lesson, however, was thus taught, that its purifying efficacy was not inherent in itself, but arose from the divine appointment, as in other ordinances of religion, which are effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them or in him that administers them, but solely through the grace of God communicated thereby." In *Matthew Henry's Commentary* we read the following: "Even he that sprinkled the water of separation, or touched it, or touched the unclean person, must be unclean till the evening, that is, must not come near the sanctuary on that day, v. 21, 22. Thus God would show them the imperfection of those services, and their insufficiency to purify the conscience, that they might look for the Messiah, who in the fullness of time should by the eternal Spirit offer himself without spot unto God, and so purge our consciences from dead works (that is, from sin, which defiles like a dead body, and is therefore called a body of death), that we may have liberty of access to the sanctuary, to serve the living God with living sacrifices."

*Matthew Henry* is, of course, correct in saying that the water pointed toward the coming Christ. The death of the heifer did not bring about a complete victory over death to the point where no pollution was present any more. Even in this ceremonial cleansing, death still had the upper hand. The problem has always been that man carries the germ of sin in his own heart, which responds to the sin that pollutes from the outside. That is why people would become ceremonially unclean by touching certain objects, animals, sick people, or corpses. Jesus touched lepers without defiling Himself. Matthew tells us: "A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.' Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately he was cured of his leprosy."<sup>364</sup> Not only was Jesus not defiled, but the unclean person was cleansed! The same with the

<sup>363</sup> Rev. 20:14

<sup>364</sup> Matt. 8:2,3



woman who had suffered from bleeding for twelve years. According to the law, any person she touched became unclean.<sup>365</sup> Not only did Jesus not become unclean, but the woman was healed and cleansed instantly when she touched Him. Mark tells us the story in the most vivid colors: “And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, ‘If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.’ Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.”<sup>366</sup> This is the reason why Jesus could take upon Himself the sin of the world, without defiling Himself. When He descended into hell the “fire” did not burn Him, because there was no “worm” of sin in His inner being that responded to the outside touch.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> See Lev. 15:25-27

<sup>366</sup> Mark 5:25-29

<sup>367</sup> See Mark 9:48

## CHAPTER TWENTY

IV. *The Failure of Israel En Route to Moab* 20:1-25:18

- A. Miriam Dies 20:1
- B. Moses and Aaron Fail 20:2-13
- C. Edom Refuses Passage 20:14-21
- D. Aaron Dies 20:22-29

A. **Miriam Dies** 20:1

In this chapter two deaths in the family of Moses are reported; both Miriam and Aaron die. Another death in the family could be called the rupture of the brother bond between Israel and Edom, between Jacob and Esau, when Edom refuses passage to the people of Israel, thereby increasing their hardship. In between those sad events occurs the failure of Moses and Aaron to honor the Lord at the rock that contained water for the people.

We have no indication in this chapter as to the time in which the events described took place. It is only through comparison with ch. 30:38 that we learn that the end of the wandering of the people in the desert has come. We read there: "At the LORD's command Aaron the priest went up Mount Hor, where he died on the first day of the fifth month of the fortieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt."

From *Adam Clarke's Commentary* we copy: "The transactions of thirty-seven years Moses passes by, because he writes not as a historian but as a legislator; and gives us particularly an account of the laws, ordinances, and other occurrences of the first and last years of their peregrinations. The year now spoken of was the last of their journeying, for from the going out of the spies, <Num. 13>, unto this time was about thirty-eight years." The thirty-eight years of wandering were not only years of gloom under the shadow of death, they were also years of silence. God does not want the years of shame recorded in Scripture.

The NIV opens the chapter with the statement: "In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh." The KJV is more emphatic in its statement: "Then came the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, into the desert of Zin in the first month: and the people abode in Kadesh." *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: "The latter words are emphatic here and in ver. 22, and seem intended to mark the period of reassembly after the dispersion of nearly thirty eight years. Probably a portion of the tribes had visited Kadesh many times during those years, and perhaps it had never been wholly abandoned." So, the impression we get is that during the desert journey the people had slacked in discipline and abandoned their orderly march which characterized them during the first two years of their travel. They had no longer formed the army of the Lord, which was conditioned to wage the Lord's wars. As the end of their wanderings approach, however, a complete change comes over the people. They are regrouped and mobilized for their assault on the land of Canaan. Although not audibly so, this chapter opens with the blast of a trumpet.

It also opens with the report of the death of the last people who had to die before the way was clear to enter the promised land. The death of Miriam is recorded very briefly. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this: "Nothing could be more brief and formal than this mention of the death of one who had played a considerable part in Israel, and had perhaps wished to play a more considerable part. It can scarcely, however, be doubted that her death in the unlovely wilderness was a punishment like the death of her brothers. There is no reason whatever to suppose that she had any part in the rebellion of Kadesh, or that the sentence of death there pronounced included her; she was indeed at this time advanced in years, but that would not in itself account for the fact that she died in exile; it is, no doubt, to the arrogance and rebellion recorded in ch. xii, that we must look for the true explanation of her untimely end." The use of the word "untimely" seems strange considering that fact that she must have been at least 130 years old!

B. **Moses and Aaron Fail** 20:2-13

The verses 2-11 report an event that seems to prove that history repeats itself. At the crucial moment of regrouping there is a lack of the most fundamental of human needs: water. Forty years earlier their fathers had had the same experience at Rephidim.<sup>368</sup> Not only were the circumstances the same, but the reaction of the people was not different either. At Rephidim the people said to Moses and Aaron: "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" At Kadesh the

<sup>368</sup> See Ex. 17:1-7

reaction is even worse. People, who hardly had any memory of Egypt, say: "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! Why did you bring the LORD's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!"

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* has the following interesting observation: "There was at Kadesh a fountain, En-Mishpat <Gen. 14:7>, and at the first encampment of the Israelites there was no want of water. It was now, however, either partially dried up by the heat of the season, or had been exhausted by the demands of so vast a multitude."

The NIV is more emphatic than some other versions in saying: "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD!" *Matthew Henry's Commentary* says about this: "They wished they had died as malefactors by the hands of divine justice, rather than thus seem for a while neglected by the divine mercy: Would God that we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! Instead of giving God thanks, as they ought to have done, for sparing them, they not only despise the mercy of their reprieve, but quarrel with it, as if God had done them a great deal of wrong in giving them their lives for a prey, and snatching them as brands out of the burning. But they need not wish that they had died with their brethren, they are here taking the ready way to die like their brethren in a little while. Woe unto those that desire the day of the Lord, <Amos 5:18>."

About the phrase "When our brethren died before the Lord," *The Pulpit Commentary* writes: "This is difficult, because the visitation of God at Kibroth-hattaavah (ch. xi. 34) and at Kadesh (ch. xiv. 37) had overtaken not their brethren, but their fathers, some thirty-eight years before. On the other hand, the daily mortality which had carried off their brethren is clearly excluded by the phrase, 'before the Lord.' It may be that the rebellion of Korah happened towards the end of the period of wandering, and that the reference is to the plague which followed it; or it may be that the formula of complaint had become stereotyped, as those of children often do, and was employed from time to time without variation and without definite reference. The latter supposition is strongly supported by the character of the words which follow." I do not see any problem, as this commentary does; the use of the term "Brethren" for the older generation does not seem to be out of character. It was a term that expressed solidarity more than blood relationship.

It is obvious that there was a complete lack of vision on the side of the people as far as it concerned the meaning of the exodus and their progress toward the promised land. They only looked back, without any eye on the future and the hope that was before them. God was leading them to their destination: "a land flowing with milk and honey," but they were too busy looking the other way to catch the vision.

Moses and Aaron did the only reasonable thing that could be done under such circumstances; they sought the face of the Lord. This was no meaningless routine. They were immediately overwhelmed by the presence of the Lord and fell facedown before Him. We should pause here to appreciate the importance of this moment. Minutes before, they had been in the midst of tumult and confusion, in which, probably, their lives were threatened. All of this changed in a moment when they came before the Lord. Asaph described this experience in one of his psalms: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God."<sup>369</sup> Immediately, the fear left them and their visions was cleared. We have to keep in mind that Moses and Aaron had this experience moments before the utter failure that cost them their entrance into the holy land, and their very lives.

God told them to take the staff, which must have been Aaron's staff that had miraculously blossomed and borne fruit, go to the rock, and to speak to it. It is important to remember which staff they took with them; it was not the staff they carried for their daily use. Although Aaron may have used it before, it was the miracle staff which symbolized the fact that the priesthood was a divine institution.

Moses and Aaron obeyed God's command in that they took the staff from God's presence, gathered the people and went to the place that was indicated, but then something snapped inside the brothers, and they failed miserably. They could not help associating this moment with the one that had happened almost forty years before at Rephidim, where Moses had been instructed to strike the rock with his own staff. But that was, probably, a different staff. That one had changed into a snake at Mount Sinai and at Pharaoh's court, but it had never blossomed and borne fruit. The mere association in Moses' mind between the two similar incidents cannot account completely for his failure, although it surely played a role. The crucial point was the position in which Moses placed himself and his brother, while standing at the rock. God had said: "You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock

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<sup>369</sup> Ps. 73:16,17

can drink,” but the way Moses used those very words denied the importance of God’s revelation of Himself, which was symbolized in the presence of Aaron’s staff. When Moses said: “Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” he makes it look as if he is the miracle worker, instead of the Lord. When God invests us with certain powers, we should never forget that the power is His, not ours. Paul understood the danger of the use of God’s power, when he wrote to the Corinthians: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”<sup>370</sup>

In elevating himself in this way, Moses also failed to show the compassion God had for His people. After all, here was a mass of people, women and little children included, who were dying with thirst, but this appears to have left Moses unmoved. He did not see the multitude as Jesus did, of whom we read: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”<sup>371</sup> Rebels they may have been, but they were rebels dying of thirst, with a vision that had died earlier. It is more tragic to have one’s vision die than to physically die because of thirst and exposure. These people had traveled in the presence of the Lord for forty years, but they did not know it. For all practical purposes they were without God and without hope in this world. When God had wanted to destroy the nation earlier, Moses had stood in the gap and interceded for them. He had been willing for his name to be erased out of God’s book for his people,<sup>372</sup> but now as he saw himself as the savior of the people, pride blinded his eyes and closed his heart.

*Matthew Henry* makes the astute observation: “It is an evidence of the sincerity of Moses, and his impartiality in writing, that he himself left this upon record concerning himself, and drew not a veil over his own infirmity, by which it appeared that in what he wrote, as well as what he did, he sought God’s glory more than his own.”

In different commentaries we find a variety of efforts to explain the meaning of the incident, and of the essence of Moses’ sin. Bishop Lightfoot believed that in Moses’ mind, and maybe in the people’s, the similarity between the two occurrences at which water came out of the rock, led to the idea that, since forty years of wandering in the desert followed the first occurrence, another lengthy delay of entering the promised land would follow this one. I see no reason for this conclusion in the text.

*Matthew Henry* seems to struggle with the discrepancy between the rather minor offense of Moses and Aaron and the severity of the punishment. He admits that God must have been righteous in the punishment He meted out to them, but he remains puzzled by it.

*The Pulpit Commentary* stresses Moses’ position as leader and example of the people and adds: “The heinousness of a sin depends quite as much on the position of the sinner as upon its intrinsic enormity.”

The question remains, what was the sin of Moses and Aaron? In what respect did they dishonor God? There is, obviously, more to it than that Moses and Aaron lost their temper, or even that, for a moment, they lost sight of the fact that they represented God before the people. We can only appreciate the enormity of Moses’ and Aaron’s sin if we look at it from the perspective of New Testament revelation. Speaking about the supernatural way Israel’s needs were provided for during the desert journey, the Apostle Paul writes: “They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.”<sup>373</sup> There is a strange paragraph in *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* which reads: “The water out of the rock of Rephidim had followed them while there was need of it; but it is probable that for some time they had been in a country where they were supplied in an ordinary way, and when common providence supplied them it was fit that the miracle should cease.” Evidently, Matthew Henry took Paul’s spiritualization of the miracles literally, and believed that the water from Rephidim followed the people all through the desert. This concept seems to push the principle of divine providence too far, and places it into the realm of the myth. The point Paul wanted to make was that the rocks at Rephidim and Kadesh were an image of our Lord Jesus Christ. When God ordered Moses to strike the rock at Rephidim, He had in mind the way the water of life would come to the souls of men by the striking of His Son Jesus Christ. By striking the rock at Rephidim, Moses enacted the crucifixion of our Lord. By striking the rock at Kadesh, he, unwittingly, enacted the rejection of the Messiah by the nation of Israel centuries later. The writer to the Hebrews uses the expression: “They are crucifying the Son of God

<sup>370</sup> II Cor. 4:7

<sup>371</sup> Matt. 9:36

<sup>372</sup> See Ex. 32:31,32

<sup>373</sup> I Cor. 10:3,4

all over again.”<sup>374</sup> Moses and Aaron had, of course, no idea of the deeper meaning of their acts. The death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ lay far beyond the scope of their vision. But the God of history, both past and present, knew and He saw in Moses’ striking of the rock an act which expressed the subjection of Christ to public disgrace.

We could object that it is unfair that people are punished for, what we consider, relatively minor offenses that symbolize the hidden meanings of deep spiritual truths. But we understand that Adam and Eve did more than just eat a fruit from a tree. The burning of the flag of a country is more than setting fire to a piece of cloth; it is a protest against a whole system. Moses may not have known what he did in his anger, but had he remained in fellowship with God, he would have been able to control his anger. The book of Proverbs says: “A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.”<sup>375</sup> Because of Moses’ anger, the devil saw his chance to take control of the situation and manipulate Moses’ acts, thus “subjecting Christ to public disgrace.”

The last verse of this paragraph reads: “These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD and where he showed himself holy among them.” We read the name Meribah also in the book of Exodus, in the passage that reports the parallel incident, forty years earlier.<sup>376</sup> There the place, which was not at the same location, was called “Massah and Meribah.” The name does not refer to a location, but to the meaning of the occurrence. Massah means “testing”; God was put to the test by the people, and Meribah means “strife” the people quarreled with God. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* says about those two separated locations: “The place is hereupon called Meribah, v. 13. It is called Meribah-Kadesh <Deut. 32:51>, to distinguish it from the other Meribah. It is the water of strife; to perpetuate the remembrance of the people’s sin, and Moses’, and yet of God’s mercy, who supplied them with water, and owned and honored Moses notwithstanding. Thus he was sanctified in them as the Holy One of Israel, so he is called when his mercy rejoices against judgment, <Hos. 11:9>. Moses and Aaron did not sanctify God as they ought in the eyes of Israel (v. 12), but God was sanctified in them; for he will not be a loser in his honor by any man. If he be not glorified by us, he will be glorified upon us.”

At several places in the Book of Psalms the incidents are mentioned. At one place the blame for Moses’ sin is put upon the people. We read in the Psalms: “By the waters of Meribah they angered the LORD, and trouble came to Moses because of them; for they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses’ lips.”<sup>377</sup>

The Israelites quarreled with the Lord, and He showed himself holy among them. As in the first incident reported in Exodus, the question was not whether there was water which was needed to keep the people alive, but whether the Lord was in their midst or not. We read in Exodus: “And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’”<sup>378</sup> The question may not have been repeated in so many words, but the issue was the same. When God is present, there is never any need to ask whether we will find what we need to stay alive. Jesus spoke those famous words: “Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”<sup>379</sup> And the author of the Hebrew epistle admonishes us: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”<sup>380</sup> The Israelites did not need any of the “grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates” they were longing for; they only needed the Lord and His holiness.

#### C. Edom Refuses Passage 20:14-21

The third breakdown recorded in this chapter is the relationship between Israel and Edom, that is, between Jacob and Esau. As far as we know, for over half a millennium the descendants of the twin brothers had not had any contact with each other. Esau had been reconciled to Jacob at their encounter at

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<sup>374</sup> Heb. 6:6

<sup>375</sup> Prov. 29:11

<sup>376</sup> See Ex. 17:7

<sup>377</sup> Ps. 106:32,33

<sup>378</sup> Ex. 17:7

<sup>379</sup> Matt. 6:32,33

<sup>380</sup> Heb. 13:5,6

Peniel.<sup>381</sup> The last recorded time the brothers met was at the funeral of their father Isaac.<sup>382</sup> We gather from Moses' words that the Edomites had followed Israel's history closely. The message Moses sent to the king of Edom, says: "This is what your brother Israel says: You know about all the hardships that have come upon us. Our forefathers went down into Egypt, and we lived there many years. The Egyptians mistreated us and our fathers, but when we cried out to the LORD, he heard our cry and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt." The message implies, that since Edom knew Israel's history, they would recognize Israel's claim to the land of Canaan, but they did not.

There is a puzzling passage in Deuteronomy that seems to imply that Edom did initially grant permission. When Moses sent a similar message to the king of Heshbon he seemed to infer that Israel passed through Edom's territory. The words "let us pass through on foot-- as the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir, and the Moabites, who live in Ar, did for us," may only mean that Moses had sent similar requests to Edom and Moab.<sup>383</sup>

Edom's initial refusal to extend a hand of brotherly help and to recognize the bonds of blood between the two nations resulted in a long history of animosity and bitter strife, causing the prophet Obadiah to prophesy about them: "Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever."<sup>384</sup>

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes about Edom: "Some thirty years after the Exodus, Ramses III 'smote the people of Seir.' The Israelites could not have been far off. We first hear of war between Israel and Edom under Saul <1 Sam 14:47>."

In *Unger's Bible Dictionary* we read about Edom: "The descendants of Esau, who settled in the S of Palestine and at a later period came into conflict with the Israelites <Deut. 23:7>; frequently called merely Edom (<Num. 20:14-21; 24:18; Josh. 15:1; 2 Sam. 8:14>; etc.).... Edom ('Idumaea,' KJV) was situated at the SE border of Palestine <Judg. 11:17; Num. 34:3> and was properly called the land or mountain of Seir <Gen. 36:8; 32:3; Josh. 24:4; Ezek. 35:3,7,15>. The country lay along the route pursued by the Israelites from Sinai to Kadesh-barnea and thence back again to Elath <Deut. 1:2; 2:1-8>, i.e., along the E side of the great valley of Arabah. On the N of Edom lay the territory of Moab, the boundary appearing to have been the "brook Zered" <2:13-14,18>. The physical geography of Edom is somewhat peculiar. Along the western base of the mountain range are low calcareous hills. These are succeeded by lofty masses of igneous rock, chiefly porphyry, over which lies red and variegated sandstone in irregular ridges and abrupt cliffs with deep ravines between. The latter strata give the mountains their most striking features and remarkable colors. The average elevation of the summit is about two thousand feet above the sea. Along the eastern side runs an almost unbroken limestone ridge, a thousand feet or more higher than the other. This ridge sinks down with an easy slope into the plateau of the Arabian Desert. Although Edom is thus wild, rugged, and almost inaccessible, the deep glens and flat terraces along the mountainsides are covered with rich soil, from which trees, shrubs, and flowers now spring up luxuriantly.... The Edomites were descendants of Esau, or Edom, who expelled the original inhabitants, the Horites <Deut. 2:12>. A statement made in <Gen. 36:31> serves to fix the period of the dynasty of the eight kings. They 'reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the sons of Israel'; i.e., before the time of Moses, who may be regarded as the first virtual king of Israel (cf. <Deut. 33:4-5; Exo. 18:16-19>). It would also appear that these kings were elected. The chiefs ('dukes,' KJV) of the Edomites are named in <Gen. 36:40-43> and were probably petty chiefs or sheiks of their several clans.... Esau's bitter hatred toward his brother, Jacob, for fraudulently obtaining his blessing appears to have been inherited by his posterity. The Edomites peremptorily refused to permit the Israelites to pass through their land <Num. 20:18-21>. For a period of 400 years we hear no more of the Edomites. They were then attacked and defeated by Saul <1 Sam. 14:47>. Some forty years later David overthrew their army in the 'Valley of Salt,' and his general, Joab, following up the victory, destroyed nearly the whole male population <1 Kin. 11:15-16> and placed Jewish garrisons in all the strongholds of Edom <2 Sam. 8:13-14>. Hadad, a member of the royal family of Edom, made his escape with a few followers to Egypt, where he was kindly received by Pharaoh. After the death of David he returned and tried to excite his countrymen to rebellion against Israel, but failing in the attempt he went on to Syria, where he became one of Solomon's greatest enemies <1 Kin. 11:14-22>."

<sup>381</sup> See Gen. 33

<sup>382</sup> See Gen. 35:29

<sup>383</sup> See Deut. 2:28,29

<sup>384</sup> Obadiah vs. 10

*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* writes about the Edomites that they were: "Descendants of Edom, or ESAU-- an ancient people who were enemies of the Israelites. During the days of Abraham, the region which later became the home of the Edomites was occupied by more than one tribe of non-Israelite peoples. When Esau moved to this region with his family and possessions, the HORITES already lived in the land <Gen. 36:20>.... After the years of wilderness wandering, Moses wanted to lead Israel northward to Canaan across Edom into Moab. The king of Edom, however, refused them passage <Num. 20:14-21>, forcing them to bypass Edom and Moab through the desert to the east <Judg. 11:17,18>. Later in the journey northward to Abel Acacia Grove in the plains of Moab across from Jericho <Num. 33:48-49>, Balaam prophesied that Israel would one day possess Edom <Num. 24:18>."

We understand that Moses sent and received several messages. After Edom's initial refusal, Moses repeated the pledge that they would pay for everything they took during their passage, but Edom refused and mobilized its army. These circumstances set the stage for the wars between the two brother-nations, as quoted above from the commentaries. Edom's attitude may be somewhat understandable if we consider that they had been subjected to attacks by the Egyptians only one decade before the arrival of the Israelites.

The way Edom treated Israel determined the rest of their history. In his great farewell speech, Moses said to the Israelites: "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel."<sup>385</sup> The Hebrew text seems to be open to various translations. The RSV, for instance, renders the verse: "When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God." The interpretation of TLB is even farther removed from the NIV text. We read: "When God divided up the world among the nations, He gave each of them a supervising angel! But he appointed none for Israel; For Israel was God's own personal possession!" There seems, however, to be a divine law according to which the nations of the world are treated by God according to the way they treat the people of Israel. The main issue of World War II centered around an awful holocaust in which Hitler endeavored to find a "final solution to the Jewish problem." Part of the blessing God gave to Abraham read: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."<sup>386</sup>

In refusing passage to Israel, Edom, in fact, rejected the reality of God's revelation in this world. We know very little of the people who were living in that part of the world at the time of the Exodus. We may assume, however, that they knew their history, that is, their common descent from Isaac and the matter of God's election of Jacob over Esau within the framework of the history of salvation. They must have been familiar with God's prophecy to Rebekah: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."<sup>387</sup> They must have known what this meant in terms of the promises God had made to their ancestors regarding the coming of the Messiah, which was implied in the birthright Esau sold to Jacob for a bowl of soup. Edom's attitude at the time of Israel's exodus was still basically the same as Esau's had been toward Jacob when he sold his soul and took the soup. They were more concerned about the preservation of their vineyards and water wells than about the God who demonstrated His glory in bringing more than two million people out of Egypt, led them through the desert and brought them through, not only alive, but strong enough to invade a well defended land.

Edom's demonstration of power, the mobilization of their army, indicated that they were afraid of Israel, and, probably, that they were afraid of what the God of Israel would do to them. Their reaction may have been just as much a sign of a bad conscience toward God, as a lack of compassion toward a brother nation.

*The Pulpit Commentary* writes about vs. 22-The whole Israelite community set out from Kadesh and came to Mount Hor, "If the narrative follows the order of time, we must suppose that the Edomites at once blocked the passes near Kadesh, and thus compelled the Israelites to journey southwards for some distance until they were clear of the Zazimât; they would then turn eastwards again and make their way across the plateau of Paran to the Arabah at the point opposite Mount Hor. It is supposed by many, although it finds no support in the narrative itself, that the armed resistance offered by Edom is out of chronological order in ver. 20, and only occurred in fact when the Israelites had reached the neighborhood

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<sup>385</sup> Deut. 32:8

<sup>386</sup> Gen. 12:3

<sup>387</sup> Gen. 25:23

of Mount Hor, and were preparing to ascend the Wady Ghuweir.” This assumption would explain Moses’ words in his message to the king of Heshbon, as quoted above.<sup>388</sup>

**D. Aaron Dies 20:22-29**

The last verses of this chapter report the death of the first High Priest on earth. The accent in the account is on the transfer of the office, not upon the departure of Aaron. We are given no details about his death or burial, only his high-priestly garments, the richest clothes that were ever made on earth, were taken off of Aaron and put upon his son, while Aaron was still alive. It was not Aaron’s dead body that was stripped. He entered into the presence of the Lord, as he had done over the years on the Day of Atonement, dressed in his undergarments. He went through the veil, not as High Priest, but as a simple human being, without anything to distinguish himself from the rest of humanity. Death is an equalizer.

On the other hand, Aaron’s divestment can be seen as a preparation for his being clothed with other garments. The Apostle Paul uses this image beautifully in his second epistle to the Corinthians, where he says: “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”<sup>389</sup> However rich and beautiful the high priestly garments may have been, and in spite of the fact that they were an image of heavenly glory, they were not the real garments that God has prepared for all those who enter eternal life. God had something better for Aaron than his rich, lavish clothing.

*Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* gives the following biographical details about Aaron: “[The] brother of Moses and first high priest of the Hebrew nation. Very little is known about Aaron’s early life, other than his marriage to Elisheba, daughter of Amminadab <Ex. 6:23>. When God called Moses to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, Moses protested that he would not be able to speak convincingly to the Pharaoh. So Aaron was designated by God as Moses’ official spokesman <Ex. 4:14-16>. At Moses’ instruction, Aaron also performed miracles as signs for the release of the Hebrews. Aaron’s rod turned into a serpent that swallowed the rods of the Egyptian magicians <Ex. 7:8-20>. Aaron also caused frogs to cover the land by stretching his rod over the lakes and streams of Egypt <Ex. 8:6>. Aaron held an important place of leadership because of his work with his brother Moses. A central figure in the exodus from Egypt, he also received instructions from God for observing the first Passover <Ex. 12:1>. In the wilderness he assisted Moses in keeping order and rendering judgments over the people <Num. 15:33>. Both he and Moses were singled out when the people complained about the harsh conditions of these wilderness years <Num. 14:2>. When the priesthood was instituted in the wilderness, Moses consecrated Aaron as the first high priest of Israel <Exodus 28--29; Leviticus 8--9>. The priesthood was set within the tribe of Levi, from which Aaron was descended. Aaron’s sons (Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar) inherited the position of high priest from their father <Num. 3:2-3>. Aaron was given special robes to wear, signifying his status within the priesthood <Lev. 8:7-9>. At his death the robes were transferred to his oldest living son, Eleazar <Num. 20:25-28>. The tabernacle, the main sanctuary of worship, was placed under Aaron’s supervision <Numbers 4>. He received instructions from God on the functions of the priesthood and the tabernacle <Numbers 18>. He alone, serving in the capacity of high priest, went into the Holy of Holies once a year to represent the people on the Day of Atonement. In spite of his responsibility for the spiritual leadership of the nation, Aaron committed a serious sin in the wilderness surrounding Mount Sinai. While Moses was on the mountain praying to God and receiving His commandments, the people began to build a golden calf to worship. Aaron made no attempt to stop the people and even issued instructions on how to build the image <Ex. 32:1-10>. Aaron was saved from God’s wrath only because Moses interceded on his behalf <Deut. 9:20>. After all their years of leading the people, neither Moses nor Aaron was permitted to enter the Promised Land. Apparently this was because they did not make it clear that God would provide for the Hebrews’ needs when they believed they would die for lack of water in the wilderness <Num. 20:12>. Aaron died first at Mount Hor, and Moses died later in Moab. Upon arriving at Mount Hor from the wilderness of Kadesh, Aaron was accompanied by Moses and his son Eleazar to the top of the mountain. Here he was stripped of his high priestly garments, which were transferred to Eleazar. After Aaron’s death, the community mourned for 30 days <Num. 20:22-29>. The Book of Hebrews contrasts the imperfect priesthood of Aaron with the perfect priesthood of Christ

<sup>388</sup> See Deut. 2:26-29

<sup>389</sup> II Cor. 5:1-4



<Heb. 5:2-5; 7:11-12>. Christ's priesthood is compared to the order of Melchizedek because it is an eternal office with no beginning and no end. Thus, it replaces the priesthood of Aaron."

Upon arrival at Mount Hor, God announced to Moses: "Aaron will be gathered to his people." This strange expression is used in connection with the death of all the patriarchs in Genesis.<sup>390</sup> The implication seems to be that death is a place of arrival, the achievement of a goal. In the light of the absence of any strong evidence of life after death in the Old Testament, the phrase stands out as a beacon of light. Especially the fact that the term is first used in connection with the death of Abraham gives credence to the belief of the Jews of Jesus' day that death meant being taken to "Abraham's bosom." In telling the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus says: "And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom."<sup>391</sup> So when God announced Aaron's approaching death, there is no inference that this would mean the end of his life, rather the entering upon a new phase of living.

There is no mention of a consecration of Eleazar as High Priest, like there was when Aaron entered into the office. Yet, God had stated specifically that there would be an anointing ceremony for Aaron's sons in the event of his death. We read: "Aaron's sacred garments will belong to his descendants so that they can be anointed and ordained in them. The son who succeeds him as priest and comes to the Tent of Meeting to minister in the Holy Place is to wear them seven days."<sup>392</sup> It seems unlikely that this ceremony would have taken place on top of Mount Hor; it is more likely that Eleazar's inauguration took place in the presence of all the people, as soon as they had descended from the mountain, but we are not told what happened.

The news of Aaron's death makes the nation of Israel observe a period of mourning of 30 days. *The Pulpit Commentary* says about this: "The Egyptians prolonged their mourning for seventy days (Gen. 1. 3), but thirty days seems to have been the longest period allowed among the Israelites (cf. Deut. xxxiv. 8)."

The death of Aaron was the end of an era. We get the impression that, apart from Moses, Aaron was the last of the condemned generation to die in the desert. With his death the road to Canaan opened, and the people prepared for the great invasion of the land that would be their home.

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<sup>390</sup> See Gen 25:8; 35:28, 29; 49:33

<sup>391</sup> Luke 16:22 (KJV)

<sup>392</sup> Ex. 29:29,30

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

- E. Israel's Victory over the Canaanites 21:1-3
- F. The Failure of Israel 21:4-9
- G. Journey to Moab 21:10-20
- H. Israel's Victory over Sihon 21:21-32
- I. Israel's Victory over Bashan 21:33-35

*The Pulpit Commentary* has as a heading over this section: "THE LAST MARCH: FROM MOUNT HOR TO JORDAN (CH. xxi - xxii. 1).

**E. Israel's Victory over the Canaanites 21:1-3**

There is some confusion as to the place in Israel's history of this account of an attack by the Canaanite king of Arad and the subsequent victory over him and his domain. In *The Pulpit Commentary* we find a rather lengthy discourse about this question, which boils down to two possibilities: 1. That the report is out of place for some reason or another, or 2. that the chronology of the account is correct. Under the first heading, it is presumed by some commentators that Israel was attacked by the king of Arad and made a vow for the destruction of the country, but that the vow was not carried out until under Joshua. In the list of thirty-one kings Joshua defeated and whose land was conquered the king of Arad is mentioned also.<sup>393</sup> The second option would be, and we copy from *The Pulpit Commentary*: "That the Israelites lay for thirty days under Mount Hor is certain, and they may have been longer. During this period they could not get pasture for their cattle on the side of Edom, and they may have wandered far and wide in search of it. It may have been but a comparatively small band which approached the Negeb near enough to be attacked, and which, by the help of God, was enabled to defeat the king of Arad, and to lay waste his towns. It had certainly been no great feat for all Israel to overthrow a border chieftain who could not possibly have brought 5000 man into the field."

It is, of course, impossible to determine which of the two theories is closer to the truth. The fact that the king of Arad is mentioned in Joshua's list gives credence to the first one, but the mention of the capture of some Israelites leaves open the possibility that a smaller group of them had separated themselves temporarily from the main body of the army. It could also be that Arad did not dare to risk a frontal attack, and thus only carried out a surprise maneuver that was aimed at Israel's unsuspecting rear. Such a surprise would have infuriated the people more than an open frontal resistance.

There seems to be more behind the story than just a skirmish in the desert. The specific vow in vs. 2 indicates that this attack is viewed by the people as demonic interference, of the same kind as Amalek's attack forty years earlier. We read here: "Then Israel made this vow to the LORD: 'If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.'" In the record of Amalek's attack in Exodus it was God who made the vow. We read there: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.' Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. He said, 'For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD. The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.'" <sup>394</sup> It seems that the Israelites saw a connection between these two incidents, and placed Arad and his attack upon them in the same category as Amalek's. The fact that in this chapter other writings which are no longer in existence are mentioned, such as "the Book of the Wars of the LORD" in vs. 14, and "the poets" in vs. 27 seems to link this passage to the scroll on which Moses had to write the story of Amalek's defeat.<sup>395</sup>

The place where the attack took place is called Atharim, which some translations leave untranslated as a proper name, but others render as: "the way of the spies."<sup>396</sup> If the translation of the name is correct, it is still not clear which spies are meant.

At this point *The Pulpit Commentary* digs deeply into the moral problem of the eradication of the people of Canaan, in connection with the vow Israel made at this time. We copy: "If it was right to destroy the Canaanites at all, no fault can be found with the vow; it merely did for that military proceeding what

<sup>393</sup> See Josh. 12:14

<sup>394</sup> Ex. 17:8-16

<sup>395</sup> See Ex. 17:14

<sup>396</sup> See KJV, and TLB

national feeling and discipline does of the far more bloody exigencies of modern warfare, removing it from the sphere of private hatred, revenge, and cupidity, and placing it upon a higher level. The patriot soldier of these days feels himself to be a mere instrument in the hands of the rulers of his people to maintain their rights or avenge their wrongs. The Israelite could not have this feeling, which was foreign to his time and place in history, but he could feel that he was a mere instrument in the hands of God to perform *his* will upon *his* enemies. In either case a most important advantage is secured; the soldier does not slay in order to gratify his own hatred, or in order to satisfy his own cupidity. It is quite true that such vows as are here mentioned would certainly in a more advanced stage of civilization be abused to throw a cloak of religion over frightful enormities; but it does not in the least follow that they were not permitted and even encouraged by God in an age to which they were natural, and under circumstances in which they were beneficial.”

It is very difficult for twentieth century man to look objectively at the world in which Israel left Egypt, crossed the desert, and entered Canaan. In *The Pulpit Commentary* we see a tendency to judge the ancient world with a measure that applies to our day. The excesses of more recent history in which, in fact, godless acts were performed under the cover of “a cloak of religion” makes it hard for us to look objectively at what Israel was asked to do in the Name of God. We look at the medieval crusades, and at the programs that were carried out in the Name of Christianity, and we tend to put Israel’s invasion of Canaan on the same level, as the program Hitler wanted to carry out to create living space for the superior Aryan race. Unless we understand that the plan God had for Israel in giving them Canaan was the same kind of judgment over the world of that time as Noah’s flood was centuries earlier, we tend to condemn the nation of Israel unjustly. That the conquest of Canaan was “an act of God” in the true sense of the word is clear from God’s prophecy to Abraham, in which He said: “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, *for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.*”<sup>397</sup> Also the miracle of the collapse of the walls of Jericho,<sup>398</sup> the rain of hailstones during Joshua’s battle against the five kings,<sup>399</sup> and the standing still of the sun during that battle<sup>400</sup> testify to the fact that the eradication of the people that inhabited Canaan was God’s punishment upon a sinful human race, more than the hunger for land of a homeless nation. As a matter of fact we find that in many cases Israel was slack in carrying out, to their own detriment, the charge the Lord had given them.

When Israel made a vow to the Lord they recognized that the enemy they faced was God’s enemy, even more than theirs. This implies that they saw the demonic powers behind the human hostility that confronted them. The name which was given to the place of victory, Hormah, emphasizes the spiritual significance of the battle even further. The Septuagint translates Hormah with *anathema*, which is the same word the Apostle Paul uses in the last verses of his first epistle to the Corinthian church: “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha.”<sup>401</sup> Anathema is the curse of God upon those who hate Him. In making this vow, Israel simply affirmed that it wanted to obey God’s orders; that they were on His side in the cosmic struggle against a supernatural enemy. David expresses the same desire, when he interrupts his beautiful meditation on the miracle of God’s creation of his body, soul, and spirit, and he says: “If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.”<sup>402</sup> Some of the humanitarian tolerant feelings people express have their roots in hell.

For us, New Testament Christians, the Apostle Paul puts the Old Testament situation in its right perspective when he says: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”<sup>403</sup>

#### **F. The Failure of Israel 21:4-9**

In order to understand the following story, we have to take a closer look at the map. We read: “They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom.” *The Pulpit Commentary* says at this point: “It appears from comparison of ch. xxxiii. 38 and ch. xx. 29 that their departure was not earlier than the beginning of the sixth month of the fortieth year. This season would be

<sup>397</sup> Gen. 15:16

<sup>398</sup> Joshua 6:20

<sup>399</sup> Joshua 10:11

<sup>400</sup> Joshua 10:12-14

<sup>401</sup> I Cor. 16:22 (KJV)

<sup>402</sup> Ps. 139:19-22

<sup>403</sup> Rom. 16:20

one of the hottest and most trying for marching. **By way of the Red Sea**, *i.e.* down the Arabah, towards Ezion-geber, at the head of the Elanitic Gulf. ... Not far from this place they would reach the end of the Edomitish territory, and turn eastwards and northwards up the Wady el Ithm towards the steppes of Moab."

This detour brought the people close to the place where they had been forty years before. The Red Sea mentioned here, however, is not the part where they crossed when coming out of Egypt, but the arm of the sea that went inland East of the peninsula. They must have felt, however, that they were, so to speak, back to square one. This in itself can be a discouraging experience, and if we add it to the hardship of the terrain and the weather, as the above mentioned commentary suggests, we can feel some sympathy for their tendency to feel down. NIV uses the word "impatient" in vs. 4. Other translations say: "discouraged." The word literally means "shortened." It is the same word that is used in Exodus 6:9, where the RSV reads: "Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel; but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel bondage." This seems to be more than an emotional discouragement; it can be seen as a frontal attack by the enemy of the people upon their spirits. Discouragement comes from a loss of hope. Now, as they were on "The Last March: from Mount Hor to Jordan," as *The Pulpit Commentary's* heading over this section reads, they lose their vision, and they doubt whether they will ever arrive at the objective of the exodus. They even doubt as to whether the goal had been worth the effort. They turn against God, and they ask Him why He bothered to redeem them from Egypt. This returning tendency to idealize the place of their bondage, that began immediately after the exodus and kept on sticking up its ugly head during the forty years of wandering, cannot be explained other than by means of some supernatural evil influence among the people. Satan's ministry of propaganda relentlessly broadcasted programs in which Egypt was built up in the minds of the people, and Canaan was played down. This is an example of what Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthians: "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."<sup>404</sup>

The immediate complaint was: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" Death in the desert had come to an end with the death of Aaron. There was no reason for this generation to believe that God wanted them dead. The forty years were over. As far as the food was concerned, they must have had water, and they had the manna, which they called "this miserable food."

Dissatisfaction about food can be a trap of the enemy of our souls. It is no sin to enjoy culinary delights, but if our gourmet tastes come between us and the Lord we are in serious trouble. The devil knows how much our souls, and sometimes our stomachs, depend upon variety, and he is very clever in exploiting boredom. If eating the same food day after day affects us spiritually, he will certainly allow us to eat instead of to starve. On the other hand, if he can make us dependent upon a daily change of diet, he will use that to enslave us, and separate us from God in that way. It is important, therefore, to say prayers of thanksgiving before every meal, and consider all that we eat, or cannot eat, as coming from the Lord. Our gratitude to God will make the difference, and cut off the means by which the Evil One tries to control us. Speaking about false teachers, Paul says: "They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."<sup>405</sup> And the Apostle's advice to the Thessalonians is: "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."<sup>406</sup>

The Lord's punishment for the people's flare up of discontent was an invasion of venomous snakes. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains the following about the word for snake used here: "*Nachash* is the ordinary word for serpent. The word *saraph*, which seems to mean 'burning one,' stands (by itself) for a serpent in ver. 8, and also in Isa. xiv. 29; xxx. 6. In Isa. vi. 2, 6 it stands for one of the symbolic beings (seraphim) of the prophet's vision. The only idea common to the two meanings (otherwise so distinct) must be that of brilliance and metallic luster. It is commonly assumed that the 'fiery' serpents were so called because of the burning pain and inflammation caused by the bite,... But [it] is hardly possible that Isaiah should have used the same word in such wholly dissimilar senses, and it is clear from comparison with Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim (Ezek. I. 7) that the *saraph* of Isa. vi. 2 was so called from the burnished luster of his appearance. Even our Lord himself is described in the Apocalypse as having in the highest

<sup>404</sup> II Cor. 4:4

<sup>405</sup> I Tim. 4:3-5

<sup>406</sup> I Thes. 5:18

degree this appearance of glowing brass (Rev. I. 15; ii. 18). It is further clear that the *saraph* was so named from his colour, not his venom, because when Moses was ordered to make a *saraph* he made a serpent of brass (or rather copper), with the evident intent of imitating as closely as possible the appearance of the venomous reptile. We may conclude then with some confidence that these serpents were of a fiery red color, resembling in this respect certain very deadly snakes in Australia, which are known as 'copper snakes.' Travelers speak of some such pests as still abounding in the region of the Arabah, but it is quite uncertain whether the fiery serpents of that special visitation can be identified with any existing species."

There does not seem to have been any supernatural feature in the punishment God meted out to Israel. If anything supernatural, it was that nobody had fallen victim to snake bites before, because the desert must have harbored a good number of those reptiles. So we can say that Israel's sinful attitude brought out the evil of the land. It is the presence of sin within that makes man susceptible to the influence of the evil that surrounds him. Jesus, who knew no sin, could take upon Himself the sin of the world without being contaminated in His own soul, but man, who is conceived and born in sin, always finds within himself a sounding board for the evil that comes from outside.

The clear miracle in this story is not the plague but the deliverance. When the people show signs of repentance, and ask Moses to intercede for them, we read: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' " It is with this part of the record that Jesus identifies Himself in His conversation with Nicodemus. We read that He said: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."<sup>407</sup> *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* comments on this passage: "Just as the bronze serpent brought deliverance from poisonous snakes, so the Son of Man would be raised to deliver His people from sin. Just as the Israelites had to look in faith at the bronze serpent to be saved from death, so we must look in faith at the crucified Christ to have eternal life." Jesus' reference to this portion of Scripture has made it into an image of that which is the core of the Gospel message. The bronze serpent was, of course, only a symbol of the evil that had befallen the Israelites; the piece of metal Moses put up on the pole had no intrinsic evil value, or any healing power. Healing came to those bitten as God's answer to their faith. From a medical viewpoint, or any other viewpoint, it is foolishness to expect that looking at a bronze snake from any distance could have any effect upon poison that had penetrated the human bloodstream. We find, therefore, in this story a quadruple spiritual lesson: there is the life threatening power of sin, the identification of Christ with our sinful condition, the redeeming power of Christ's death on the cross, and the meaning of faith, which the Apostle Paul calls "the foolishness of the cross."<sup>408</sup>

Jesus testified to the people of His time that the Old Testament was written about Him. In John's Gospel we read: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me."<sup>409</sup> But there are very few instances in which Jesus personally identifies Himself with certain Scripture passages. The reference to the bronze snake is one of them, and another one is the elements that were part of the Passover celebration, particularly of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which Jesus gave new meaning in the Lord's supper, by taking the bread, and saying: "Take and eat; this is my body," and with the cup of wine: "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>410</sup> There are other references, but they are less direct.

We read nowhere that the Lord exterminated the snakes in answer to Moses' prayer. Undoubtedly, they moved away, and stopped being a threat, but in this instance also, evil was not taken out of the world. God saved from the consequences of sin, but not from the presence of it.

The bronze serpent itself, that was made to provide healing and salvation for those who were dying, became a fetish among the Israelites in later days. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says about it: "When the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, they carried the bronze serpent with them and preserved it until the time of Hezekiah, king of Judah (715-686 B. C.). During his religious reform, Hezekiah destroyed the image because it had been turned into an idol which the people regarded with superstitious reverence <2 Kin. 18:4>." The Scripture reference given here reads: "He [Hezekiah] broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)"

<sup>407</sup> John 3:14,15

<sup>408</sup> See I Cor. 1:18-24

<sup>409</sup> John 5:39

<sup>410</sup> Matt. 26:26-28

According to *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, *Nehushtan*, literally means "bronze serpent-idol," which was the contemptuous name given to it by King Hezekiah.

From these fragments of the history of the bronze serpent left to us, we can see something of the subtlety of the devil in drawing man's focus away from the central truths of God's revelation in order to make him concentrate on the object used instead of on the One who heals and saves. The cross of Christ has not escaped this fate completely either; in certain cases it has become a fetish that absorbs man's attention so that he sees the symbol and not the Lord. We are not saved by "the old rugged cross" but by the Lord who died for us.

We cannot leave this Scripture portion without reminding ourselves of the fact that the devil is often presented in the Bible in the form of a serpent. When he makes his first appearance in Paradise, he showed himself to Eve as a snake, and the book of Revelations calls him "that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray."<sup>411</sup> This may account for the fact that the word used for snake in this story is not *nachash* but *saraf*, which is the same word Isaiah used for the heavenly beings that surround God's throne in Isaiah's vision.<sup>412</sup> After all, Satan was created as a *saraf*, and the fact that he fell into sin did not change the glorious aspect of his appearance; only the glory turned into poison.

#### **G. Journey to Moab 21:10-20**

*The Pulpit Commentary* writes above this section THE END OF JOURNEYS, THE BEGINNING OF VICTORIES. We are told that the Israelites pitched their tents at Oboth. Ch. 33:41-43 gives a more complete account of the places where the people rested for shorter or longer periods of time. We read there: "They left Mount Hor and camped at Zalmonah. They left Zalmonah and camped at Punon. They left Punon and camped at Oboth." By circumventing Edom they arrived at Moab, at the Arnon river, which marked the border between the Moabites and the Amorites. The quote from *The Book of the Wars of the LORD*, supposedly, implies that, in the words of *The Pulpit Commentary*, that: "the Amorites had wrested from Moab all to the north of Arnon."

What this book was, nobody knows. This is the only instance in the Bible where such a book is mentioned. About this *Book of the Wars of the LORD*, *The Pulpit Commentary* writes the following: "Nothing is known of this book but what appears here. If it should seem strange that a book of this description should be already in existence, we must remember that amongst the multitude of Israel there must in the nature of things have been some 'poets' in the then acceptance of the word. Some songs there must have been, and those songs would be mainly inspired by the excitement and triumph of the final marches. The first flush of a new national life achieving its first victories of the national foe always finds expression in songs and odes. It is abundantly evident from the foregoing narrative that writing of some sort was in common use at least among the leaders of Israel ..., and they would not have thought it beneath them to collect these spontaneous effusions of a nation just awaking to the poetry of its own existence. The archaic character of the fragments preserved in this chapter, which makes them sound so foreign to our ears, is a strong testimony to their genuineness. It is hardly credible that any one of a later generation should have cared either to compose or to quote snatches of song which, like dried flowers, have lost everything but scientific value in being detached from the soil which gave them birth." I believe the commentary to be right in assuming that the quote was not a later addition to the record by some editor. The contrary rather seems to be the case, that the quote was more extensive and that parts were lost over centuries of copying the text, which makes it less intelligible to us. That Israel could break out in spontaneous song at times of victory is clear from the song of Moses and Miriam after the crossing of the Red Sea on the topic: "The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea."<sup>413</sup>

There seems to have been a complete change of mood among the people upon their arrival at Beer. We do not read here about any complaint regarding lack of water, although this must have been the case; otherwise God's command in vs. 16: "Gather the people together and I will give them water," would not have made much sense. The way the water was supplied was quite different from some previous occasions. There was no striking of a rock like at Massah and Meribah,<sup>414</sup> but the people had to dig their own well. Evidently, the leaders of the people gave the good example, since we read in the song, composed for this occasion: "Spring up, O well! Sing about it, about the well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people sank-- the nobles with scepters and staffs." Whether the princes and nobles literally used their

<sup>411</sup> Rev. 12:9

<sup>412</sup> See Isa. 6:2

<sup>413</sup> Ex. 15:21

<sup>414</sup> See Ex. 17:1-7; Num. 20:2-13

scepters for digging is, of course, very doubtful. The poetry expresses the fact that the leaders laid aside the dignity of their position in order to do the work. The KJV gives a different translation of this verse: "The princes digged the well, the nobles of the people digged it, by the direction of the lawgiver, with their staves." *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this with: "The meaning of *michokek* is disputed,... but in either case the meaning must be practically as in the A.V. It speaks of the alacrity with which the leaders of Israel, Moses himself amongst them, began the work even with the insignia of their office." The main point is that Israel entered upon a new phase in its existence as a nation. The dispensation of miraculous sustenance was ending; soon the manna would no longer come down, and they would have to labor, both in conquering the land, and in making a living in it.

God is always the God of the miraculous, but this does not mean that we will always see miracles happen at every stage in our life. The Almighty does not perform miracles upon demand in order to satisfy our curiosity and sense of sensation. When the people in Jesus' time asked for a miracle, just for the sake of seeing one, the Lord turned them down. In Matthew's Gospel we read: "Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, 'Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.' He answered, 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'"<sup>415</sup>

God's miracles are always practical; they come when needed. When Israel came out of the desert they no longer needed any water from the rock; they could dig for it. We should commend them for their sense of reality which caused them to burst out in a spontaneous song.

There is a difference between living a life that has its origin in the supernatural, and the occurrence of miracles. God's main means of sustaining our fellowship with Him is through His Word. Often miracles will occur when God's Word is unknown, and people cannot be reached by means of it. We have seen this happen in certain situations on the mission field. In such cases miracles happened to draw people's attention, so the Word could be preached. Where there is a desire for miracles, when God's Word is readily available, we are in grave spiritual danger. When the rich man in Jesus' story of Lazarus said to father Abraham: "I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment," we read: "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"<sup>416</sup> The Apostle Paul writes: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."<sup>417</sup> In the order of revelation God's miracles take second place to God's Word.

It is also obvious from Israel's history that there is no direct link between miracles and faith. People who saw the most astounding miracles happen before their very eyes, did not draw near to God because of it. Jesus reproaches the people of His time that the miracles He performed had no effect upon their souls. In the Gospel of Matthew we read: "Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.'"<sup>418</sup> This should not make us afraid of miracles, but we should be aware of the danger of going after miracles and missing the point that God wants to make in our lives.

At vs. 21 the story picks up where it left off at vs. 13. Messengers were sent to Sihon the king of the Amorites to ask for free passage through their territory. Actually, as we have seen before, the land had originally belonged to the Moabites, but had been taken from them by the Amorites. *The Pulpit Commentary* points out that Amorites were not related to the Israelites as Edom and Moab were. The

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<sup>415</sup> Matt. 12:38-40

<sup>416</sup> Luke 16:27-31

<sup>417</sup> Rom. 10:17

<sup>418</sup> Matt. 11:20-24

Amorites were the original inhabitants of Canaan, mentioned by God to Abraham.<sup>419</sup> The name “Amorites” is sometimes used for the all of the inhabitants of Canaan.<sup>420</sup>

It seems strange that Israel even offered a possibility for the Amorites to be exempt from extinction by allowing Israel free passage through their territory. Whether this was done by divine mandate or not, we are not told. It does show, though, that the Israelites did not fall upon un-expecting nations without provocation. Their first approach was one of peace. If Sihon had allowed Israel free passage, he would have saved his life and that of his people. It is understandable that he showed suspicion, but his suspicion was probably the reflection of his own unreliability. He could not imagine that Israel would have traveled along the king’s highway without robbing the country poor. So he not only refuses, but he attacks Israel with his whole army. Thus he sets the pattern for his own extermination, and also for the whole conquest of Canaan. It seems that the Canaanites could have come to terms with Israel, but their entrenchment into sin would not permit them to do so. Their master, whom they had served faithfully over the centuries, would not allow for surrender. We can say that Satan was more bent upon their extinction than God was. This puts the conquest of Canaan in a different light than that in which we tend to look at it.

In the verses 27-30 we read about another commemoration in song of a historical event. The NIV introduces the poem with: “That is why the poets say.” The RSV speaks about “the ballad singers,” and the KJV reads: “Wherefore they that speak in proverbs say.” *The Pulpit Commentary* describes those poets: “A class of person well marked among the Hebrews, as perhaps in all ancient countries. It was their gift, and almost their profession, to express in the sententious, antistrophic poetry of the age such thoughts or such facts as took hold of men’s minds. At a time when there was little difference between poetry and rhetoric, and when the distinction was hardly drawn between the inventive faculty of man and the Divine afflatus, it is not surprising to find the word *mashal* applied to the rhapsody of Balaam (ch. xxiii. 7), to the ‘taunting song’ of Isaiah (ch. xiv. 4) to the ‘riddle’ of Ezekiel (xvii. 2) as well as to the collection of earthly and heavenly wisdom in the Book of Proverbs. That which follows is a taunting song, most like to the one cited from Isaiah, the archaic character of which is marked by its strongly antithetic form and abrupt transitions, as well as by the peculiarity of some of the words.”

The gist of the poem seems to be that Sihon who took the land from Moab, and caused terror among the Moabites, suffered the same fate himself at the hands of Israel. God used Israel to pay him back what he had done to others.

In the poem the Moabites are called “people of Chemosh,” which was their idol. *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* writes about Chemosh: “Chemosh <Judg. 11:24; 2 King. 23:13> was the national god of the Moabites and Ammonites. This deity was apparently compounded with Athtar, the Venus star, and so is thought to be a pagan god associated with the heavenly bodies. Chemosh has been identified with Baal of Peor, Baal-Zebub, Mars, and Saturn, as the star of ill-omen. Dibon <Num. 21:30>, a town in Moab north of the River Arnon, was the chief seat of its worship. Like Molech, Chemosh was worshipped by the sacrifice of children as burnt offerings, but scholars believe it is incorrect to identify Chemosh directly with Molech. Solomon sanctified Chemosh as a part of his tolerance of pagan gods <1 Kin. 11:7>, but Josiah abolished its worship <2 Kin. 23:13>. Human sacrifice was made to Chemosh, according to <2 Kings 3:27>, which reports that Mesha, king of Moab, offered his eldest son as a burnt offering on the wall of Kir Hareseth, the ancient capital of Moab.”

When it is said in vs. 31: “So Israel settled in the land of the Amorites,” we must probably take this to mean that this territory was included in the land the Israelites occupied when they conquered Canaan. As far as we can see no occupational force was left behind in the land of the Amorites while the main army marched on. The victory over Sihon, however, was the beginning of the conquest. It was a turning point in Israel’s history. At this point they left the desert for good and marched toward the land the Lord had promised them.

Sihon’s opposition to Israel’s advance set the trend for other nations to resist. Og, the king of Bashan mobilized his whole army to attack Israel. Apparently, the forces of Sihon had been small in comparison with the force that Og brought into the field to battle Israel, because the Lord gave a special promise to Moses. Also the fact that Og, and probably his sons were descendants of a race of giants, may have been cause for concern. *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says about Og: “Og was the last survivor of the race of giants <Deut. 3:11>. His huge iron bedstead was kept on display in Rabbah Ammon long after his death <Deut. 3:11>.” The words: “Do not be afraid of him, for I have handed him over to you,

<sup>419</sup> See Gen. 15:18-21

<sup>420</sup> See Gen. 15:16



with his whole army and his land,” seem to indicate that the nation was apprehensive of this next test of their strength. The victory over Sihon must have been like a rehearsal for the real test that was before them in the form of the formidable army of Og. Apparently, the Lord wanted Israel to receive some training in the field before they engaged in any major battles.

The words: “I have handed him over to you” did not imply that Bashan and its people were handed to Israel on a silver platter. God would give them the victory, but they had to fight for it. There are instances in which the Lord takes complete charge of a situation, and expects His children to stand back and see Him work. To king Jehoshaphat the Lord said: “The battle is not yours, but God’s.... You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you.”<sup>421</sup>

The victory over Og is reported in one single verse: “So they struck him down, together with his sons and his whole army, leaving them no survivors. And they took possession of his land,” but it is doubtful that the victory was as smooth and easy as that. In recounting the event in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses, talking about the cities of Bashan said: “All these cities were fortified with high walls and with gates and bars.”<sup>422</sup>

We have to remember that these first major victories were won by those who had looked at the brass serpent and received healing from the poison that threatened their lives. Once the enemy within is defeated, the enemy without will not be able to stand against us.

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<sup>421</sup> II Chr. 20:15,17

<sup>422</sup> Deut. 3:5

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

**J. Failure with the Moabites** 22:1-25:18**1. Balak, king of Moab, calls Balaam to the rescue.** ch. 22:1-41

The story of the prophet Balaam, his character as a prophet, and his role in Israel's history, and in the history of prophecy is one of the most intriguing stories in the Bible. Besides the mention of his name in the context of this Old Testament event, we find him three times in the New Testament. Peter called Balaam a false prophet, "who loved the wages of wickedness,"<sup>423</sup> Jude puts him in the same category as the murderer Cain, and the rebel Korah,<sup>424</sup> and the Lord Jesus refers to him in the book of Revelations, in His letter to Pergamum, where He says: "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality."<sup>425</sup> The last reference throws light upon the report of the orgy and idolatry in which the Israelites got involved later with the Moabites, which story we find in ch. 25.<sup>426</sup>

Balaam remains an enigma to the New Testament Christian. We can only conceive of two kinds of prophecy: prophecy inspired by God, and false prophecies given to people by demons under the guise of divine inspiration. Balaam's prophecies seem to have come from God; at least the ones that are documented in the section of Scripture we are studying. What is hard for us to understand is that a man can be the recipient of divine revelations, and at the same time be totally corrupt in character. This was, undoubtedly, the case with Balaam. As such he is presented to us in the New Testament. But there is also the problem of the kind of prophecy in which Balaam seems to have been dealing. The picture we get of him is more of a magician than of a prophet, and the baffling aspect in this is, that some of the magic he performed appears to have come from God, and not from Satan.

Balaam's fame must have been widespread and enormous for Balak, who lived in Canaan, to know about a man whose abode was hundreds of miles away. (It is generally understood that Balaam's residence "near the River" was at the border of the Euphrates in Mesopotamia). The most likely way for Balak to know about Balaam, and his supernatural abilities, was through merchants who traveled from Mesopotamia through Canaan to Egypt.

As the chapter opens, we find Israel encamped along the Jordan river, across from Jericho,<sup>427</sup> which was about thirty miles north of the River Arnon, which formed one of the boundaries of Moab. Israel had circumvented Moab territory, and the Moabites had even sold supplies to the Israelite army as they passed. Moses mentioned this fact in his report in Deuteronomy.<sup>428</sup> After this initial friendly contact, the mood in Moab changed because of the defeat of Sihon and Og. The Moabites were sure now that they would be the next victims of Israel's conquest. In the resulting panic, the Moabites entered into a league with the Midianites, to whom they were distantly related. The Moabites were the descendants of Lot, and the Midianites from Abraham through his wife Keturah. The Midianites were supposedly nomadic, or semi-nomadic. They probably feared that Israel's invasion would curtail their roaming around in their search for grazing grounds, so they went into this liaison with Moab for reasons of self-preservation.

The Scriptures say here that Balak sent messengers to summon Balaam to curse Israel, evidently as a preparation for an armed attack upon Israel. The fact that Balak "summons" seems to indicate that he considered himself in a position superior to Balaam. Balak's action indicates that he believed in the existence of a God who was superior to the local deities to which he, obviously, owed some allegiance, but also that he did not consider himself inferior to this superior God; otherwise, it would hardly have been in order for him to order the prophet of that God around. Balak's summons is a clear example of a state that wanted to use religion for its own benefit. On the other hand, Balak believed that a curse of that superior God upon the people of Israel would make them vulnerable in an armed encounter. His local deity, the Baal

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<sup>423</sup> II Pet. 2:15

<sup>424</sup> Jude vs. 11

<sup>425</sup> Rev. 2:14

<sup>426</sup> See Num. 25:1-3

<sup>427</sup> A footnote in the NIV says: "Hebrew *Jordan of Jericho*; possibly an ancient name for the Jordan River."

<sup>428</sup> See Deut. 2:26-29

of Peor, whom we meet in one of the following chapters,<sup>429</sup> would not have been able to achieve this goal. Balak believed that the magic of YHWH was stronger than any other. This attitude also shows that Balak could only conceive of religion in the form of magic, either white or black. His basic philosophy was animistic.

Balaam's attitude is more complicated. Obviously, he possessed a gift that gave him access to the world of the supernatural, and he knew the God who revealed Himself in the Old Testament. It was not beneath him to use his gift of soothsaying for personal gain. It was generally known that he charged for his services. Balak and his envoys knew this since they brought "the fee for divination" with them. It was also known that Balaam was willing to use his gift for the destruction of people. This was, after all, the purpose of the visit of the Moabite and Midianite elders.

Reading these chapters raises serious questions about how much of God, the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, there was in Balaam's prophecies. We get the impression that Balaam dabbled in the supernatural, but that in this instance God intervened, and that this quack prophet, suddenly found himself pronouncing prophecies that were coined in heaven, and that had the supreme and eternal value of the Word of God. The experience must have been very disturbing and frustrating for Balaam. All of a sudden he found himself confronted with truth and wisdom that went far above what he was used to handle. From a soothsayer who manipulated spiritual powers, he became the mouthpiece of the Almighty. He knew this could happen, and he had warned Balak about it, but evidently, he had hoped to be able to avoid it, so he could present Balak with a stiff bill for his fees. Apparently, he did receive his money, but not because of his prophetic utterances. When Balaam realized that he could not curse Israel, he found another avenue for Moab to weaken Israel's resistance. It was upon Balaam's advice<sup>430</sup> that the men of Israel were invited to participate in a feast for the Baal of Peor, which involved sexual immorality with the Moabite women.<sup>431</sup> Balaam made the mistake of hanging around too long, probably, to see what would happen. This cost him his life. When an army of twelve-thousand men invaded Moab as a reprisal for what they had done to Israel, we read that Balaam was killed also.<sup>432</sup>

Another strange feature in this story is God's seemingly ambiguous attitude: initially God tells Balaam not to go, then he is allowed to go, but when he leaves God demonstrates His displeasure in a threatening manner. It is obvious that the immutable God did not change His mind on the subject. What appears to be ambiguity is meant to convey a message to Balaam that he was playing with fire. The reason that Balaam kept on trying to obtain God's permission was his greed.

Also, in the background is the strange phenomenon that, if Balaam had uttered a curse upon Israel, this would have had an effect upon the spiritual resilience of the nation, and would have torn the cover of their protection. If this were not the case, if Balaam could have uttered whatever curse he wanted without this doing any damage to Israel as a nation, the whole story would make no sense. This is probably the most baffling part of this situation. Curses do have effect, even upon people God has blessed. The reason for this, it seems, lies in the structure of the Old Testament dispensation. God's call, and God's blessings upon the lives of individuals, and upon a nation did not, necessarily, bring about a change of life. In Old Testament times, the fact that God spoke to persons, and even used them to speak to others, did not cause regeneration, as it does in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit could work in lives temporarily, and for specific purposes, and then leave that person again, sometimes without leaving any trace of change. The life of King Saul is an example.

Balak's fear was kindled when he saw what Israel did to the Amorites, who were his former conquerors. Israel occupied the territory that had belonged to Moab. When he sent his message to Balaam, he hoped that, with the help of Balaam's curse on Israel, he would be able to regain his former territory. That is, undoubtedly, the meaning of the phrase: "Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country."

It is interesting to see how much Balak knew about Israel's history. He was able to tell Balaam that the Israelites had come from Egypt, which was forty years before. It is likely that the way Israel left Egypt, and left Pharaoh and his army dead behind at the shore of the Red Sea, was known to him also. Whether Balaam knew this or not, we are not told, but it must have given enough information to the

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<sup>429</sup> See ch. 25:2

<sup>430</sup> Num. 31:16

<sup>431</sup> See Num. 25:1-3

<sup>432</sup> Num. 31:8

prophet to realize that Israel was under some very strong protection, that would be very difficult to counter with a curse.

When the elder of Moab and Midian arrived at Balaam's dwelling place and conveyed the request of the king, Balaam invited them to spend the night. Balaam's invitation was probably the minimum requirement of hospitality, but also because he felt the need to consult YHWH about the matter. He may have guessed that the mighty protection that was upon Israel was the hand of God. It is interesting to note that some four centuries after Abraham left Mesopotamia, there was still so much knowledge of the true and only God in the area. Balaam's character and behavior shows that the truth had been corrupted, but it had not disappeared.

The way God dealt with Balaam during that first night is interesting. It sounds as if God needs information from the prophet. We read: "God came to Balaam and asked, 'Who are these men with you?' " Obviously, the question was not to satisfy God's curiosity, as if the Omniscient God would not know, but for Balaam to realize what and whom he was dealing with. Whether Balaam received God's answer in a dream or in a more direct revelation, we are not told. Now, Balaam knows for sure that the protection over Israel is God's blessing, and that he will be unable to do anything against the Israelites.

It isn't until the second visit that he begins to waver in his decision. The fact that he knew he could not curse Israel would make us wonder why he even bothered to go with the second delegation. The only possible explanation seems to be that, at this point, Balaam had already conceived the plan about the seduction of the Israelites by the Moabite women. He must have figured that Israel's moral failure would have the same effect upon them as the curse he was unable to utter. It must have been because of this secret plan that he met with divine resistance on the road, in the form of the angel who tried to kill him. God warned this prophet because He wanted to save him, but Balaam paid no attention. He was after the money. God's dealing with Balaam at this point is another indication of God's mercy; He did not want Balaam to be lost. Yet, God did not prevent Balaam's going, because He wanted him to pronounce a blessing upon the people.

Balak knew how to approach Balaam. He used the right kind of psychology. A second delegation was sent with higher ranking members of the royalty to bring the message that Balaam would be rewarded "handsomely." KJV puts it in a more formal way by saying: "For I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me." Not only will Balaam be able to set his own price, but other honors will be bestowed upon him. This is quite different from the message brought by the first delegation who were carrying the money with them. Balak did not only appeal to Balaam's pride but also to his vanity. Balak was right in his assessment of the prophet. In spite of Balaam's remonstrance: "Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God," he must still have had hope that God would permit him to go because he decided to consult the Lord for the second time.

It is at this point that two different plans are formed: God's plan to let Balaam go and make him utter supreme blessings upon Israel, and Balaam's plan for the seduction of the Israelites by Moabite prostitutes who were dedicated to the Baal of Peor. Balaam was, evidently, under the mistaken illusion that he could outwit God. This is a clear indication of the relationship this prophet had with the one he called "the LORD my God."

Balaam left immediately the next morning, accompanied by two of his servants. There was no drawn out politeness or extension of hospitality; the prophet was in a hurry.

The verses 22-35 belong to the most controversial parts of the whole Bible. Theologians have argued the point of the talking donkey for centuries. *The Pulpit Commentary* says the following about this: "And the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam. On the face of it this expression would seem decisive that an audible human voice proceeded from the ass's mouth, as St. Peter beyond doubt believed: But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey-- a beast without speech-- who spoke with a man's voice and restrained the prophet's madness."<sup>433</sup> It is truly said, however, that a passing illusion of this kind, while it testifies that the Apostle understood the words, like all his contemporaries, in their most natural and simple sense, does not oblige us to hold the same view; if he was mistaken in this matter, it does not at all affect the inspired truth of his teaching. Two theories, therefore, have been proposed in order to avoid the difficulties of the ordinary belief, while vindicating the reality of the occurrence. It has been held by some that the whole affair took place in a trance, and resembled St. Peter's vision of the sheet let down from heaven (Acts x. 10), which we rightly conceive to have been purely subjective. This is open

<sup>433</sup> The commentary renders this sentence in the Greek

to the obvious and apparently fatal objection that no hint is given of any state of trance or ecstasy, and that, on the contrary, the wording of the narrative as given to us is inconsistent with such a thing. In ver. 31 Balaam's eyes are said to have been opened so that he saw the angel; but to have the eyes open so that the (ordinarily) invisible became visible, and the (otherwise) inaudible became audible, was precisely the conditions of which Balaam speaks (ch. xxiv. 3,4) as that of trance. According to the narrative, therefore, Balaam was in an ecstasy, if at all, after the speaking of the ass, and not before. By others it has been put forward, somewhat confusedly, that although Balaam was in his ordinary senses, he did not really hear a human voice, but that the 'cries' of the ass became intelligible to his mind; and it is noted that as an augur he had been accustomed to assign meanings to the cries of animals. If instead of 'cries' we read 'brayings,' for the ass is endowed by nature with no other capacity of voice, being indeed one of the dumbest of 'dumb' animals, we have the matter more fairly before us. To most people it would appear more incredible that the brayings of an ass should convey these rational question to the mind of its rider than that the beast should have spoken outright with a man's voice. It would indeed seem much more satisfactory to regard the story, if we cannot accept it as literally true, as a parable which Balaam wrote against himself, and which Moses simply incorporated in the narrative; we should at least preserve in this way the immense moral and spiritual value of the story, without the necessity of placing non-natural constructions upon its simple statements. Supposing the miracle to have really occurred, it must always be observed that the words put into the ass's mouth do nothing more than express such feelings as a docile and intelligent animal of her kind would have actually felt. That domestic animals, and especially such as have been long in the service of man, feel surprise, indignation, and grief in the presence of injustice and ill-treatment is abundantly certain. In many well-authenticated cases they have done things in order to express these feelings which seemed as much beyond their 'irrational' nature as if they had spoken. We constantly say of a dog or a horse that he can do everything but speak, and why should it seem incredible that God, who has given the dumb beast so close an approximation to human feeling and reason, should for once have given it human voice?"

In considering the meaning of the words: "Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth," we have to understand that the donkey was not transformed from a dumb animal to an intelligent being that had received the gift to express feelings and thoughts in a human language. The speaking of the donkey, if this is what actually happened, must have been akin to the speech of a parrot. It sounded intelligible, but there was nothing behind it that we could call intelligence. We also have to bear in mind, as *The Pulpit Commentary* points out, that Balaam was used to hearing voices that ordinary people could not hear. Then there is the fact that the donkey did not really convey a message to Balaam. The words: "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?... Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" only served to make Balaam realize that the behavior of the donkey was not normal, and that there must have been an outside cause for the animal's conduct. This was, obviously, not a case in which a spiritual being took possession of an animal body, as in the temptation in Paradise. Probably, the closest we can come in understanding what happened here is that Balaam heard a voice that was intended to bring him to his senses.

There still remains the fact that the donkey saw the angel of the LORD long before the prophet saw Him, but that can hardly be seen as a problem. After all, we know next to nothing about the perception of invisible beings either by humans or by animals. It could very well be that some animals have a more developed sense for the detection of the presence of angels than humans have. Some animals are superior to man in their ability to see, hear, or smell, so why not in perceiving a spiritual reality?

As we said before, the reason for this divine displeasure cannot have been the fact that Balaam went with the princes of Moab, for God had already given him permission for this, and this permission was confirmed here. It must have been Balaam's secret plan to have Israel seduced by Moabite women that kindled the Lord's wrath. The message conveyed in this encounter with the angel of the LORD was that Balaam endangered his life. God did not want him to give up seeing Israel and pronouncing a blessing, but He wanted him to abandon the ploy of the seduction. This Balaam disregarded to his own perdition.

Balaam's anger, which finds an outlet in the beating of his donkey, is in reality anger at himself. The secret he was carrying around with him must have bothered him to the point that he lost his temper when the animal began to behave in an unusual way. This anger is the topic of the whole encounter between the angel and Balaam. The prophet heard the donkey say: "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" and the angel asks Balaam the same question: "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times?" The intent was, obviously, for Balaam to ask himself the question: "Why am I angry?" The answer he gives is: "You have made a fool of me!" And we can ask the legitimate question:

“Who is making a fool of Balaam, if not Balaam himself?” That is enough reason to become angry. People who make fools of themselves very seldom get angry at themselves; they direct their anger at other people. God wanted Balaam to have a good look at himself, but this he refuses because of the reward that awaits him. Besides God’s advice for Balaam to come to his senses, God tells him: “I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me.” The rendering of the RSV is closer to the original with: “Behold, I have come forth to withstand you, because your way is perverse before me.” God wants Balaam to understand that He knows his intentions, and He calls them “perverse.”

When Balaam arrived at the border of Moab, King Balak came to meet him to roll out the red carpet. The arrival of the prophet is celebrated with a feast, and he is treated as royalty coming for a state visit. Yet, Balaam knew that his gift to enter the supernatural, which was the reason for this VIP treatment, would do him or Balak no good at this time. Even though Balaam would receive the coveted reward, he would lose his reputation as a prophet. Balak would follow Balaam’s advice, but he probably despised the prophet for it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### J. Failure with the Moabites (continued) 22:1-25:18

#### 1) Balaam's first prophecy 23:1-12

The closing verse of the previous chapter tells us: "The next morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth Baal, and from there he saw part of the people." This was a high place from which part of the Israelite camp was visible. Both the condition of the place and the view were intended to bring Balaam in the trance in which he could curse the people. It is very unlikely, as we mentioned before, that Balaam still had any hope that he would be able to pronounce a curse. He went through the ritual to deceive Balak and to make him understand at the end that he had been unable to utter a curse because of factors beyond his control., Balaam, however, also tried to deceive God. The seven altars with the seven sacrifices were built by Balak for the service of YHWH. In making this arrangement Balaam dug his own grave.

The Lord did meet Balaam, and the prophet received the text of the prophecy he was to utter in the presence of Balak. Balaam's prophecy is called an "oracle" in the NIV. The KJV uses the word "parable." *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "Balaam's utterances were in the highest degree poetical, according to the antithetic form of the poetry of that day, which delighted in sustained parallelisms, in lofty figures, and in abrupt turns. The '*mashal*' of Balaam resembled the 'burden' of the later prophets in this, that it was not a discourse uttered to men, but a thing revealed in him of which he had to deliver himself as best he might in such words as came to him. His inward eye was fixed on this revelation, and he gave utterance to it without consideration of those who heard."

The text of this first oracle reads as follows: "Balak brought me from Aram, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains. 'Come,' he said, 'curse Jacob for me; come, denounce Israel.' How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not denounced? From the rocky peaks I see them, from the heights I view them. I see a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs!" The first two lines were obviously pronounced for the benefit of Balak, to make the king understand that Balaam would have cursed Israel if he could, but that he was overruled by a higher authority. The next two lines are definitely the core of the prophecy of blessing which God wanted Balaam to utter, and we may consider the last two lines as an utterance of Balaam's personal wish.

Balaam needed no divine revelation to pronounce the first part of the prophecy. He knew he could not curse Israel, and he saw part of the people from the place where he was standing. From the words "the fourth part," we understand that only approximately one quarter of the people were visible from this point. The phrase "a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations" should be taken in the spiritual sense, that Israel differed from other nations because of God's election and of His revelation to them. Within the nation of Israel there was some ambiguity on this point. Israel struggled from time to time with the fact that they were different from other nations. This was the cause for their assimilation of the idolatry of Canaan, and it led ultimately to their desire for a king, and the end of theocracy. The leaders of Israel said to Samuel: "Appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."<sup>434</sup> This false prophet saw more in God's people than they saw in themselves! The phrase: "Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?" makes us think of God's promise to Abraham, after the sacrifice of Isaac. Balaam may have been familiar with the words: "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore."<sup>435</sup> If not, they were definitely part of the inspired words the Lord had given to him.

The last phrase of this first prophecy sounds pathetic in the mouth of this perverse prophet: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs!" "The righteous" are, undoubtedly, the Israelites, whom Balaam was trying, and willing, to curse. He not only recognized their privileged position in life, but also in death. That is a most remarkable statement, since it implies a philosophy of death that is not generally found in the Old Testament. It goes beyond that supposition that there is life after death; it suggests that there is judgment after death and also blessedness. In uttering this prayer, Balaam must have felt that this blessedness was beyond his reach. God would have given His blessing to this prophet, had he

<sup>434</sup> I Sam. 8:5

<sup>435</sup> Gen. 22:17

been willing to give up his secret scheme for the defeat of Israel through the seduction by the Moabite women. This, obviously, he was unwilling to do. This is what makes Balaam come through to us in these pages of Scripture as one of the most tragic figures in the whole Old Testament.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes a certain Dr. Warburton who interprets these words thus: "Let me die in a mature old age, after a life of health and peace, with all my posterity flourishing about me, as was the lot of the righteous observers of the law." The commentary adds to this: "But they bear a far deeper and more important signification than this cold and feeble construction puts upon them, expressing a wish that the close of his life might be cheered with the comforts of the righteous, and be introduced into the happiness of another life, which the righteous only can enjoy ... Balaam was the representative of a large class in the world who express a wish for the blessedness of the Lord's people at last, but are averse to lead a corresponding life."

Balak is, of course, upset with the text of Balaam's first parable. He must have thought that with some effort on Balaam's side, the prophet would have been able to rip off the protective spiritual cover that was over Israel. He had no idea who the God of Israel was, and he may have thought that Balaam's "blessing" was a ploy by the prophet to increase his soothsaying fee. Otherwise, he would not have arranged for a second, and even a third seance.

## 2) Balaam's second prophecy 23:13-26

For the second session Balaam is led to the top of Mount Pisgah. This must have been a well-known look-out, according to *The Pulpit Commentary*, for "the field of Zophim" literally means "the field of the watchers." A large section of the country must have been visible from there, since it was the place from which the Lord showed Moses the promised land, prior to his death.<sup>436</sup> When Balak says to Balaam that he will be able to "see only a part but not all of them," it must have meant that the whole army of Israel had not moved close enough to be observed from there. The preparatory ritual is the same as the first time. Seven bulls and seven rams are offered on seven altars to appease the Spirit of God. Balak and his dignitaries stand beside these altars while Balaam moves away to meet the Lord.

Balak did not understand how insulting this ritual must have been to God, the Creator of heaven and earth. This king tried to appease the Almighty in the same way the pagan idols, representing evil spirits, were pacified so they could be manipulated by man to become subservient to his purpose. The sacrifices Balak brought were, in no way, a pleasing aroma to the Lord; they did not remind Him of the sacrifice of love His Son would bring to reconcile creation with its Creator.

Balaam meets the Lord again, like the first time, and he is sent back with a second message. We find the text of the second blessing in the verses 18-24. Actually, the text does not contain a new blessing of Israel, but a confirmation of Israel's inalterable blessed condition. In the opening sentences of this text Balaam addresses Balak personally. Balak is confronted with the reality of truth. Truth is a divine attribute; it is an absolute. This must have been a new concept to Balak, who, like all people who do not know God, believed that truth was relative, and that it could be approached subjectively. In addressing Balak like this, God penetrates to the core of Balak's problem, as Jesus did in His brief audience with Pilate. Jesus said to Pilate: "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" Pilate asked."<sup>437</sup> Everyone who is not "on the side of truth" is on the other side, that is on the side of the lie, the side of the father of lies, as Jesus called him. Speaking of Satan, Jesus said: "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."<sup>438</sup> Lying and murder go together, like truth and life.

Balak is told: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act?" As in Jesus' words to Pilate, so in this address to Balak, there is a hidden invitation to the truth that could set man free if they would allow God to transform their lives. The writer to the Hebrews says: "It is impossible for God to lie." The full text reads: "God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged."<sup>439</sup> God's inability to lie is not a flaw in His perfection, but a

<sup>436</sup> Deut. 34:1-3

<sup>437</sup> John 18:37,38

<sup>438</sup> John 8:44

<sup>439</sup> Heb. 6:18



confirmation of His reliability. Although Balak, undoubtedly, accepted this affirmation in a negative sense, since he was out to obtain a curse for people who were blessed, the content of the words is positive. In denying Balak his curse, God preached the Gospel to him, so that, if he would flee to the God of Israel, he could take hold of the hope offered by Him and thus be greatly encouraged. But Balak was too preoccupied with the hope for a curse, to hear the sound of a blessing for himself, and his master certainly would not have allowed him to see the light. In reading Balaam's prophecies, we should not fail to see in them God's outstretched hand of mercy to this pagan king who was caught in the web of the father of lies.

Israel was the recipient of God's promise to Abraham, which climaxed in the coming of the Savior of the world. Balak could have been the recipient of this blessing also, had he not been so earnest in his search for a curse, a curse that would boomerang. Paul's words to the Galatians are applicable here: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."<sup>440</sup>

The NIV renders vs. 21 with: "No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel." Another rendering is: "He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel."<sup>441</sup> The Hebrew word translated "misfortune," or "iniquity" is *'aawen*, which is derived from *'aven*, defined by *Strong's* with "to pant (hence, to exert oneself, usually in vain; to come to naught) trouble, strictly nothingness, vanity, wickedness; specifically an idol." The word for "misery" is *'aamaal* or *'amal*, meaning "toil, i.e. wearing effort; hence, worry, whether of body or mind."

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "[He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel] This is a difficult passage; for if we take the words as spoken of the people Israel, as their iniquity and their perverseness were almost unparalleled, such words cannot be spoken of them with strict truth. If we consider them as spoken of the patriarch Jacob and Israel, or of Jacob after he became Israel, they are most strictly true, as after that time a more unblemished and noble character (Abraham excepted) is not to be found in the page of history, whether sacred or profane; and for his sake, and for the sake of his father Isaac, and his grandfather Abraham, God is ever represented as favoring, blessing, and sparing a rebellious and undeserving people; see the concluding note, <Gen. 49>. In this way, I think, this difficult text may be safely understood. There is another way in which the words may be interpreted, which will give a good sense. 'Aawen ... not only signifies iniquity, but most frequently trouble, labour, distress, and affliction; and these indeed are its ideal meanings, and iniquity is only an accommodated or metaphorical one, because of the pain, distress, etc., produced by sin. 'Aamaal ..., translated here perverseness, occurs often in Scripture, but is never translated perverseness except in this place. It signifies simply labour, especially that which is of an afflictive or oppressive kind. The words may therefore be considered as implying that God will not suffer the people either to be exterminated by the sword, or to be brought under a yoke of slavery. Either of these methods of interpretation gives a good sense, but our common version gives none.

Dr. Kennicott contends for the reading of the Samaritan, which, instead of *lo' ... hibiYT ...*, he hath not seen, has *lo' 'abiT*, I do not see, I do not discover anything among them on which I could ground my curse. But the sense above given is to be preferred." The most logical explanation seems to be that the presence of the Lord among Israel would rule out any curse, since God cannot curse Himself.

"The shout of the King" is the battle cry of Israel. This is the sound Balak feared most. It stands for the power that brought about the Exodus and the defeat of Pharaoh and his army. It also spelled the defeat of the people that inhabited Canaan, whose measure of iniquity was full to the brim.

The power of God is presented under the symbol of "a wild ox." The KJV uses the word "unicorn." *Strong's* defines the Hebrew word *re'em* with "a wild bull." *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says here: "It is generally allowed that there is no such beast in nature as the unicorn: i. e, a creature of the horse kind, with one long rich curled horn in the forehead. The creature painted from fancy is represented as one of the supporters of the royal arms of Great Britain. It is difficult to say what kind of beast is intended by the original word. The Septuagint translate the word *monokeros*, the unicorn, or one-horned animal; the Vulgate, sometimes, *unicornus*; and in the text *rhinocerotis*, by which the rhinoceros, a creature which has its name from the horn on its nose, is supposed to be meant. That no single-horned animal can be intended by the reem of Moses, is sufficiently evident from this, that Moses, speaking of Joseph, says, 'he has the HORNS of A unicorn,' or reem, where the horns are spoken of in the plural, the animal in the singular. The

<sup>440</sup> Gal. 3:13,14

<sup>441</sup> NKJ

creature referred to is either the rhinoceros, some varieties of which have two horns on the nose, or the wild bull, urus, or buffalo; though some think the beast intended is a species of goat, but the rhinoceros seems the most likely. There is literally a monoceros, or unicorn, with one large curled ivory horn growing horizontally out of his snout; but this is not a land animal, it is the modiodan or nurwal, a marine animal of the whale kind, a horn of which is now before me, measuring seven feet four inches, but I believe the rhinoceros is that intended by the sacred writers.” One of the “four living creatures” that surround the throne of God is identified by the Apostle John as being a bull.<sup>442</sup> The obvious intent of the image is that the power of God was upon the people of Israel, and that there was no human match for this among the inhabitants of Canaan.

Balaam goes on to say: “There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel. It will now be said of Jacob and of Israel, ‘See what God has done!’ ” These words go beyond the admission that Balaam’s witchcraft is powerless in the presence of the God of Israel; they are a declaration of God’s plan of salvation for the world. God chose a group of nomadic slaves, delivered them from their bondage, and not only made them into a powerful nation, but used them as the vehicle of His revelation in this world. Israel’s status was to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>443</sup> The fact that Balak experienced this as a threat to his existence was the result of his own perversity, not of God’s election.

Most modern translations render vs. 24 with: “The people rise like a lioness.” The KJV uses the term “a great lion.” The Hebrew word *labiy*’, evidently, is used for both the male and female of the “king of the forest.” But *Strong’s Definitions* states: “a lion (properly, a lioness as the fiercer [although not a roarer]).” We find in Balaam’s prophecy both the traces of God’s love in that He chose Israel to be the bearer of His Self revelation in this world, and of His wrath, symbolized in the images of the bull and the lioness. In the above quote from Revelation, we find the lion next to the bull as the guardians of the throne of God. When we say, though, that the lioness symbolizes the wrath of God, we should also state that “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” appears to the Apostle John under the form of “a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain.”<sup>444</sup> The fact, however, that the nature of the Lion of Judah is like that of a Lamb that is slain does not seem to alleviate the fear of wicked men. We read in Revelation: “Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’ ”<sup>445</sup> Only those with a bad conscience can fear “the wrath of the Lamb.”

Balak’s reaction to this prophecy of Balaam is “Neither curse them at all nor bless them at all!” What he probably meant to say was: “If you cannot curse them, at least do not bless them.” If we take Balak’s words literally, we have to conclude that Balak did not know what he wanted Balaam to do. Just file a non-committal report about Israel? All of a sudden Balak wanted to become non-aligned, or neutral. The problem in life is that there is no neutral ground between the curse and the blessing. We have no option but to choose between the two. Balak had initially chosen for the curse; now he wants to cancel the curse, since it appears to be impossible, but he does not want to reverse it. Balak’s attitude defines the dilemma of man throughout the ages. In his farewell address to Israel, Moses said: “This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life.” Balak did not want to choose anymore, but not choosing also is a choice, and it is a bad one.

### 3) Balaam’s third prophecy 23:27-24:25

In spite of Balak’s newly acquired position of neutrality, he wants Balaam to give the curse one more try. This time Balaam is taken to Peor. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says about this place: “[Brought Balaam unto the top of Peor]-- the eminence on the Abarim range which stood a little north of Nebo, and nearer the Israelite encampment, commanding a view of the whole host. The wilderness, the Arabah, or desert tract on both sides of the Dead Sea. The part of it, however, specially referred to was the site of Israel’s encampment, ‘over against Beth-peor’ <Num. 24:2; Deut. 3:29; 4:6; 34:6>.” And *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* says: “Probably the place where the famous Baal-peor had his chief temple. He appears to have been the Priapus of the Moabites, and to have been worshipped with the

<sup>442</sup> Rev. 4:6<sup>b</sup>,7

<sup>443</sup> Ex. 19:6

<sup>444</sup> Rev. 5:6

<sup>445</sup> Rev. 6:15-17

same obscene and abominable rites.” *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* writes: “They change the place. Balak is at last convinced that it is not Balaam’s fault, on whom, before, he had laid the blame, but that really he was under a divine check, and therefore now he hopes to bring him to a place whence God might at least permit him to curse them, v. 27. Probably he and Balaam were the more encouraged thus to repeat their attempt because God had the second time allowed Balaam to go, though he had forbidden him the first time. Since by repeated trials they had carried that point, they hoped in like manner to carry this. Thus because sinners are born with, and sentence against their evil works is not executed speedily, their hearts are the more fully set in them to do evil. The place to which Balak now took Balaam was the top of Peor, the most eminent high place in all his country, where, it is probable, Baal was worshipped, and it was thence called Baal-peor. He chose this place with a hope, either, First, That it being the residence (as he fancied) of Baal, the god of Moab, Jehovah the God of Israel would not, or could not, come hither to hinder the operation; or, Secondly, That, it being a place acceptable to his god, it would be so to the Lord, and there he would be brought into a good humor. Such idle conceits have foolish men of God, and so vain are their imaginations concerning him. Thus the Syrians fancied the Lord to be God of the hills, but not of the valleys <1 Kin. 20:28>, as if he were more powerful in one place than he is in every place.”

*Matthew Henry* is probably most correct in assuming that the change of place to the top of Mount Peor was of spiritual significance. Balak must have thought that, at the sanctuary of his god, the overruling power of YHWH was cancelled out. At least he felt that it was worth trying. So the scene is set for the last curse. Obviously, these last verses of the chapter, verse 27 through 33 belong to the next one. So, we will follow our study in chapter 24.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## 3) Balaam's third prophecy (continued) Ch. 24:1-25

Balaam's prophecy in this chapter is divided into two sections: vs. 1-13, which includes Balak's furious reaction, and vs. 14-25 where Balaam gives an epilogue, in which he pronounces the highest and purest prophecy of this whole section.

Balaam finds himself here at the headquarters of Baal-Peor, one of the foul representatives of God's archenemy. He has come to the conclusion that, not only he is unable to curse Israel, which he knew all the time, but that he is forced to pronounce positive blessings upon the people. This makes him decide to change his approach. We read: "Now when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not resort to sorcery as at other times, but turned his face toward the desert." What form of sorcery Balaam used before, we do not know. It could be that he tried some form of trance, either with or without the help of certain drugs. It could also be that in turning his face toward the desert he expected to be able to use some demonic power. If so, he was frustrated, because what he saw was not the desert demon, but the people of Israel, camped below him. And instead of meeting with a demon, the Spirit of God came upon him. This time he is faced with a reality that he had never experienced before in this way. He may have dabbled in sorcery, and occasionally brushed against something that came from the Lord, but what happened to Balaam here must have been the most awful experience of his life: a personal encounter with the Spirit of the living God. He may have felt something demons feel in the presence of God, which James describes by saying: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-- and shudder."<sup>446</sup> Judas would feel that shudder later when Jesus handed him the piece of bread that represented His broken body. We read in John's Gospel: "Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him."<sup>447</sup> So Balaam encountered his moment of truth.

He responded to this experience with a piece of self propagation, as if this was a normal experience for him: "The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of one whose eye sees clearly, the oracle of one who hears the words of God, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened." Yet, we may be sure that this soothsayer had never had a revelation such as this one before in his life.

The text of Balaam's prophecy is movingly beautiful. We have to bear in mind that he was looking at a camp of tents in the desert. Tents are temporary dwelling places for men; most people in this world live in more permanent structures. The Bible compares our frail and mortal bodies to tents which are meant to be broken down one day and replaced with permanent residences in glory. The Apostle Paul reminds us: "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling."<sup>448</sup> Yet, looking at those tents in the desert, Balaam said: "How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!" The beauty of Israel's tents was derived from the fact that the Lord Himself had pitched His tent among them. We cannot say these words without remembering what John wrote: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling [pitched His tent] among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."<sup>449</sup> And in Balaam's eye the desert of Arboth was transformed by Israel's presence into "gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the LORD, like cedars beside the waters." *The Pulpit Commentary* takes "a river" to mean the river Euphrates. We read: "The river ... means the Euphrates. Balaam combines the pleasant imagery of his own cultivated land with that of the wilder scene amidst which he now stood." Balaam pronounces beautiful the tents, those reminders of our transient existence, of frailty caused by the entrance of sin. We may ask, if that beauty symbolizes the transient, what will the eternal be like? If the presence of God can make life in a tent beautiful, how will it be when we enter the city and see His face?

The same can be said about the transformation of the desert. Israel was camped in a dry and barren country, but Balaam sees them: "Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the LORD, like cedars beside the waters." It reminds us of the man in Psalm One, whose "delight is in

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<sup>446</sup> James 2:19

<sup>447</sup> John 13:26,27

<sup>448</sup> II Cor 5:1,2

<sup>449</sup> John 1:14

the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”<sup>450</sup> The difference is not in the outward circumstances but in the presence of the Lord. “He turned the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs.”<sup>451</sup>

The King to whom Balaam refers cannot have been any of the Israelite kings who had not even appeared yet on the horizon at this point. Israel was still a theocracy, and God Himself was their King. The phrase may contain a prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah, like the Star of Jacob which Balaam mentions later on. Agag was probably not the name of a certain person living at that time, but a title. *The Pulpit Commentary* says here: “The name Agag ... does not occur again except as the name of the king of Amalek whom Saul conquered and Samuel slew (I Sam. xv.); yet it may safely be assumed that it was the official title of all the kings of Amalek, resembling in this ‘Abimelech’ and ‘Pharaoh.’ ” The fact that at least one, and probably two references to the coming of the Messiah are made in Balaam’s prophecy is a clear proof of the divine inspiration of these verses.

The text of the verses 8 and 9 is almost literally the same as the previous oracle.<sup>452</sup> Balaam’s closing words: “May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed!” are for Balak the straw that breaks the camel’s back. They make Balaam the blessed one and Balak the cursed. The unspoken curse for Israel boomeranged to Balak. His majesty loses his temper, and he tells the prophet to go home without payment. Whether Balaam actually went home or not is a point of discussion among the scholars. Since Balaam was found among those slain in ch. 31:8 when Israel actually invaded Midian, some experts think that there were two people with the name of Balaam. This seems highly unlikely, as we shall see later.

Before taking leave, Balaam pronounces his most profound and far-reaching prophecy, and he does this without being invited to do so. This prophecy is not a curse in reverse, like the preceding ones, but it is the result of the presence of the Holy Spirit who overpowered Balaam. He may have wanted to shut off the flow of words, but found himself unable to do so. But even in pronouncing this piece of genuine prophecy, Balaam manages to turn things to his own advantage. He introduces the Word which God puts in his mouth with some advertisement about his own prophetic gifts. He introduces the prophecy as: “The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of one whose eye sees clearly, the oracle of one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened.” This soothsayer has reached the point of no return. It is true that he heard the words of God and had received knowledge from the Most High, and received a vision from the Almighty. His body falls prostrate before God, but his dark soul is not willing to give up the secret plan he had formed to corrupt Israel through the seduction by women connected to the Baal-Peor worship. The Word of God that comes out of his mouth has not changed his heart. Balaam goes down in history as a false prophet, “who loved the wages of wickedness.”<sup>453</sup> We should pause and stand in awe before the tragedy of this man’s life. He handled the Word of God, while at the same time searing his heart against this very Word. Balaam could have been saved by this very Word of God, had he done what James advises the New Testament Christians to do: “Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”<sup>454</sup> Balaam’s attitude shows us the awesome power of man to resist the Word of God. Paul said: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”<sup>455</sup> When God created light, the light did not offer any resistance to the Word of creation; but when God speaks the same Word to make His light shine in our hearts, we have the option to refuse.

Not only did Balaam refuse to be saved, he went on prophesying the Word of God, and he fell prostrate before God, as if he was the holiest man in the world. Whom did Balaam want to deceive? His greed had caused a complete moral blindness.

Yet, the content of his prophecy is among the most remarkable ones in the whole Old Testament. This prophet foretells the coming of the Messiah about two millennia before His arrival. His words transcend the boundaries of his time. The Messiah is described with words like “a star,” “a scepter,” and “a

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<sup>450</sup> Ps. 1:2,3

<sup>451</sup> Ps. 107:35

<sup>452</sup> See ch. 23:22,24

<sup>453</sup> II Pet. 2:15

<sup>454</sup> James 1:21

<sup>455</sup> II Cor. 4:6

ruler.” The enemies are called with local names, such as “Moab,” and “Edom,” but other designations indicate that the impact of the Messiah’s coming will be of global proportions. This is evident in “all the sons of Sheth,” and “the survivors of the city.”

In his prophecy about Moab, the prophet Jeremiah seems to quote from Balaam’s prophecy by saying: “In the shadow of Heshbon the fugitives stand helpless, for a fire has gone out from Heshbon, a blaze from the midst of Sihon; it burns the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of the noisy boasters.”<sup>456</sup> The fact that Jeremiah substitutes the clause “all the sons of Sheth” with “the noisy boasters” has caused quite a debate among the scholars. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, most Jewish commentators follow the Septuagint, and understand the phrase to mean the sons of Seth, the son of Adam, that is all mankind. The commentary further remarks that: “Jewish prophecy, from beginning to end, contemplated the Messiah as the Conqueror, the subduer, and even the Destroyer of all the heathen, *i.e.* of all who were not Jews. It is only in the New Testament that the iron scepter with which he was to dash in pieces the heathen (Ps. ii. 9) becomes the pastoral staff wherewith he shepherds them. ... The prophecy was that Messiah should destroy the heathen; the fulfillment that he destroyed not them, but their heathenism (cf. *e.g.* Ps. cxlix. 6-9 with James v. 20).” The meaning of the “iron scepter” is probably best explained in one of the later chapters of Revelation, where John describes Christ as the rider on a white horse, and he says: “Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.”<sup>457</sup> The “iron scepter” is the equivalent of the “sharp sword” which comes out of His mouth. The victory of Christ over the nations is not the outcome of a physical war in which Jesus defeats the others, but it is the result of a moral judgment by the Word of God. The fact that the pictures used in the book of Revelation are those of physical carnage may confuse us, but we should understand that the sword that kills is not a sword that is in Christ’s hand, but one that comes out of His mouth.

Neither Balaam nor Balak would have understood this. They only feared and occupied themselves with “those who kill the body.” Jesus tells us: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”<sup>458</sup> In a sense Balaam saw the day of Christ, as Abraham did before him. Jesus’ refers to this in John’s Gospel by saying: “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”<sup>459</sup> Balaam did not see Christ’s Day experientially as Abraham did, but he saw it as a visionary in the prophecy he pronounced. His reaction, however, was far from Abraham’s rejoicing. We read that he says: “Ah, who can live when God does this?” To him the aroma of Christ was a smell of death.<sup>460</sup>

Balaam’s parting oracle is not a chronological bird’s eye view of history. He begins in the center with the coming of Christ, both His first coming and His second, and from there he moves back to the conquest of Canaan by Israel, and to the Assyrian captivity. All of Balaam’s prophecy will ultimately be fulfilled when the last enemy is destroyed. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”<sup>461</sup>

There is much in Balaam’s last prophecy that is hard to unravel. Scholars disagree about the meaning of some of the names he mentions. There is the strange mention of the ships coming from the shores of Kittim, which some believe refers to Italy, others to Cyprus. But the message of judgment to come upon this world is loud and clear. The Messiah will come from Israel and will judge the world.

For those who reject the possibility of prophecy that deals with future events, Balaam’s words can only be explained by moving them to a later date, like after the disappearance of the Macedonian empire. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this by saying: “The difficulty and arbitrary character of such an assumption becomes the more evident the more it is considered; nor does it seem consistent with the form into which the predictions are cast. A patriotic Jew looking *back* from the days of Alexander or his successors would not call the great Eastern power by the name of Asshur, because two subsequent empires had arisen in the place of Assyria proper. But that Balaam, looking *forward* down the dim vista of the

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<sup>456</sup> Jer. 48:45

<sup>457</sup> Rev. 19:15

<sup>458</sup> Matt. 10:28

<sup>459</sup> John 8:56

<sup>460</sup> See II Cor. 2:15,16

<sup>461</sup> I Cor. 15:24-26

future, should see Asshur, and only Asshur, is in perfect keeping with what we know of prophetic perspective, - the further off the events described by inward vision, the more extreme the foreshortening, - according to which law it is well known that the first and second advents of Christ are inextricably blended in almost every case."

*The Pulpit Commentary* has an interesting addition to its verse-by-verse comment, which is called *Notes on the Prophecies of Balaam*. The writer tries to sort out the differences between the local elements of Balaam's prophecy and the Messianic character of the content. He makes an effort to explain the, in his view, incongruity between the ruthlessness of the victors and the actual identity of the Messiah whom Balaam predicts. Judging from, what he calls, a higher moral standard, he refers Balaam's feelings about the subject of his own prophecy to a more primitive period in which annihilation of enemies was considered a lofty feat. All this is open for discussion, of course. One profound statement in the commentary is worth quoting, however: "God ever reveals the supernatural through the natural, the heavenly through the earthly, the future through the present." It is certainly true that Balaam himself could not have understood the portent of his prophecy, but if we look at his words in the light of Scripture as a whole, we can understand clearly what the Holy Spirit has to say to us.

The remaining mystery in these pages is how the information in these chapters about Balaam and his curse came into Israel's possession. There are several possibilities, such as a written account that Balaam may have left behind, which was found upon him when he was killed, or even a report as a result of an interrogation of the prophet after his capture and before his execution. None of this is reported. It could be that Moses received the information through a direct revelation from the Lord, but that seems to be less likely, since human avenues were available.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

**J. Failure with the Moabites** 25:1-18

This chapter describes Israel's seduction by Moab, and God's judgment upon those that sinned. It is in fact, what our heading calls "Israel's failure with the Moabites. The whole episode is commemorated in the psalms, in which we read: "They yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor and ate sacrifices offered to lifeless gods; they provoked the LORD to anger by their wicked deeds, and a plague broke out among them. But Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was checked. This was credited to him as righteousness for endless generations to come."<sup>462</sup>

As we mentioned before, the plot to seduce Israelites by using temple prostitutes who invited them for a meal at the temple, originated with Balaam. This piece of key information is omitted in this chapter, but when Israel finally takes revenge upon the Moabites and Midianites and the army captures some of the women and keeps them alive, Moses says: "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the LORD's people."<sup>463</sup> Evidently, a lot of details are left out, suggesting that that is a page of shame in Israel's history, which is better written in as brief a form as possible. It is difficult to understand why *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests at this point: "This commencement of sin seems to have been made by Israel without special provocation."<sup>464</sup> The very victories won, and the comparative ease and affluence now enjoyed, after long marches and hardships, may well have predisposed them to this sin, for which they now for the first time found abundant opportunity." The *Commentary* completely disregards "Balaam's advice" in this carefully laid plot. It is true, however, that man is often most vulnerable to temptation after victories have been won.

It seems strange that Balaam's role in this event is never even mentioned in this chapter; we can only find out about it by piecing various scattered fragments of information together. Evidently, the point Moses wants to make in recounting this story is not Israel's failure, but Phinehas' role in the restoration of the nation's testimony. In giving testimony about episodes of sin in our lives, it is good policy to be brief about the details of our failure and to put the full emphasis on the restoration the Lord brings about.

Balaam's plan indicates that Balaam was a good psychologist. He knew that Israel's resistance to certain forms of temptation would be very low. The enticement probably came in the form of a dinner invitation. For people who for forty years had lived on manna and water, such a temptation would be more than "what is common to man," and people were "tempted beyond what they could bear," to use the words of the Apostle Paul.<sup>465</sup> The initial invitation probably did not contain any suggestion of sex and idolatry. The Israelites would only have to come and stare at tables full of food, such as they had never seen in their lives. Once their resistance was weakened, the rest would be easy. These men, who had lived in the desert for forty years, were probably not used to alcohol, and the excellent wine that was served must have made the task for Moab easy. Nobody will have guessed, in the early stages, that the demon Baal of Peor was waiting for them around the corner. Balaam had guessed right.

His comprehension about the character of God was correct also. He understood that if those men could be led into idol worship, even if they were drunk when they yielded, the result would be equally destructive as a curse pronounced over them. The divine protection over them would be torn. He knew God's standard of right and wrong.

The event is reported in a very sober way: "While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them." The satisfaction of those men's appetites led straight into the arms of one of the worst idols of that time, and to the one who was behind the idol: Satan.

*The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that the Baal of Peor was a god that required rites of obscenity, and that Peor "was the distinguishing name of Baal or Chemosh when worshipped as the god of reproduction with the abominable rites proper to this cultus."

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<sup>462</sup> Ps. 106:28-31

<sup>463</sup> Ch. 31:16

<sup>464</sup> Italics are mine.

<sup>465</sup> I Cor. 10:13



Appetite for good food, and fulfillment of sexual desires is not, in itself, sinful, but we have to be careful as to how we satisfy our desires. If our bodies, instead of our spirits, dictate our behavior to us, we are going along a dangerous path. People who have never dedicated their bodies to the Lord have no resistance against demonic temptations in the physical realm. That is the reason Paul urges us: “to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.”<sup>466</sup> The Apostle also spells out what the function of our bodies should be in our relationship with the Lord. He writes to the Corinthians: “ ‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food’ -- but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, ‘The two will become one flesh.’ But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”<sup>467</sup> Paul does not mention demonic involvement at this point, probably because it was general knowledge that all prostitution was related to idol worship. There was no secular prostitution, as we know it now. Actually, prostitution is never secular!

The burning of God’s anger meant that some kind of plague erupted among the people, and the anger was also demonstrated in the punishment God wanted Moses to carry out. Whether the word “the plague” means that people died with the bubonic plague, or by some other kind of disaster, is not clearly spelled out. The verdict was that the leaders of the people had to be executed. *The Pulpit Commentary* takes this to mean all the heads of the people, as the phrase reads in the KJV, regardless of whether they participated in this sin or not. We read: “...the chiefs, who ought to have prevented, and might have prevented, this monstrous irregularity, but who seem, if we may judge from the case of Zimri, to have countenanced it. The mere neglect of duty in so gross a case was reason enough for summary execution.” It seems hard to accept, though, that God would condemn to death those who had not themselves actively participated in this sinful behavior. The NIV, with its rendering : “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD’s fierce anger may turn away from Israel,’ ” seems to suggest that “all the leaders of these people” who committed the sin are meant. The following verse, vs. 5, bears out this supposition. The fact that two different words are used, “leaders” in vs. 4, and “judges” in vs. 5 also confirms this interpretation. The execution was probably done, either by stoning, or with the sword, with subsequent hanging of the bodies in public display. *The Pulpit Commentary’s* suggestion that the leaders would have been killed by impalement or crucifixion, seems unbelievable. Each clan leader, which is called “judge” here, was responsible for meting out justice within his own jurisdiction.

All this is recounted in brief to come to the point of the story, which is the behavior of Aaron’s grandson, Phinehas. One of the offenders is a certain Zimri from the tribe of Simeon. He carried the offense even further than the others who had been involved in this affair, in bringing the Midianite woman into the Israelite camp and taking her into his tent. We get the impression that the greater part of the nation was in a state of shock, otherwise Zimri would not have been able to carry out this act of defiance publicly. Phinehas’ reaction in seeing what happened was fierce anger. He followed the couple in their tent and killed them both with his spear. It appears that the killing of both was done with one spear thrust and that, therefore, the couple was probably in intimate embrace at the moment they were killed. They died in their sin, and appeared before the judgment seat of God, so to speak, as “one flesh.” One shudders at the thought that some people die in the act of committing sin, and are, as it were, whisked away before the throne of judgment with all the evidence of their crime. We have to remember that Zimri’s sin was more than a satisfying of his sexual lust. The sexual sin in this chapter was connected to the worship of Satan.

God created man as a sexual being, as male and female, to be able to give physical expression to a spiritual relationship. The key to the mystery is found in Paul’s writing: “ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound

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<sup>466</sup> Rom. 12:1,2

<sup>467</sup> I Cor. 6:13-20

mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church.”<sup>468</sup> Satan has thrown his fiercest attacks against God in the effort to pervert man’s sexual behavior, so that it would not longer be the expression of God’s mystery in man, but the mere fulfillment of a physical desire. He has had overwhelming success on this point, and in the case of Zimri he scored one hundred percent.

Phinehas seems to have understood the issue, its source, and portent, better than anyone else among the people. He may not have been aware of Balaam’s role in the event at this point, but he must have grasped that what Zimri, and some of the other men who had been seduced, had done went against the core of Israel’s reason for existence. If unpunished, it would have brought about the curse Balak had been seeking to put upon Israel. Being the grandson of Aaron, and the eventual successor in the high-priestly office, he had tasted the holiness of God, and recognized, therefore, immediately the attack upon God’s holiness when he saw it. That is the reason that God singled him out for a special recognition, although he, certainly, was not the only one who had executed people involved in the Baal of Peor case. God recommended Phinehas for the zeal he demonstrated for God’s honor, which, in God’s own words, equaled God’s own zeal. The Hebrew says literally: “while he was zealous with my zeal.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* has a rather lengthy, and very profound NOTE ON THE ZEAL OF PHINEHAS at the end of this section, from which we quote some portions: “The act of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, in slaying Zimri and Cosbi is one of the most memorable in the Old Testament; not so much, however, in itself, as in the commendation bestowed upon it by God. It is unquestionably surprising at first sight that an act of unauthorized zeal, which might so readily be made (as indeed it was made) the excuse for deeds of murderous fanaticism, would be commended in the strongest terms by the Almighty; that an act of summary vengeance, which we find it somewhat hard to justify on moral grounds, should be made in a peculiar sense and in a special degree the pattern of the great atonement wrought by the Savior of mankind; but this aspect of the deed in the eyes of God by its very unexpectedness draws our attention to it, and obliges us to consider wherein its distinctive religious character and excellence lay.”

The commentary proceeds to draw various parallels between Phinehas’ act of atonement and other particular acts carried out by men in office and privately: such as Aaron’s atonement for the people when he stood between the living and the dead in ch. 16:46-48, and also Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. The commentary quotes Ps. 105, where we read: “But Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was checked. This was credited to him as righteousness for endless generations to come.”<sup>469</sup> From James’ epistle on Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac,<sup>470</sup> where we read that Abraham’s obedience was credited to him as righteousness,<sup>471</sup> the line is drawn between Phinehas and Abraham on account of the righteousness that was credited to both of them.

In speaking of the atonement Phinehas brought about, the commentary says: “What he did was not done officially (for he held no office), nor was it done by command (for the offenders were not under his jurisdiction as judge), nor in fulfillment of any revealed law or duty (for no blame would have attached to him if he had let it alone), and yet it had the same effect in staying the plague as the act of Aaron when he stood between the living and the dead with the hallowed fire in his hand (see on ch. xvi. 46-48). Of both it is said that ‘he made an atonement for the people,’ and so far they both appear as having power with God to turn away his wrath and stay his avenging hand. But the atonement made by Aaron was official, for he was the anointed high priest, and, being made with incense from the sanctuary, it was made in accordance with and upon the strength of a ceremonial law laid down by God whereby he had bound himself to exercise his Divine right of pardon. The act of Phinehas, on the contrary, had no legal or ritual value; there is no power of atonement in the blood of sinners, nor had the death of 24,000 guilty people had any effect in turning away the wrath of God from them that survived. It remains, therefore, a startling truth that the deed of Phinehas is the only act neither official nor commanded, but originating in the impulses of the actor himself, to which the power of atoning for sin is ascribed in the Old Testament.... Again, the act of Phinehas merited the highest reward from God, a reward which was promised to him in the most absolute terms. Because he had done this thing he should have God’s covenant of peace, he and his seed after him,

<sup>468</sup> Eph. 5:31,32

<sup>469</sup> Ps. 106:30,31

<sup>470</sup> See James 2:23

<sup>471</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* does not do justice at this point to the text in James. It does not say that righteousness was imputed to Abraham because of his obedient sacrifice, but “the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” Righteousness had been imputed to Abraham before, not at the moment of the sacrifice of Isaac.

even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood. This promise must mean that he and his seed should have power with God for ever to make peace between heaven and earth, and to make reconciliation for the sins of the people; and, meaning this, it is a republication in favor of Phinehas, and in more absolute terms, of the covenant made with Levi as represented by Aaron (see on Mal. ii. 4,5). Nor is this all. In Ps. cvi. 31 it is said of his deed that 'it was counted unto him for righteousness unto all generations for evermore.' This word 'counted' or 'imputed' is the same ... which is used of Abraham in Gen. xv. 6, and the very words of the Septuagint here ... are applied to the obedience of Abraham in James ii. 23. It appears then that righteousness was imputed to Phinehas, as to the father of the faithful, with this distinction, that to Phinehas it was imputed as an everlasting righteousness, which is not said of Abraham. Now if we compare the two, it must be evident that the act of Phinehas was not, like Abraham's an act of self-sacrificing obedience, nor in any special sense an act of faith. While both acted under the sense of duty, the following of duty in Abraham's case put the greatest possible strain upon all the natural impulses of mind and heart; in the case of Phinehas it altogether coincided with the impulses of his own will. If faith was imputed to Abraham for righteousness, it is clear that zeal was imputed to Phinehas for righteousness for evermore. This being so, it is necessary in the second place to point out that the act in question (like that of Abraham in sacrificing his son) was distinctly one of moral virtue according to the standard then Divinely allowed. An act which was in itself wrong, or of doubtful rectitude, could not form the ground for such praise and promise, even supposing that they really looked far beyond the act itself."

In questioning the morality of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, and of Phinehas act of revenge, the commentary touches upon the paradox of faith, as Soren Kierkegaard expounds in his profound treatise entitled *Fear and Trembling*. Was Abraham a hero of faith, he asks, or was he a murderer? The same question could be asked about Phinehas act of revenge. *The Pulpit Commentary* states very correctly: "Now it is clear (1) that under no circumstances would a similar act be justifiable now; (2) that no precedent could be established by it then."

The commentary proceeds by drawing conclusions from Phinehas' act to the doctrine of atonement. We read: "The act of Phinehas stands, in some respects upon a higher level than all the types and shadows of the cross which had gone before; being neither an act of submission to a definite command, like the sacrifice of Isaac, nor a piece of ordered ritual, like the sending forth of the goat for Azazel; but a spontaneous deed, having a moral value of its own. Partly at least for the sake of what it was, not merely what it showed in a figure, it was accepted as an atonement for the sin of Israel (which was very gross), and was imputed to its author for an everlasting righteousness. Phinehas, therefore, in one very important sense, would seem to bear a stronger resemblance to our Lord in his atoning work than any other person in the Old Testament. It may therefore be submitted that we must seek the truest ground of the atonement wrought by Christ not in the simple fact of the passion and death of the God-man, nor in the greatness or value of his sufferings as such; but in that zeal for God, that Divine indignation against sin as the opposite of God, that consuming desire to cause it to cease, which first animated the life of the Redeemer, and then informed his death. Phinehas in his measure, and according to his lights, was governed by the same Spirit, and surrendered himself to the prompting of the same Spirit, by which Christ offered himself without spot unto God. And that Spirit was the Spirit of a consuming zeal, wherein our Lord hastened with an entire eagerness of purpose (Luke xii. 50; John ii. 17; xii. 27, 28, &c.) to 'condemn sin in the flesh' and so to glorify God, and to accomplish the object of his mission (Rom. viii. 3), not by the summary execution of individual sinners, but after an infinitely higher fashion, by the sacrifice of himself as the representative of the whole sinful race."

Phinehas' act was an act of anger, which in itself would be something to be frowned upon. We tend to think that all anger is negative and sinful. The Bible teaches that some anger is positive and holy. In Ezekiel's days God said: "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none."<sup>472</sup> It seems that, at this point in history, God found such a man in Phinehas.

The above remarks on the subject by *The Pulpit Commentary* give a very profound insight in the incident described in this chapter. We tend to stare at Christ's sacrifice of atonement for sin, only from the angle of the prophecy of Isaiah and the words of John the Baptist. "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."<sup>473</sup> And, "Look, the Lamb of

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<sup>472</sup> Ezek. 22:30

<sup>473</sup> Isa. 53:7

God, who takes away the sin of the world!”<sup>474</sup> It was not meekness alone that brought Christ to the cross; it was His zeal for the glory of God. The Apostle John saw this clearly when he applied David’s quote to Christ by saying: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”<sup>475</sup> It was this zeal also that made Christ’s anger flare up at the sight of men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money in the temple courts.<sup>476</sup> The same zeal and anger was demonstrated at Lazarus’ grave when, in John’s words, Jesus “was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.”<sup>477</sup> The Greek word *enebrimeesato* means “snorting with indignation.” Jesus was just as much driven by His self-sacrificing love, as by His wrath and anger toward Satan, when He gave Himself up to be crucified, carrying the sin of the world.

There can be no doubt about the fact that Phinehas was angry also. He must have seen through Balaam’s scheme, although he may not have known about Balaam at this point. He understood that what had happened went well beyond carnal lust and fornication, and that Israel was being drawn into the net demonic powers. He reacted violently against this, and God blessed him for it. Phinehas’ act was unique, and, as *The Pulpit Commentary* remarked, it should never be seen as a precedent. But if some of his anger and zeal could spill over and affect the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, the results would be a very wholesome revival.

In making a covenant of a lasting priesthood with Phinehas and his descendants, God emphasized that priesthood should be characterized by the zeal of Phinehas, and of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our attitude against God’s archenemy should be, as David put it: “Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you?”<sup>478</sup>

The verses 14 and 15 give the names of the Israelite man as Zimri son of Salu, the leader of a Simeonite family, and the name of the Midianite woman as Cozbi daughter of Zur, a tribal chief of a Midianite family.” As *The Pulpit Commentary* points out, Zur is mentioned, in ch. 31:8, as one of the five kings, or tribal chiefs which was killed when Israel invaded Midian. The commentary says: “That the daughter of such a man should have been selected, and should have been willing, to play such a part throws a strong light upon the studied character and the peculiar danger of the seduction.”

The whole incident became a reason for a declaration of war with Moab and the Midianites. It is true that Moab is not mentioned at this point, but this does not mean that they are excepted from the forthcoming hostilities. After all, it was the king of Moab who had initiated the matter by calling for Balaam to put a curse on Israel. He not only failed in his objective, but he called disaster upon himself and his nation by invoking the wrath of God and of Israel. As we saw before, both Midian and Moab were deeply involved in the plot. Israel had initially treated Moab as a friendly relative, but all of this changed after this.

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<sup>474</sup> John 1:29

<sup>475</sup> John 2:17. See Ps. 69:9

<sup>476</sup> Matt. 21:12,13; John 2:14-16, etc.

<sup>477</sup> John 11:33

<sup>478</sup> Ps. 139:21

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### Part Three: The Preparation of the New Generation (26:1-36:13)

#### I. *The Reorganization of Israel* 26:1-27:23

- A. The Second Census 26:1-51
- B. Method for Dividing the Land 26:52-56
- C. Exceptions for Dividing the Land 26:57-65

#### A. **The Second Census** 26:1-51

It is, in a way, regrettable that our outline cuts up this chapter into three sections, as if the verses about the census had no relationship to the rest of the chapter. The reason for this census, which was quite different from the one taken before, was to have a basis for the division of the promised land. The main reason for the first census was the mobilization of the army. At the counting of each tribe we read the phrase: "All the men twenty years old or more who were able to serve in the army were listed by name, one by one...."<sup>479</sup> In this census the number of people in each tribe would determine their allotment in the land God promised to them, although the phrase: "all those twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army of Israel," is found in the beginning of this chapter also. This is understandable since there would be no occupation of the inheritance without a military conquest. *The Pulpit Commentary* says on this point: "The mustering according to families ... was the distinguishing feature of this census, because it was preparatory to a territorial settlement in Canaan, in which the unity of the family should be preserved as well as the unity of the tribe."

We are told in vs. 1 that God ordered the census after the plague, that is after the death of the 24,000 who died as a result of their involvement with the Baal of Peor. The plague cleansed the nation of those elements that were not completely dedicated to the Lord. The census was not taken for God's benefit, of course. He, who has numbered the very hairs of our head,<sup>480</sup> would certainly know how many dedicated people were left in Israel. The Apostle Paul writes to Timothy: "Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.'"<sup>481</sup> The plague had taken care of at least some wickedness. The thought of moral cleansing is a recurring theme in the account of the census. The verses 9 and 10 specifically mention the rebellion of Korah and his followers. Also, the sin of Nabad and Abihu, who were killed when they entered the tabernacle without authorization, is mentioned in vs. 61.

The tribes are listed apparently in random order. Reuben, Jacob's oldest son, is mentioned first, but the last one in the list is Naphtali, who was not the youngest. As in the first census, the order seems to be the placement of the tribes in their encampment. It seems that the numbers were rounded off to the nearest hundred, although an exception is made for Reuben in this census, his total being 43,730. This same kind of irregularity we find in the first census in the count of Gad, which was given as 45,650.<sup>482</sup>

The final results of the census show that the number of Israelites had remained more or less stationary. The total in the first count was 603,550, and in the second 601,730, which means a decrease of 1820. On a population of several million such a difference is negligible. It is obvious, though, that there had been no population increase during the desert journey. Actually, there would have been an increase if Baal had not claimed the lives of 24,000. Also, the disobedience of the people in their refusal to enter Canaan the first time resulted in the death of everyone over the age of twenty. This judgement surely depleted the population growth.

*The Pulpit Commentary* writes about the tally of the census: "The one fact which these figures establish in a startling way is, that while the nation as a whole remained nearly stationary in point of numbers, the various tribes show a most unexpected variation. Manasseh, *e. g.*, has increased his population 63 per cent. in spite of the fact that there is not one man left of sixty years of age, while Simeon has decreased in the same proportion. There is indeed little difficulty in accounting for diminishing numbers amidst so many hardships, and after so many plagues. The fact that Zimri belonged to the tribe of Simeon,

<sup>479</sup> Ch. 1:20, etc.

<sup>480</sup> Matt. 10:30

<sup>481</sup> II Tim. 2:19

<sup>482</sup> See Num. 1:25

and that this tribe was omitted soon after the blessing of Moses (Deut. xxxiii.), may easily lead to the conclusion that Simeon was more than any other tribe involved in the sin of Baal-Peor and the punishment which followed. But when we compare, *e. g.*, the twin tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, concerning whom nothing distinctive is either stated or hinted, whether bad or good; and when we find that the one has decreased 20 per cent. and the other increased 63 per cent. during the same interval, and under the same general circumstances, we cannot even guess at the causes which must have been at work to produce so striking a difference. It is evident that each tribe had its own history apart from the general history of the nation - a history which had the most important results for its own members, but of which we know almost nothing. It is observable, however, that all the tribes under the leadership of Judah increased, whilst all those in the camp of Reuben decreased."

Vs. 3 says, rather cryptically, that "Moses and Eleazar the priest spoke with them," without specifying who the "them" were that were addressed. It is generally taken for granted that the tribal leaders are meant. Not, however, the same ones as were in charge of the first census, as *The Pulpit Commentary* seems to indicate, since those would have died in the desert. It cannot be assumed that people under the age of twenty would have had the responsibility to take a census. Also the statement: "These were the Israelites who came out of Egypt" has raised some questions, since the majority of the generation that was about to enter Canaan had been born in the desert. The Septuagint uses the sentence as the heading for the following verses, as does the NIV: "These were the Israelites who came out of Egypt: The descendants of Reuben..." God sees the nation of Israel as one. Hosea's prophecy, which is quoted by Matthew, actually indicates that, in God's eyes, all the generations of Israel were, so to speak, wrapped up in the one Person of Jesus Christ. In Hosea's prophecy we read: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."<sup>483</sup> Matthew puts this in perspective when, after the birth of Christ, Joseph takes Mary and the baby to Egypt. We read in the Gospel: "So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'<sup>484</sup>

At several points there are some interesting details added, which, as we mentioned before, reinforce the thought that a cleansing had taken place among the people. In Reuben's genealogy, for instance, the sons of Pallu are mentioned in detail since his grandchildren, Dathan and Abiram were involved in the rebellion which was headed by Korah. Also, vs. 11, which states: "The line of Korah, however, did not die out," or, as the KJV has it: "Notwithstanding the children of Korah died not," is not strictly a sentence which one would expect to find in the report of a census. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this verse: "The confused nature of the narrative in ch. xvi. is well exemplified by this statement; we should certainly have supposed from ch. xvi. 32 that Korah's sons had perished with him, if we were not here told to the contrary. The sons of Korah are frequently mentioned among the Levites, and Samuel himself would seem to have been of them...; it is, however, slightly doubtful whether the Kohathite Korah of 1 Chron. vi. 22, the ancestor of Samuel, is the same as the Izharite Korah, the ancestor of Heman, in 1 Chron. vi. 38."

The mention of Er and Onan in connection with the tribe of Judah is even more amazing, since this history goes back to the time before Israel even settled in Egypt. It is recorded of both Er and Onan that the Lord put them to death because of their wickedness.<sup>485</sup>

About the sons of Manasseh *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "There is considerable difficulty about the families of this tribe, because they are not recorded in Genesis, while the details preserved in 1 Chron. vii. 14-17 are so obscure and fragmentary as to be extremely perplexing. According to the present enumeration there were eight families in Manasseh, one named after his son Machir, one after his grandson Gilead, and the rest after his great-grandsons. The list given in Josh. xvii. 1,2, agrees with this, except that the Machirites and the Gileadites are apparently identified. It appears from the genealogy in 1 Chron. vii. that the mother of Machir was a stranger from Aram, the country of Laban. This may perhaps account for the fact that Machir's son received the name of Gilead, for Gilead was the border land between Aram and Canaan; it more probably explains the subsequent allotment of territory in that direction to the Machirites (ch. xxxii. 40). Gilead appears again as a proper name in Judges xi. 2."

Zelophehad son of Hephher is mentioned separately because of the fact that he had no sons but five daughters, whose names are mentioned. This situation, which must have been unusual, since it is the only

<sup>483</sup> Hosea 11:1

<sup>484</sup> Matt. 2:14,15

<sup>485</sup> See Gen. 38:7,10

case mentioned, led to some special legislation, establishing the right of heritage, which is dealt with in the following chapter, as well as in ch. 36:1-13.

It is interesting that neither in connection with the first census, nor in relation to the one we are studying the matter of ransom money is mentioned. Yet, the law clearly stated: "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the LORD a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them. Each one who crosses over to those already counted is to give a half shekel, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. This half shekel is an offering to the LORD. All who cross over, those twenty years old or more, are to give an offering to the LORD. The rich are not to give more than a half shekel and the poor are not to give less when you make the offering to the LORD to atone for your lives. Receive the atonement money from the Israelites and use it for the service of the Tent of Meeting. It will be a memorial for the Israelites before the LORD, making atonement for your lives."<sup>486</sup> We may assume, though, that, although not mentioned, this money was collected.

#### **B. Method for Dividing the Land 26:52-56**

The verses 52-56 reiterate the purpose of this census. The land was to be distributed among the tribes in accordance with the count of each tribe, that is the size of the territory. The locations were to be determined by the drawing of lots. At least this seems to be the meaning of the verses 53 and 55. The paraphrase of TLB is probably clearest at this point: "Then the Lord told Moses to divide the land among the tribes in proportion to their population, as indicated by the census-- the larger tribes to be given more land, the smaller tribes less land. 'Let the representatives of the larger tribes have a lottery, drawing for the larger sections,' the Lord instructed, 'and let the smaller tribes draw for the smaller sections.' "

#### **C. Exceptions for Dividing the Land 26:57-65**

The verses 57-61 give us the count of the Levites, as separate from the other tribes, in the same way as in the first census, the reason being that they would not receive any allotment in the promised land, apart from certain cities with the surrounding pastures. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* writes the following about the inheritance of the Levites: "Unlike the other tribes of Israel, the Levites received no territorial inheritance in the promised land of Canaan. Their portion was to be God Himself <Num. 18:20>, who commanded that 48 cities be set apart for them, along with enough pasture for their cattle <Num. 35:1-8>. They were to receive the tithes due God from the fruits of the fields, the flocks and herds, the fruits of the firstborn, and certain portions of the people's sacrificial offerings <Num. 18:24>. Of these tithes, the Levites had to turn over a tithe (a tenth part) to the priests <Num. 18:26>." This ensured that the Levites would be scattered throughout the land instead of living all together in certain allocated territories. The matter of the cities to be allotted to them is dealt with in ch. 35:1-8.

The status of the Levites indicates that the whole matter of the conquest and possession of Canaan was an image of a higher spiritual reality. God wanted Israel to understand that there was more to be received than territory and fields. He had said to Aaron: "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites."<sup>487</sup> In this Aaron and the Levites represented Israel's ideal. The writer to the Hebrews stresses the fact that Israel's entering in the promised land was an image of our heritage in Christ. We read: "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first."<sup>488</sup> The same epistle connects the conquest of Canaan with the reality of the Sabbath. In another chapter we read: "It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.' For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."<sup>489</sup>

The exceptions for dividing the land, as our outline calls it, emphasize the real meaning of this chapter. God has counted us, and the ransom for our souls has been paid. We are the recipients of an

<sup>486</sup> Ex. 30:12-16

<sup>487</sup> Ch. 18:20

<sup>488</sup> Heb. 3:14

<sup>489</sup> Heb. 4:6-10

inheritance that surpasses our wildest imagination. The Apostle Peter touches upon this in both of his epistles, where he writes: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."<sup>490</sup> And: "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires."<sup>491</sup> What God is saying to us in this chapter is: "I am your share and your inheritance."

*The Pulpit Commentary* has some interesting remarks in its "Homiletics," in the concluding section of its analysis of this chapter. The author of the article clearly takes sides in the debate about election and eternal security, into which we will not enter. His observation on the following are, however, worthwhile copying: "That there should have been but one census taken, since all who were numbered at Sinai were numbered for victory and for speedy inheritance in Canaan. That a second muster was needful at all was entirely due to the rebellion at Kadesh, and the subsequent rejection of that generation." The second census was indeed a record of man's failure, and of the immutability of God's plan of salvation.

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<sup>490</sup> I Pet. 1:3-5

<sup>491</sup> II Pet. 1:4



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

This chapter deals with two matters which, in our outline, fall under the heading:

- C. Exceptions for Dividing the Land 27:1-11, and
- D. Appointment for Israel's New Leader 27:12-23

### C. Exceptions for Dividing the Land: The inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad 27:1-11

The incident involving the inheritance of Zelophehad proves, on the one hand, that Judaism was not meant to be a purely male dominated religion, and on the other hand, that the name of the male members of a family marked the inheritance God gave to His people. *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks on this: "The case of Zelophehad's daughters is no doubt in keeping with that favorable consideration of women, as capable of claiming rights and holding a position of their own, which certainly distinguished the Mosaic legislation, and affected for good the Jewish character."

Zelophehad had five daughters, whose names are recorded: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. These ladies valued the fact that they were members of the tribe of Manasseh, and they were proud of their father's name. They did not consider themselves merely to be the future wives of some men, and they were not willing to sacrifice their parental pride and let their family name go down in anonymity. So they spoke up in a way that demands our respect for their courage. The problem is, in a way, difficult for us to understand, since in our modern society names have lost their value. With some exceptions, names are no longer attached to character and immortality, as they were in Biblical times. The prevalent philosophy among people in the Old Testament seems to have been that a man had really died when his name was no longer remembered by his offspring.

The request of the ladies was not only an indication of their pride, but also of their faith. The people of Israel had not yet entered the promised land, and the division of the land was, as yet, a matter of hope only. Zelophehad's daughters dealt with God's promises as realities, and they acted upon them with foresight. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* says about this matter: "Those that seek an inheritance in the land of promise shall have what they seek, and other things shall be added to them. These are claims which God will countenance and crown."

Evidently, all five of them were still unmarried, and, consequently, they must still have been rather young. The annotation of *The Pulpit Commentary* on this is quite helpful to understand the portent of the girls' request: "The daughters of Zelophehad did not ask for any share of what had been their father's, but they asked that the lands which would have been assigned to their father in the settlement of Canaan might still be assigned to them, so that their father's name might attach to those lands, and be handed down with them. The request assumes that the 'brethren' of Zelophehad would receive an inheritance in the promised land, either personally or as represented by their sons; hence it seems clear that Zelophehad was not of the elder generation, which had forfeited all their rights and expectations in Canaan, but of the younger, to whom the inheritance was transferred (ch. xiv. 29-32). This is confirmed by the consideration that these women were not married until some time after this (ch. xxxvi. 11; cf. Josh. xvii. 3, 4), and must, therefore, according to the almost invariable custom, have been quite young at this time."

It is interesting to note that this particular matter of inheritance is mentioned three times in Scripture; that emphasizes the importance of inheritance.<sup>492</sup> It is brought up in the last chapter of Numbers, where it becomes clear that the request of the daughters would affect their marriages, and would put limitations on their choices for marriage. There is no indication in the Old Testament that the Jewish custom demanded that young girls marry without their consent. The daughters of Zelophehad imposed restrictions upon themselves by requesting this legislation, governing their father's inheritance. In our modern society it is generally taken for granted that marriages should be based, not so much on love between partners, as on being "in love." The fact that love could be the result of a higher motivation for marriage is not something that would be taken into consideration in our world of today. We do not even want to go into the matter that the bond of marriage itself is not thought to be relevant any more in our present age. Relationships are built upon transient amorous feelings; when those feelings change, the relationship breaks up, whether there is a legal marriage or not. The daughters of Zelophehad demonstrated that they believed in matters that were more important than being in love in considering matrimony. In their minds the inheritance God had promised to His people, and their father's share in this, took priority over their own desires for happiness.

<sup>492</sup> Besides this chapter, see ch. 36, and Josh. 18:3,4

Jesus leaves open the possibility of celibacy because of the kingdom of heaven. In Matthew's Gospel we read: "For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."<sup>493</sup> The implication of these words in our modern time seems to be that our choice of a marriage partner ought to be determined by God's priorities. The Apostle Paul gives some rather controversial advice about marriage in his first epistle to the Corinthians. One thing is very clear, however, that one of the conditions for a the marriage of a Christian is that his or her spouse is also a Christian. He says: "A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord."<sup>494</sup> Especially if God calls us to specific tasks in His kingdom, it is important that our choices, whether for marriage or for anything else, be determined by God's priorities.

The realistic way in which the daughters of Zelophehad presented their case before Moses is worth a closer look. They say: "Our father died in the desert. He was not among Korah's followers, who banded together against the LORD, but he died for his own sin and left no sons." The reference to Korah's rebellion seems to be puzzling, but we read about it in the previous chapter in the context of the census. Korah left sons who did receive an inheritance, in spite of their father's insurrection.<sup>495</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks about the phrase "he died for his own sin": "This cannot mean that Zelophehad was one of those who died in the wilderness in consequence of the rebellion of Kadesh. ... Apparently his daughters meant to acknowledge that they had no complaint against the Divine justice because of their father's death, but only against the law because of the unnecessary hardship which it inflicted upon them." On the one hand this incident demonstrated the girls' pride in the name of their father, and on the other hand they recognized his sin. They did not idealize him as perfect. It is especially significant that the girls recognized the relationship between their father's sin and his death. In the context of the Israelite philosophy of life, it could also imply that the fact that Zelophehad left no sons behind at his death was considered a punishment for sin. But in any case the words confirm the biblical teaching that, in Paul's words: "The wages of sin is death."<sup>496</sup> It is true that we owe our mortality to Adam's sin, but we also inherited from him the tendency to sin, which demonstrates itself in our own sinful acts.

The result of the complaint of the daughters of Zelophehad is an important piece of legislation which regulates heritage in cases where there are no sons in the family. The Lord confirms that there is no difference in legal status before Him between male and female. In God's ordinance males are given priority over females in certain matters, but there is no question of superiority or inferiority. The Apostle Paul substantiates this in our new relationship with God in Jesus Christ, by saying: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."<sup>497</sup>

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* states that in the Hebrew text some of the personal pronouns which refer to the daughters are in the feminine, whilst some that are masculine as if they refer to male members. This difference does not come through in the English translation. He dismisses the hidden meanings and spiritualization that some commentators have tried to deduct from this "curious anomaly," and concludes by saying: "Now the plain truth is, that the masculine is in the present printed text a mistake for the feminine. The Samaritan, which many think by far the most authentic copy of the Pentateuch, has the feminine gender in both places; so also have upwards of fourscore of the MSS. collated by Kennicott and De Rossi. Therefore all the curious reasons for this anomaly offered by interpreters are only serious trifling on the blunder of some heedless copyists."

Another interesting comment in the same commentary pertains to the names of the father and the daughters. Clarke himself also dismisses the importance of this, and he does not support the spiritual lessons some people draw from it, but the note is interesting enough to copy here: "Their names are mysterious; for Zelophehad, TS<sup>a</sup> LAAP<sup>a</sup> CHAD ... signifies the shadow of fear or dread. His first daughter, MACHLAH ... infirmity; the second, NO<sup>a</sup>AAH ... wandering; the third, CHAAG<sup>a</sup> LAAH ... turning about or dancing for joy; the fourth, MILKAH ... a queen; the fifth, TIRTSAAH ... well-pleasing or

<sup>493</sup> Matt. 19:12

<sup>494</sup> I Cor. 7:39

<sup>495</sup> See ch. 26:11

<sup>496</sup> Rom. 6:23

<sup>497</sup> Gal. 3:26-29

acceptable. By these names we may observe our reviving by grace in Christ; for we are all born of the shadow of fear, (Tselophehad,) being brought forth in sin, and through fear of death being all our life time subject to bondage, <Heb. 2:15>. This begets (Machlah) infirmity or sickness-- grief of heart for our estate. After which (Noah) wandering about for help and comfort we find it in Christ, by whom our sorrow is turned into joy (Choglah.) He communicates of his royalty (Milcah) to us, making us kings and priests unto God and his Father, <Rev. 1:6>. So we shall at last be presented unto him glorious and without blemish, being (Tirtsah) well-pleasing and acceptable in his sight. This is a specimen of pious INGENUITY, which has been endeavoring to do the work of an EVANGELIST in the church of God from the time of Origen to the present day."

#### **D. Appointment for Israel's New Leader 27:12-23**

The second part of this chapter deals with the announcement of the imminent death of Moses, and the succession of leadership. In introducing this passage, *The Pulpit Commentary* notes: "It is impossible to determine the exact place of this announcement in the order of events narrated. It would appear from ch. xxxi. 1 that the war with the Midianites occurred later, and certainly the address to the people and to Joshua in Deut. xxxi. 1-8 presupposes the formal appointment here recorded; but the chronology of the concluding chapters of Numbers is evidently very uncertain; they may, or may not, be arranged in order of time. We may with good reason suppose that the summons to die was only separated from its fulfillment by the brief interval necessary to complete what work was yet unfinished (such as the punishment of the Midianites and the provisional settlement of the trans-Jordanic country) before the river was crossed."

Moses had known for quite a while that he, himself, would not be allowed to enter Canaan. After the failure of the brothers at Meribah, the Lord had said to them: "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."<sup>498</sup> Aaron had already died, and so there was no reason for Moses to believe that God would change His mind. In his great address to the people in Deuteronomy we learn that Moses had not given up without a struggle. We read there that he says: "At that time I pleaded with the LORD: 'O Sovereign LORD, you have begun to show to your servant your greatness and your strong hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do? Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan-- that fine hill country and Lebanon.' But because of you the LORD was angry with me and would not listen to me. 'That is enough,' the LORD said. 'Do not speak to me anymore about this matter. Go up to the top of Pisgah and look west and north and south and east. Look at the land with your own eyes, since you are not going to cross this Jordan.'"<sup>499</sup> The moment had come when Moses would have to die and leave behind the work he had begun, without being able to finish it. At the onset, when God had called him to be the shepherd of His people, he had said: "O Lord, please send someone else to do it."<sup>500</sup> Now he could not tear himself away.

Death is almost as much of a mystery for us as life is. The New Testament gives us greater insight into what is awaiting us, and we have the confidence that the keys of death and Hades are in the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, death remains for each of us "the undiscover'd country, from whose bourn no traveler returns."<sup>501</sup> People have fantasized about the dead, as if the dead can look down upon us from above. The Bible gives us no reason for this kind of illusion. God did not comfort Moses with the assurance that he would be able to see Canaan from a higher vantage point. As a matter of fact, the very experience of looking at the promised land from the top of Mount Abarim suggests that this would be the only time Moses would get to see the country. Once in heaven, he would, undoubtedly, know that Canaan was only an image of the reality into which God wanted him to enter. But, being on this side of the line of separation, Moses was dealing with the picture of reality. It was the only thing he could see, the only thing that was important to him at this point.

Moses' ascension to the top of the mountain was, in a way, a concession the Lord gave to him, which had been given to no one else. We do not read that Aaron was given this kind of vision before he died, nor that anybody else of the departed ones had seen the goal towards which they had journeyed. God

<sup>498</sup> ch. 20:12

<sup>499</sup> Deut. 3:23-27

<sup>500</sup> Ex. 4:13

<sup>501</sup> Shakespeare: (From Hamlet's soliloquy).

gave Moses this special dispensation to soften the punishment. As we read above, this concession was given to him in answer to prayer.<sup>502</sup>

Moses' reply to God's summons is rather moving. There is no longer any question about arguing or pleading; his final thoughts are for the people of Israel whom he is about to leave behind. Moses introduces a phrase that will be used several times in Scripture, of Israel being "like sheep without a shepherd." The same phrase is used on three other occasions in the Bible. The prophet Micaiah, in predicting Ahab's death, uses the very same words.<sup>503</sup> The prophet Isaiah uses the words in a much wider sense to describe the condition of all mankind on the Day of God's Wrath.<sup>504</sup> And, finally, Jesus borrows the words in expressing His compassion on the people of Israel, as reported by Matthew and Mark, where we read: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."<sup>505</sup> The words evoke a moving picture of helplessness in the face of danger. Jesus tells His disciples: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."<sup>506</sup> Sheep without a shepherd are in danger of being torn apart by the wolves. Moses' use of the phrase indicates that he recognizes the enemy. The prophet Ezekiel would later use the same image, although he did not literally use the same words. In his prophecy God condemns those who call themselves shepherd but do not fulfill the task God laid upon them.<sup>507</sup>

Of course, God never intended to leave His people to be a prey for the wolves. In Ezekiel's prophecy we further read: "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.'" <sup>508</sup> Moses' request, and Ezekiel's prophecy both point toward Him who was to come, and who said of Himself: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."<sup>509</sup> Moses announced his coming with the words: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him."<sup>510</sup> What he could not know was that this prophet, this shepherd would be, at the same time, the Lamb of God. Even for us, this paradox is almost too great to grasp. The wolves are conquered by the superior power of the Lamb they would like to kill and devour.

At this point in Israel's history, Joshua had already risen to a very prominent position, almost to the point that it would hardly be deemed necessary to ask the Lord to appoint another shepherd. Joshua's succession of Moses was a forgone conclusion. This makes Moses' prayer so remarkable. Moses leaves open the possibility that God's conclusions may be different from man's conclusions. He addresses God in a rather unusual way as: "the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind." Other translations, such as the KJV, render the phrase with: "the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh." The latter suggests a clearer insight into the way man is created, as a creature endowed with a spirit which links him to his Creator in a way no other creature on earth is. Moses' use of the term also seems to indicate that the human spirit is what determines man's personality; that which distinguishes him, not only from other creatures, but also from other human beings. No two men are alike on earth, because no two spirits are alike. And the Lord, YHWH, the God of the spirits, knows which is which. That is the reason we read about Joshua that he is: "a man in whom is the spirit." God knew Joshua, even better than Joshua knew himself. *The Pulpit Commentary* takes this to mean that it was the Holy Spirit who was upon Joshua. It seems more logical, though, that God speaks about Joshua's own human spirit, which he had developed into a strong medium of fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit would be given him through the imposition of hands by Moses and Eleazar. This corresponds with what we read in Deuteronomy, where we read: "Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him."<sup>511</sup>

So Joshua became Moses' official successor in a public commissioning ceremony. This is the first record of a succession of office. Moses had become the leader of Israel because God had called him

<sup>502</sup> See Deut. 3:23-27

<sup>503</sup> See I Kings 22:17; II Chr. 18:16

<sup>504</sup> See Isa. 13:9-16

<sup>505</sup> Matt. 9:36; Mark 6:34

<sup>506</sup> Matt. 10:16

<sup>507</sup> See Ezek. 34:1-10; also Zech. 10:2

<sup>508</sup> Ezek. 34:11,12

<sup>509</sup> John 10:11

<sup>510</sup> Deut. 18:15

<sup>511</sup> Deut. 34:9

personally. Joshua became the leader through the imposition of hands by Moses and Eleazar. There was no repetition of the personal call. We could say that Joshua was called “in Moses.” God says to Moses: “Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him.” The KJV renders this with: “And thou shalt put some of thine honour upon him.” The Septuagint uses the word *dóxes* which means “glory.” Whether this means that Joshua’s face became radiant, like Moses’ was when he received the Ten Commandments, we do not know. We read in Exodus: “When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.”<sup>512</sup> It seems, however, that the radiance on Moses’ face was not a lasting phenomenon, but faded away after a period of time. It was the result of his moments of intimacy with God. Since Moses had just been spoken to by God at the time of Joshua’s ordination, it could very well be that the radiance was present. We would expect, though, to find some mention of it at this point; although it may have become so common in the forty years since the experience on Mount Sinai, that nobody any longer paid any attention to it. The amazing part would be that this radiance could be transmitted to someone else. It would certainly have enhanced Joshua’s authority among the people he was going to lead into the promised land, if, during the public ceremony his face shone with the same supernatural radiance that had been occasionally on Moses’ face.

Moses’ shoes would be hard to fill by anyone. He still towers over everybody else in the pages of the Old Testament. Even the transmission of divine glory from Moses to Joshua would not bring about that Joshua superseded his predecessor in Israel’s history. There is one, though, who would; one whose name is the same as this Old Testament hero. The name Joshua, or Jehoshua in Hebrew means “the Lord is salvation,” or “there is salvation in YHWH.” It is the name of Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews says about this: “Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself.”<sup>513</sup> And that Jesus superseded the Old Testament Joshua is clear from the words in the same epistle: “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God,” and, “Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.”<sup>514</sup> Moses may have transmitted some authority to his successor, Jesus confesses: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”<sup>515</sup> And as far as glory is concerned, Jesus is called “The Lord of glory.”<sup>516</sup> Also, the offices of High Priest and Shepherd of the nation are both combined in Christ. This fact may be foreshadowed in the imposition of hands, by both Eleazar and Moses, during the commissioning service. Each of the two men transferred some of their authority to the new leader. This did not mean that Joshua became also the High Priest of the nation, but the one he portrayed would exercise both offices.

We read that Eleazar would “obtain decisions for him by inquiring of the Urim before the LORD.” According to *The Pulpit Commentary* the literal reading is: “who shall inquire for him in the judgment of Urim.” The commentary further observes: “The Urim of this passage and of 1 Sam. xxviii. 6 seems identical with the Urim and Thummim of Exod. xxviii. 30; Levit. viii. 8. What it actually was, and how it was used in consulting God, is not told us in Scripture, and has left no reliable trace in the tradition of the Jews; it must, therefore, remain forever an insoluble mystery. It does not appear that Moses ever sought the judgment of Urim, for he possessed more direct means of ascertaining the will of God; nor does it seem ever to have been resorted to after the time of David, for the ‘more sure word of prophecy’ superseded it. Its real use, therefore, belonged to the dark ages of Israel, after the light of Moses had set, and before the light of the prophets had arisen.” There is also no record in Scripture that Joshua ever sought the will of God by consulting the Urim and Thummim. But the absence of a record does never prove anything conclusively.

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<sup>512</sup> Ex. 34:29

<sup>513</sup> Heb. 3:3

<sup>514</sup> Heb. 3:1

<sup>515</sup> Matt. 28:18

<sup>516</sup> I Cor. 2:8

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### II. The Regulations of Offerings and Vows 28:1-30:16

#### A. The Regulations of Sacrifices 28:1-29:40

*The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* says about the Jewish festivals: "The date of every Mosaic festival without distinction, no matter what its special object may have been, gave evidence of being connected in some way or other with the number seven. So every seventh day, every seventh month, every seventh year, and last, the year that came after the lapse of seven times seven years, was marked by a festival. Again, the Passover and the feast of Booths (Tabernacles, KJV) extended over seven days; the number of special convocations (which see) during the year was seven-- two at the Passover, one at Pentecost, one at the feast of Trumpets (or New Moon), one on the Day of Atonement, and two at the feast of Booths."

This chapter, and the one following, give a very detailed description of the various sacrifices the people had to bring at precisely prescribed times. Commentators have wondered why this section appears at this point in the book of Numbers. Some think that it may have been inserted later by an editor of the book. One point to ponder is that the sacrifices mentioned required elements that were not available to Israel during their journey through the desert, such as grain and wine, and probably olive oil. This fact seems to justify the placements of these stipulations at the eve of the entrance into the promised land. God wanted to impress upon His people that the most important feature of their possession of the land was fellowship with Him through the ritual of sacrifices that were brought daily, weekly, monthly, and at other specified occasions.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* introduces this chapter by saying: "Dr. Colenso cites this chapter as a proof of the continuous observance of the Mosaic ritual during the protracted sojourn in the wilderness, and then founds upon this alleged fact one of his strongest arguments for the unhistorical character of the Pentateuch, from the impossibility both of obtaining an adequate supply of victims and of three priests discharging all the requirements of so elaborate a service. All unprejudiced readers will deduce, from the renewal of instructions which had been given forty years before, a different conclusion--namely, that the need of such minute details, and such injunctions as to care and regularity in observing the appointed institutions of religion, affords irresistible evidence that the whole sacrificial ritual had been suspended. In particular, offerings on the altar, and the observance of the stated solemnities, had been allowed so long to fall into desuetude that fresh directions had to be issued respecting both their nature and their obligation; and since these directions embraced such matters of prominence as the morning and the evening sacrifice, the continual burnt offering, and the Passover, the conviction is painfully forced upon us, that at the end of the thirty-eight years' wanderings the religious education of the Israelites had to be begun anew."

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* remarks about this: "These laws are here given afresh, not because the observance of them was wholly disused during their thirty-eight years' wandering in the wilderness (we cannot think that they were so long without any public worship, but that at least the daily lamb was offered morning and evening, and doubled on the sabbath day; so bishop Patrick conjectures); but that many of the sacrifices were then omitted is plainly intimated, Amos v. 25, quoted by Stephen, <Acts 7:42>. Did you offer unto me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? It is implied, 'No, you did not.' But, whether the course of sacrifices had been interrupted or no, God saw fit now to repeat the law of sacrifices...."

There were sacrifices that had to be brought daily, every morning and evening (vs. 1-8). There was a special sacrifice for the Sabbath (vs. 9-10). Another sacrifice marked the beginning of each month (vs. 11-15). The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread were to be celebrated by special sacrifices for the seven-day duration of the feast (vs. 16-25). This chapter ends with stipulations for the sacrifices for the Feast of First Fruits (vs. 26-31).

#### a- The Daily Sacrifices vs. 1-8

The daily sacrifices were to be burnt offerings, or holocausts, details of which are given in Leviticus, although there it is presented as a personal sacrifice, not as a collective one.<sup>517</sup> This law had

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<sup>517</sup> See Lev. ch. 1

already been given in Exodus,<sup>518</sup> but it is doubtful that it had been carried out during the desert journey. *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks that the daily sacrifice “formed the foundation of the whole sacrificial system. Whatever else was offered was in addition to it, not in lieu of it.”

The burnt offering made no reference to the sinful condition of man; it represented an act of pure worship which formed the foundation of the relationship between God and His creation. It expressed the love between the Father and the Son in a way that surpasses any earthly association. The holocaust conveyed a heavenly reality. The only indication that sin had come in, and had broken the beauty of the original concept was in the fact that there was death involved: the lamb had to die. The burnt offering portrays a reality that is so profound that it defies analysis. God wanted to imprint upon the minds of His people, through those sacrifices repeated twice daily, that they were dealing with a heavenly reality that surpasses human understanding. The holocaust goes far beyond atonement and restoration; it leads into the depth of God’s grace, in that it not only makes man partaker of the divine nature, but it makes him share in the relationship between the Persons of the Godhead. It is a picture of the Son, giving Himself to the Father, not only because of His love for the Father, but because of His love for us. In the burnt offering God shares His deepest intimacy with us. It is a pleasing aroma, the sweetest smell imaginable.

*Matthew Henry’s Commentary* remarks here: “The particular law of the daily sacrifice, a lamb in the morning and a lamb in the evening, which, for the constancy of it as duly as the day came, is called a continual burnt-offering (v. 3), which intimates that when we are bidden to pray always, and to pray without ceasing, it is intended that at least every morning and every evening we offer up our solemn prayers and praises to God.”

The morning and evening sacrifice consisted of: a one-year-old lamb without defect, of a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives. TLB renders this in modern terms with: “three quarts of finely ground flour mixed with three pints of oil.” The Good News Bible reads: “2 pounds of flour, mixed with 2 pints of the best olive oil.” To this was to be added a quarter hin, or three pints (TLB), (Good News Bible: 2 pints (!)) of wine, to be poured out, probably not at the foot of the altar. The Hebrew word translated in the NIV with fermented drink is shekar, which *Strongs’ Definitions* describes as “an intoxicant, i.e. intensely alcoholic liquor,” translated in the KJV with “strong wine.” It would strike us as strange that such, obviously potent, liquor would be used in the worship service. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* writes about this kind of “wine”: “Heb. shekar (an ‘intoxicant’), an inebriating drink, whether the wine prepared or distilled is from barley, honey, or dates, yayin referring more particularly to wine made from grapes. Shekar is usually rendered ‘strong drink’ <Num. 28:7; cf. Ps. 69:12>. The liquors included under shekar might therefore be pomegranate wine, palm wine, apple wine, honey wine, or perhaps even beer, for some have identified it with the liquor obtained from barley by the Egyptians. The word is used in the following passages in such a manner as to show decisively that it denotes an intoxicating drink: <Lev. 10:9>, where the priests are forbidden to drink wine, or shekar, when they go into the Tabernacle; <1 Sam. 1:15>, where Hannah, charged with drunkenness by Eli, replies it was not so—‘I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink [shekar]’; <Ps. 69:12>, where the psalmist complains, ‘I am the song of the drunkard’; <Prov. 31:4-5>, ‘It is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink [shekar], lest they drink and forget what is decreed’; <Isa. 5:22>, ‘Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink [shekar]’ (cf. <28:7>; <29:9>).” *The Adam Clarke Commentary* gives the following clarification about the substance: “The word sheekaar ..., from shaakar ..., ‘to inebriate,’ signifies any kind of fermented liquors. This is exactly the same prohibition that was given in the case of John Baptist, <Luke 1:15>,... ‘wine and sikera he shall not drink.’ Any inebriating liquor, says Jerome, ..., is called sicera, whether made of corn (grain), apples, honey, dates, or other fruit. One of the four prohibited drinks among the Mohammedans in India is called sakar, ..., which signifies inebriating drink in general, but especially date wine or arrack.” *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that after the settlement in Canaan this strong drink was replaced by regular wine, and that, at the time of the giving of this commandment the use of shecar was allowed, because no regular wine was available. The commentary weakens this opinion, however, when it says: “It is certainly remarkable that the mention of shecar should be retained at a time when wine must have been easily obtainable, and was about to become abundant (Deut. VIII. 8).”

It is obvious from the above that the substance used in the drink offering was not the wine that was used commonly among the Jews, but strong intoxicating stuff. It certainly was not the same as what Jesus took during the last Passover celebration, saying: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out

<sup>518</sup> Ex. 29:38-42

for many for the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>519</sup> So, we can hardly see in this ritual an image of the death of Christ. If it is an image of any spiritual reality at all, it could be taken as a symbol of the power of the Holy Spirit, which can be said to have an inebriating effect upon people.

The fact that this kind of strong liquor was used brings us to the question as to how it was poured out? We mentioned above that it was probably not poured out at the foot of the altar. The high alcohol content would make it more likely that it was poured out over the burning embers on the altar, so that the fire would flame up and consume the sacrificial animal more rapidly. This would make the burnt offering a very impressive, and flamboyant display.

#### **b. The Sacrifice on the Sabbath (vs. 9-10)**

The sacrifice brought on the Sabbath was the same as the daily sacrifice, but it was doubled. This was brought in addition to the daily sacrifice, so in reality three lambs were sacrificed in the morning and three in the evening, accompanied by the required amount of flour, oil, and wine. It is difficult to probe the depths of meaning of this Sabbath celebration. It may be farfetched to see in the number three a reference to the Trinity. Before the fall, the Sabbath was the day of celebration of creation. After God had pronounced all of creation very good, we read: “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” After the entrance of sin, the observance of the Sabbath changed its character. At the giving of the Ten Commandments there is, initially, a reference to the completion of creation. We read in Exodus: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”<sup>520</sup> But in Deuteronomy the commemoration of the Sabbath is linked to the deliverance from slavery. We read there: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”<sup>521</sup> Jesus made it a point to perform His greatest miracles of healing on the Sabbath. He said to the people of His days: “Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?”<sup>522</sup> God meant the Sabbath to be the day of healing of the whole man. We may, therefore, be safer if we consider the sacrifice of the three lambs to refer to the healing of the whole man: body, soul, and spirit. The Sabbath is the day of celebration of deliverance in the widest sense of the word.

#### **c. The New Moon Sacrifice vs. 11-15**

This monthly celebration was more elaborate than the previous ones. It consisted of the sacrifice of two young bulls, one ram and seven male lambs a year old, all without defect, each with the accompanying grain offering, consisting of flour, olive oil, and wine. An unusual feature of the celebration was the addition of one male goat as a sin offering (vs. 15). The celebration at the beginning of the seventh month was even more elaborate, as we shall see in the following chapter.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* writes about this observance: “The beginning of the month was known, not by astronomical calculations, but, according to Jewish writers, by the testimony of messengers appointed to watch the first viable appearance of the new moon, and then the fact was announced through the whole country by signal-fires kindled on the mountaintops. The new moon festivals having been common among the pagan, it is probable that an important design of their institution in Israel was to give the minds of that people a better direction; and assuming this to have been one of the objects contemplated, it will account ‘for one of the kids being offered unto the Lord’ <Num. 28:15>, not unto the

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<sup>519</sup> Matt. 26:28

<sup>520</sup> Ex. 20:8-11

<sup>521</sup> Deut. 5:13-15

<sup>522</sup> John 7:23



moon, as the Egyptians and Syrians did. The Sabbath and the new moon are frequently mentioned together.”

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* writes the following about this celebration: “Some suggest that, as the sabbath was kept with an eye to the creation of the world, so the new moons were sanctified with an eye to the divine providence, which appoints the moon for seasons, guiding the revolutions of time by its changes, and governing sublunary bodies (as many think) by its influences. Though we observe not any feast of new moons, yet we must not forget to give God the glory of all the precious things put forth by the moon which he has established for ever, a faithful witness in heaven, <Ps. 89:37>. The offerings in the new moons were very considerable, two bullocks, a ram, and seven lambs, with the meat-offerings and drink-offerings that were to attend them (v. 11, etc.), besides a sin-offering, v. 15. For, when we give glory to God by confessing his mercies, we must give glory to him likewise by confessing our own sins; and, when we rejoice in the gifts of common providence, we must make the sacrifice of Christ, that great gift of special grace, the fountain and spring-head of our joy. Some have questioned whether the new moons were to be reckoned among their feasts; but why should they not, when, besides the special sacrifices which were then to be offered, they rested from servile works <Amos 8:5>, blew the trumpets <Num 10:10>, and went to the prophets to hear the word? <2 Kin. 4:23>. And the worship performed in the new moons is made typical of gospel solemnities, <Isa. 66:23>.”

In a way, all the feasts in this chapter are a celebration of time. The daily sacrifices are governed by the relationship between the earth and the sun. The Sabbath marks the end of the whole of creation of the heavens and the earth. The months are marked by the waxing and waning of the moon, and the beginning of the year was commemorated by the Passover, the deliverance from the bondage of Egypt.

Our understanding of time is rather limited, as is our understanding of its counterpart: eternity. Albert Einstein enlarged the horizon of human understanding somewhat by adding time as a fourth dimension. Obviously, God wants us to have some understanding of time as we experience it, since it is linked to the transient character of our existence on earth, as opposed to eternity beyond. Death may have cast its shadow upon time, but it remains true that God created time to mark our life on earth, and consequently we are called upon to celebrate it.

The addition of the sin offering of a male goat sets this celebration apart from the previous ones. This is the first direct reference to man's fallen condition in this series of feasts. The suggestion seems to be that the fall has not changed God's desire for man to celebrate, or, as *Matthew Henry's Commentary* puts it: “When we give glory to God by confessing his mercies, we must give glory to him likewise by confessing our own sins; and, when we rejoice in the gifts of common providence, we must make the sacrifice of Christ, that great gift of special grace, the fountain and spring-head of our joy.”

#### **d. The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread vs. 16-25**

The Passover, which was celebrated on the fourteenth day of the month Abib, or Nisan, marked the beginning of the New Year. The first day of the month was, of course, commemorated with the feast of the New Moon. The Lord had said to Moses in Egypt about the month in which the Exodus took place: “This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year.”<sup>523</sup>

The fourteenth day was the actual Passover celebration. At this point no reference is made to the details of the Passover celebration. It was usually observed later in the afternoon. According to *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, the Pharisees and rabbis understood that the time for the killing of the lamb should be “when the sun begins to descend to its real setting (from 3:00 to 6:00 P.M.).” Since at 6 PM the date changed from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup>, the Passover blended naturally into the Feast of Unleavened Bread. On this 15<sup>th</sup> day the special sacrifice of two young bulls, one ram and seven male lambs a year old, and one male goat as a sin offering was to be brought. The difference between the sacrifice of the first seven animals and the last one is that the first sacrifice, again, made no reference to the sinful condition of man. It was a burnt offering, a pleasing aroma to the Lord. The first and the last day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to be observed in the same way as the regular Sabbath, in abstaining from regular work. It was a week-long celebration, not only of redemption from the slavery of Egypt, but of the yeast of sin; a celebration of the purity of the new life. The Apostle Paul refers to this when he says: “Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast-- as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has

<sup>523</sup> Ex. 12:2

been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.”<sup>524</sup>

**e. The Feast of First Fruits** vs. 26-31

This chapter ends with an enumeration of the sacrifices to be brought at the Feast of First Fruits. The sacrifice is identical to the one that had to be brought the day of the New Moon and the Passover.

One of the problems in the text as it reads in the NIV is that the Feast of First Fruits seems to be blended together with the Feast of Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks. The Hebrew, apparently, does not have the word “feast” at this place. The KJV, therefore, reads: “after your weeks [be out].” This reading does not make the text any clearer, but it does alleviate a discrepancy between these verses and the ones in Leviticus, that deal with these celebrations.<sup>525</sup> The sacrifice prescribed here, may be only the one for the day the first fruits were presented before the Lord, and not for the feast of Pentecost.

If the Passover was a celebration of the death of Christ, the Feast of the First Fruits, pointed in the direction of His resurrection. As the Apostle Paul says: “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”<sup>526</sup> The full harvest, exemplified in the Feast of Pentecost, is the birth of the Church.

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<sup>524</sup> I Cor. 5:7-8

<sup>525</sup> See Lev. 23:9-22

<sup>526</sup> I Cor. 15:20

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

**II. The Regulations of Offerings and Vows 28:1-30:16****A. The Regulations of Sacrifices 28:1-29:40 (continued)**

All the sacrifices in this chapter pertain to celebrations in the seventh month, which is the month of Ethanim. TLB equates the first day of this month with the fifteenth of September. There are three celebrations held during this month: the Feast of Trumpets (vs. 1-6), the Day of Atonement (vs. 7-11), and the Feast of Tabernacles (vs. 12-40).

**f. The Feast of Trumpets vs. 1-6.**

The Feast of Trumpets was the celebration of Israel's civil year. In *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* we read: "With regard to the year, the Jewish historian Josephus stated that Israel had two New Years-- the commercial New Year, which began in the fall (seventh month), and the religious New Year, which began in the spring (first month). Since the months were based on the lunar system and since each month averaged 29½ days, the year would be 354 days, or 11 days short of the solar year. In just three years the calendar would be off more than a month." And *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* adds to this: "There are four periods of commencement of years: On the 1<sup>st</sup> of Nisan is a new year for kings and for festivals; the 1<sup>st</sup> of Elul is a new year for the tithe of cattle. .... The 1<sup>st</sup> of Tishri is new year's (day) for the ordinary or civil year, for the computation of 7<sup>th</sup> years, and of the jubilees; also for the planting of trees, and for herbs. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of Shebat is the new year for trees. The ritual for the day consequently needs little explanation. All new moons were heralded by trumpeting <Num 10:10>, and so the custom was of course observed on this feast also. There is nothing in the language of either <Lev 23> or <Num 29> to require a prolongation of the music on this special new moon, but its special distinction was no doubt marked by special trumpeting at all times, and at a later period ... elaborate rules were laid down for this feature. The additional sacrifices simply involved an increase of those prescribed for new moons <Num 28:11-15>, without changing their type."

**g. The Day of Atonement vs. 7-11**

In the law on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus the main ritual consisted of the sacrifice of the animals, the blood of which was brought inside the tabernacle to be sprinkled in front of, and on the cover of the ark. Another outstanding feature was the sending away of the scapegoat. The burnt offering is briefly mentioned in Leviticus, but not in the elaborate form in which we find it here; only one ram, as over against "one young bull, one ram and seven male lambs a year old," in our text here.<sup>527</sup> This burnt offering stands in contrast to the character of the day. In the institution of the day God said to Moses: "And {this} shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls, and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you shall be clean from all your sins before the LORD."<sup>528</sup> It is this paradox between the horror of sin that had to be atoned for, and the glorious way in which it was done that makes us call the day Christ died "Good Friday." The pleasing aroma of the burnt offering was victorious over the stench of our sin.

**h. The Feast of Tabernacles vs. 12-40**

The Feast of Tabernacles, or The Feast of Booths, as the older versions call it, was a commemoration of the desert crossing, when the people were living in temporary dwellings instead of in permanent houses. The emphasis of the feast is on the transient character of life, and on God's provision during a prolonged period of instability. The surprising feature of the feast is the exuberance of the celebration. It is a joyful celebration of privations and emergencies, and it is one of the most elaborate feasts of the year.

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* remarks here: "[On the fifteenth day of the seventh month] On this day there was to be a solemn assembly, and for seven days sacrifices were to be offered; on the first day thirteen young bullocks, two rams, and fourteen lambs. On each succeeding day one bullock less, till on the seventh day there were only seven, making in all seventy. *What an expensive service! How should we*

<sup>527</sup> Compare Lev. 16:3 with Num. 29:8

<sup>528</sup> Lev. 16:29,30 (NAS)

*magnify God for being delivered from it!*<sup>529</sup> Yet these were all the taxes they had to pay. At the public charge there were annually offered to God, independently of trespass-offerings and voluntary vows, fifteen goats, twenty-one kids, seventy-two rams, one hundred and thirty-two bullocks, and eleven hundred and one lambs! But how little is all this when compared with the lambs slain every year at the Passover, which amounted in one year to the immense number of 255,600 slain in the temple itself, which was the answer that Cestius, the Roman general, received when he asked the priests how many persons had come to Jerusalem at their annual festivals, the priests, numbering the people by the lambs that had been slain, said, 'twenty-five myriads, five thousand and six hundred.' " Clarke's remark about the cost of the sacrifices is very interesting. If we realize how much the Lord paid for our salvation, and how generous He is toward us in providing for our sustenance, remarks about how much it costs us seem to be strangely out of place.

In his second epistle to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul speaks about "the grace of giving."<sup>530</sup> Presenting to the church the needs of other members of the body of Christ, he reminds them of what God did for them. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." The difference between the Old Testament dispensation and ours is not that we are delivered from the obligation of giving, but that for them it was a law, for us it is a privilege: "the grace of giving." Those who do not have this grace are poor, regardless of their monetary worth.

*Unger's Bible Dictionary* has an extensive article about this feast. We read: "The dwelling in booths was to be a reminder to them of the fatherly care and protection of Jehovah while Israel was journeying from Egypt to Canaan <Deut. 8:7-18>. 'In comparison with the 'house of bondage' the dwelling in booths on the march through the wilderness was in itself an image of freedom and happiness' ... Such a reminder of God's loving care and Israel's dependence would, naturally, keep the Israelites from pride and conceit. ... On the first day of the feast, booths were constructed of fresh branches of fruit and palm trees, 'boughs of leafy trees and willows.' These were located in courts, streets, public squares, and on house roofs. In these all home-born Israelites were to dwell during the festival, in memory of their fathers' dwelling in booths after their exodus from Egypt <Lev. 23:40; Neh. 8:15>. The day was also to be observed as a Sabbath and a holy convocation, in which no secular work was to be done, and all able-bodied male members of the congregation not legally precluded were to appear before the Lord. The booth in Scripture is not an image of privation and misery but of protection, preservation, and shelter from heat, storm, and tempest <Pss. 27:5; 31:20; Isa. 4:6>."

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes: "The Feast of Tabernacles is at once the general harvest festival, *chag he-'saciph*, and the anniversary of the beginnings of the wanderings in the wilderness."

The meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles went far beyond the commemoration of an historic event; it was meant to be a reminder of the transient character of human life on earth. The Bible teaches that, as long as we are on earth, we live in a tent. We are not here to stay. The author of Hebrews says: "For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come."<sup>531</sup> Or, as TLB puts it: "For this world is not our home; we are looking forward to our everlasting home in heaven." When the Word of God became flesh, He lived among us as in a tent.<sup>532</sup> The Greek word *skenoo* refers to a tent, or a camp. We tend to look at our journey through life as passing through "a valley of tears." We think that joy in the life of a Christian should revolve only around the hope he has of glory to come. The Feast of Tabernacles teaches us that life on earth itself should be a celebration, and an exuberant one at that! God wants us to go through life joyfully, not in spite of our troubles and hardships, but because of them! James reminds us of this in the opening words of his epistle, when he writes: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."<sup>533</sup>

Another important part of the meaning of the feast was that God does not want us to forget our history. He wants us to understand where we are, and how we got there. Israel should never forget that they left Egypt and crossed the desert to enter into the Promised Land. The tragedy of the human race is that we do not learn from history. Moses put this very clearly, when he addressed the younger generation with the

<sup>529</sup> Italics are mine.

<sup>530</sup> See II Cor. 8:7

<sup>531</sup> Heb. 13:14

<sup>532</sup> See John 1:14

<sup>533</sup> James 1:2-4

words: "He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today."<sup>534</sup> The desert crossing was not a sinecure; the desert was a dreadful place. Sin has made the world we live in a desert. In a sense our planet is not fit for human habitation, and if it were not for the fact that God still keeps His hand on the human race, none of us would make it through. Mr. Unger is correct when he says: "The booth in Scripture is not an image of privation and misery but of protection, preservation, and shelter from heat, storm, and tempest."

The celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles was also a statement of defiance against Satan, who had attempted to make life unlivable for God's children. Those who dwell in the house of the Lord, make Baca into a valley of springs, as the psalmist says: "Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Selah. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools."<sup>535</sup>

The Feast of Tabernacles was one of the three occasions that drew pilgrims to the temple in Jerusalem. It was also the time the Egyptian Hallel was chanted, that is, the Psalms 113-118. In later times the celebration of the feast was accompanied by the pouring out in the temple of water from the pool of Siloam. This ceremony was omitted on the last day of the feast. It was, supposedly, on this day, which John calls "the last and greatest day of the feast," that Jesus gave His great invitation: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."<sup>536</sup> So the joy and exuberance that was typical for the Feast of Tabernacles was a pointer to the fulness of the Holy Spirit which God wants to give to those who obey Him.<sup>537</sup>

The essence of the feast was joy, but it was not a pure and unadulterated joy, it was bitter sweet. The shadow side of the feast was not the cost involved, as Adam Clarke suggested, but the fact that so many creatures had to die for it. Each one of the animals represented the death of Him, who would make it possible for streams of living water to flow from within those who obey Him. This fact gives to the joy of the feast a depth that is beyond words. It can only be expressed in the loudest praise or in the deepest silence.

This feast was part of the law of the Lord. Besides this feast and the preceding ones, the people had the option to give what they wanted. The chapter concludes with the words: "In addition to what you vow and your freewill offerings, prepare these for the LORD at your appointed feasts: your burnt offerings, grain offerings, drink offerings and fellowship offerings." But what can man pay to the Lord in exchange for his soul?

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<sup>534</sup> Deut. 8:15-18

<sup>535</sup> Ps. 84:4-6

<sup>536</sup> John 7:37,38

<sup>537</sup> See John 7:39, and Acts 5:32

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### II. The Regulations of Offerings and Vows 28:1-30:16

#### B. The Regulations of Vows 30:1-16

The purpose of this chapter is not so much to confirm the sacredness of the vow, as to emphasize the authority of a father over his unmarried daughter, and of a husband over his wife within the context of vows made by women.

The Hebrew word for vow, used in this chapter is *neder*, which *Strongs* defines as “a promise (to God); also (concretely) a thing promised.” In order to understand the background of this chapter correctly, we have to take the vow in its concrete sense, not as an oral promise, but as the thing promised, as a sacrifice. This involved property which, legally, belonged to the father, or to the husband of the girl.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* writes about the topic: “[A woman ... in her father’s house in her youth.] Girls only are specified; but minors of the other sex, who resided under the paternal roof, were included, according to Jewish writers, who also consider the name ‘father’ as comprehending all guardians of youth, and tell us that the age at which young people were deemed capable of vowing was thirteen for boys and twelve for girls. The judgment of a father or guardian on the vow of any under his charge might be given either by an expressed approval or by silence, which was to be construed as approval. But in the case of a husband, who, after silence from day to day, should ultimately disapprove or hinder his wife’s vow, the sin of non-performance was to be imputed to him, and not to her.”

*Adam Clarke’s Commentary* remarks: “[In her youth] That is, say the rabbis, under twelve years of age; and under thirteen in case of a young man. Young persons of this age were considered to be under the authority of their parents, and had consequently no power to vow away the property of another. A married woman was in the same circumstances, because she was under the authority of her husband. If however the parents or the husband heard of the vow, and objected to it in the same day in which they heard of it, <Num. 30:5>, then the vow was annulled, or, if having heard of it, they held their peace, this was considered a ratification of the vow.”

There are three points to be considered in this chapter: the nature of a vow, the status of a person who is under authority of someone else, and the meaning of silence.

A vow in the context of this chapter is a promise, made to God, to give certain things, or perform certain acts. The neglect to keep the promise amounts to sin in the eyes of God. We can, no doubt, extend the binding character of the vow to inter-human relations also. Broken promises always constitute sin. All sin between humans is sin for God. My own life is littered by unfulfilled pledges and promises, both by people made to me and by me to others. Our tongues are sharper than our memories, and often the satisfaction our good intentions give to us seems to us the equivalent of a fulfilled pledge. But the Lord’s opinion differs from ours on this point. God’s Word says: “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin.”<sup>538</sup> And in Ecclesiastes we read: “When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow.”<sup>539</sup> Those who make promises, but do not intend to keep them, are fools in the eyes of God.

Vows rated very highly in man’s moral behavior in biblical times. The breaking of a vow was considered the greatest sin of all, even to the point that, as in the case of Jephthah, murder was committed, rather than breaking the vow.<sup>540</sup> Even the immoral king Herod preferred being known as a man who kept his promises, even if it made him guilty of murder. When his daughter asked: “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist,” we read: “The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted.”<sup>541</sup> Scripture did not sanction this concept of the binding character of a vow, but it shows how vows were rated by the people of those times.

The second point we want to look at is the status of one who is under authority. As we read in the commentaries, quoted above, the regulations of this chapter were applied, not only to girls who were minors, but to members of both sexes up to the point of puberty. The law provided a place for parental

<sup>538</sup> Deut. 23:21

<sup>539</sup> Eccl. 5:4

<sup>540</sup> There is disagreement among scholars, as to whether Jephthah actually had his daughter killed or that she was condemned to a life of celibacy.

<sup>541</sup> Matt. 14:8,9

authority to override a vow made by a child. The law suggests that the making of vows requires insight and wisdom that may not be present in the mind of a child. A child is more easily inclined to act impulsively, and make rash promises that cannot be fulfilled, than an adult. God does not take the attitude of not taking the vow earnestly, by saying: "it is only a child." He takes children's vows seriously, but He also wants *them* to understand the seriousness of their vows. That is why He creates a place for a parental veto.

There is a fine line between the healthy development of a child's character, and unbridled liberty that leads to insecurity. On the other hand there is a subtle difference between strong parental guidance and imperious authority. Paul uttered words of deep wisdom when he wrote: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother' -- which is the first commandment with a promise--'that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.' Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."<sup>542</sup> As parents, we are to respect our child's personality, but we should also recognize that the developing mind of a child is not always able to oversee all the consequences of its acts. It takes maturity to be able to calculate the outcome of one's choices. Above all, it takes intimacy with God to discern which way one should go. We live in a world that is complex, and the pollution of sin blurs everyone's vision to the point that clear moral choices are often extremely difficult to make. God has ordained certain lines of authority within the family to help define those choices. Even so, no family is foolproof against mistakes and failures. There is only One "who is able to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy;"<sup>543</sup> He is the One to turn to in our dilemmas.

In our modern society it has become possible for a child to take his parents to court in cases where disciplinary acts are involved. Instead of protection of a child against parental brutality, this procedure has become an indication of the fact that our society has gone awry. Scripture, evidently, considers the evil of absence of parental authority greater than the excesses of the exercise of it.

The third point that draws our attention in this chapter is the meaning of silence. The father of the girl, or the husband of the wife did not have to verbally consent to validate the vow; the absence of objections stood for acquiescence. The problem is that silence does not always indicate approval; it can be the evidence of a lack of interest or attention. The provision of the law suggests that a father or husband was required to give full attention to the words of the girl or wife under his jurisdiction. It could be costly for a husband who was not in the habit of listening to his wife. Cancellation after the facts, of a vow that was made previously, would make the husband the guilty party.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* says significantly: "Silence gives consent. Hereby he allows his daughter the liberty she has assumed, and, as long as he says nothing against her vow, she shall be bound by it." If silence is born of neglect, it stands for consent. Neglect makes us just as responsible as our acts.

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<sup>542</sup> Eph. 6:1-4

<sup>543</sup> Jude vs. 24

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### III. The Conquest and Division of Israel 31:1-36:13

#### A. Victory over Midian 31:1-54

This chapter represents a sorrowful page in the history of the conquest of Canaan. The order to take vengeance on the Midianites came from God. The verses 1-12 detail the instructions and the execution. The verses 13-18 tell the gruesome story of the slaughter of prisoners. In the verses 19-24 the soldiers and their spoil are purified before they are allowed back into the camp. The verses 25-47 give us an inventory of the spoil, and in the verses 48-54 we read that the commanding officers decided to bring a memorial offering to the tabernacle as an expression of gratitude that no one in the Israelite army was killed in the raid.

*The Pulpit Commentary* has a lengthy section in which the moral questions that arise from this chapter are probed. We copy some of the remarks: "The grave moral difficulty presented by the treatment of their enemies by the Israelites, under the sanction or even direct command of God, is here presented in its gravest form. It will be best first to state the proceedings in all their ugliness; then to reject the false excuses made for them; and lastly, to justify (if possible) the Divine sanction accorded to them.

I. That the Midianites had injured Israel is clear; as also that they had done so deliberately, craftily, and successfully, under the advice of Balaam. They had so acted as if *e.g.* a modern nation were to pour its opium into the ports of a dreaded neighbor in time of peace, not simply for the sake of gain (which is base enough), but with deliberate intent to ruin the morals and destroy the manhood of the nation. ... Midian, therefore, was attacked by a detachment of the Israelites.... So far the Israelites had but followed the ordinary customs of war, with this great exception in their favor, that they offered (as is evident from the narrative) no violence to the women. Upon their return to the camp Moses was greatly displeased at the fact of the Midianitish women having been brought in, and gave orders that all the male children and all the women who were no virgins were to be slain. The inspection necessary to determine the latter point was left presumably to the soldiers. ... To put the matter boldly, we have to face the fact that, under Moses' directions, 12,000 soldiers had to deal with perhaps 50,000 women, first by ascertaining that they were not virgins, and then by killing them in cold blood. It is small additional horror that a multitude of infants must have perished directly or indirectly with their mothers.

II. It is commonly urged in vindication of this massacre that the war was God's war, and that God had a perfect right to exterminate a most guilty people. This is true in a sense. If God had been pleased to visit the Midianites with pestilence, famine or hordes of savages worse than themselves, no one would have charged him with injustice. All who believe in an over-ruling Providence believe that in one way or other God has provided that great wickedness in a nation shall be greatly punished. But that is beside the question altogether; the difficulty is, not that the Midianites were exterminated, but that they were exterminated in an inhuman manner by the Israelites. ... The fact is (and it is so obvious that it ought not to have been overlooked) that Midian was overthrown, not because he was given over to an 'obscene idolatry,' wherein he was probably neither much better nor much worse than his neighbors; but because he had made an unprovoked, crafty, and successful attack upon God's people, and had brought thousands of them to a shameful death. The motive which prompted the attack upon them was not horror of their sins, nor fear of contamination, but vengeance; Midian was smitten avowedly 'to avenge the children of Israel' (ver. 2) who had fallen through Baal-Peor, and at the same time 'to avenge the Lord' (ver. 3), who had been obliged to slay his own people."

In the point III, the commentary finds the true justification of the 'atrocities' committed by the Israelite soldiers in putting the moral problem in a historic perspective. The commentator presents the theory of an evolution of moral awareness over the ages, growing from primitive cruelty to modern standards. He says: "Even a bad man will shrink from doing to-day what a good man would have done without the least scruple some centuries ago; and (if the world last) a bad man will be able sincerely to denounce some centuries hence what a good man can bring himself to do with a clear conscience to-day." This position seems to be highly debatable, not only on the point of definition of a "bad man" and a "good man," but also on whether there has really been an improvement in the concept of moral behavior.

Unless we see Israel's acts upon her enemies as acts of God, which may look shocking to us from our twentieth century perspective, but were permissible within the context of that dispensation, we will not be able to deal with the problem, or face God's perfect holiness in an appropriate way. It is not in the difference of mentality from one age to another, but in the fundamental difference between dispensations,



that is God's dealing with this world, and the mode of revelation which He chose for particular periods in world history, that the answers to our questions must be sought.

It is also not true, that fear of contamination, but only vengeance was the only motive for the execution of the women. Especially as far as they were concerned, fear of contamination was the overriding motive. Moses' words: "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the LORD's people," clearly indicate that more Israelite men could fall, if those women were kept alive, and be allowed to live among the nation.

Another problem is that we cannot conceive of righteous or holy wars, because of the abuse of the concept in world history. The crusaders traveled to Palestine under the banner "God wills it!" The Inquisition thought that they were pleasing God when they burnt the martyrs at the stake. Even slavery was carried out under a Christian seal, and Hitler's armies had "God with us"<sup>544</sup> engraved on the buckles of their belts. All this clutters our minds sufficiently to look at this ancient history with skepticism. This does not mean that the moral problems that evolve from this chapter can be easily solved. The execution of the Midianite women was ugly, but it was not an atrocity. All executions are ugly, and death itself is ugly in all its forms. God hates death. Death is the weapon of the enemy; it is the Last Enemy.<sup>545</sup> But death is not the last word. In some cases physical death is to be preferred over a life that leads to spiritual and eternal death. The death of those women may have been more merciful than appears on the surface.

Above all, we must watch against the tendency to judge God. To doubt God's righteousness in His judgment over Midian, suggests that our standards are higher than God's. If we could see the real enemy behind Midian's plot to destroy Israel, as the carrier of God's revelation in this world, we would realize that the matter goes too far about our understanding of right-and-wrong to be able to argue with the Judge of all the earth.

It seems strange that the Midianites were singled out for this expedition of vengeance, and the Moabites, who were the ones who invited Balaam, were not disturbed. Evidently, the involvement of Moab in the Baal-Peor affair had been much less than that of Midian. This in itself is an indication of the righteousness of God, who did not command a blind vengeance upon the enemies, although Moab had, certainly, not been without guilt. Balaam must have found a more fertile ground for his plan for Israel's moral destruction among the Midianites than among the Moabites.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says about this point: "The Midianites had rendered themselves particularly obnoxious by entering into a hostile league with the Amorites <Josh. 13:21>. The Moabites were at this time spared in consideration of Lot <Deut. 2:9>, and because the measure of their iniquities was not yet full."

*The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* writes this about the problem of Moab's apparent exclusion: "In the time of Balaam, Moab (then ruled by Balak son of Zippor) conferred with the elders of Midian in regard to Israel, and the resulting embassy to Balaam consisted of elders both of Moab and Midian <Num. 22:1-7>. In the chapters that relate the prophecies of Balaam (23-24) only Moab is mentioned. In <25:1> it is the daughters of Moab who entice Israel; but in <25:6-15> it is Midian, and in vv. 16-18; <31:1-12> vengeance is executed on Midian. In <31:8-9> it is among the Midianites that Balaam perishes. We may therefore conclude that Midian had a prominent part in the transaction."

The war in this chapter is called "the Lord's vengeance." Vengeance is God's prerogative. In the epistle to the Hebrews, we read: "For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.'"<sup>546</sup> The psalmist said: "O LORD, the God who avenges, O God who avenges, shine forth. Rise up, O Judge of the earth; pay back to the proud what they deserve."<sup>547</sup> This verse reads in the KJV: "O LORD God, to whom vengeance belongeth...." The Bible calls the Day of Judgment, the Day of Vengeance. Isaiah says: "For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion's cause." What Israel did to Midian was not the paying back of a personal grudge, it was the carrying out of a divine mandate. What was unusual, in this case, was that God asked His own people to do this. But then, this was, partly, the basis for the whole conquest of Canaan. It was the way God carried out judgment in that particular dispensation. The fact that we live in a dispensation of grace, makes it hard for us to understand that God deals differently with the world today than He did 4000 years

<sup>544</sup> Gott mit uns

<sup>545</sup> See I Cor. 15:26

<sup>546</sup> Heb. 10:30

<sup>547</sup> Ps. 94:1,2

ago. We have a hard time reconciling the attribute of God's love with the attribute of His wrath. Yet, wrath is as much part of His holiness as love is. When the Apostle Paul writes: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness..."<sup>548</sup> he speaks about God's wrath in the present tense, as something that is always there; that is part of His character. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says about this verse in Romans: "By *orgee* ... *Theou* ..., the wrath of God, we are not to understand any uneasy passion in the Divine Being; but the displeasure of His righteousness, which is expressed by the punishments inflicted on the ungodly, those who retain not God in their knowledge; and the unrighteous, those whose lives are profligate." What Israel was ordered to do, was part of the cosmic struggle between good and evil, between God and Satan. It was a prelude to the final Day of Judgment that will close the history of this world.

This may not clear away for us all the problems and moral objections that were voiced by *The Pulpit Commentary* in a previous quote, but it should help us to put this page of history in its proper perspective. Ultimately, man is responsible for the evil he commits. When human depravity clashes with God's holiness, we cannot blame God for the awful results. We may be grateful that, in our dispensation, we are not involved in the carrying out of judgment, as the Israelites were. I would never volunteer to be an executioner, but that does not mean I am not in favor of capital punishment for those who deserve it.

Verses 19-24 are proof of the fact that God took no pleasure in this mass execution, although He had ordered it. The men who were involved in the operation were considered impure, not only because of their close contact with death, but because of the principle of evil involved. It is true that the impurity caused by a close encounter with death was given as the reason but, as it turns out, not only the people, who had been the executioners, had to be purified, but also the prisoners and the material spoil. Midian's plot to destroy Israel through prostitution had not only been a sexual temptation, but a demonic affair. Behind it all loomed the ugly face of Baal-Peor. This fact was ultimately the reason for the severity of the punishment on those who had, obviously, given themselves irrevocably to the service of demons.

The law on purification after the touching of dead bodies had been given in ch. 19:11-22. There it was stipulated that the period of purification lasted for seven days, and that the water of cleansing had to be applied on the third and the seventh day. Both the application of the water of cleansing, as well the days on which it had to be applied, are full of symbolic significance. The water of cleansing was prepared with the ashes of a red heifer, that had been killed outside the camp. The preparation of the cleansing water in itself was full of rich symbolism. The killing of the heifer symbolized Christ's death on the hill of Golgotha, outside the city of Jerusalem. The application of the water on the third day connects it to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the application on the seventh day indicates that it was to have its effect for the duration of life.

Some of the spoil had to be purified with fire, that is: it passed under the divine judgment, without being destroyed by it. The application of the water was a form of judgment also, but the judgment did not destroy the individual either. Some other creature had been destroyed in the process. The heifer, the ashes of which had been used in the preparation of the water, had been killed. Even the captives were purified by the death of the heifer. They had been linked to the nation and to the system that stood for demonic evil, but now they were purified by the water that symbolized the death of the Savior of the world.

In the verses 25-47 we are given an inventory of the spoil, and the way it was to be divided. The whole lot, people, animals, and material goods, was to be divided among the soldiers and the rest of the people, one half for each group. This meant that one half was given to the 12,000 men who had gone out in the battle, and the other half to the nation, which consisted of several million people. So, proportionally, the soldiers profited immensely. They were also taxed very lightly: they only gave 1/500<sup>th</sup> of everything to the service of the tabernacle, and the people had to give 1/50<sup>th</sup>. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* says about this: "That yet the 12,000 that went to the battle had as much for their share as the whole congregation (which were fifty times as many) had for theirs; so that the particular persons of the soldiery had a much better share than any of their brethren that tarried at home: and good reason they should. The greater pains we take, and the greater hazards we run, in the service of God and our generation, the greater will our recompense be at last; for God is not unrighteous to forget the work and labour of love."

The very detailed list of inventory seems uninspiring reading. The number of animals is impressive, and the advantage of this spoil for each of the soldiers is overwhelming. For example, the total head of sheep for the army was 337,500, which was divided among 12,000 men, giving to each individual 28,125 sheep, of which 1/500<sup>th</sup> had to be given to the Lord, leaving him approximately 28,120 sheep. This

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<sup>548</sup> Rom. 1:18

made each soldier rich overnight. It also seems redundant that the whole list is given twice, once for the soldiers, and once for the whole community. We can deduct from this God's eye for detail, for which the birds of the sky are kept track of, and the hairs of our head are counted.<sup>549</sup>

The last verses of this chapter, the verses 48-54, give a rather moving account of the reaction of the commanding officers of the army, upon the discovery that there had been no Israelite casualties in this raid. In their gratitude to the Lord for sparing the lives of each one of them, they brought all the spoil in gold jewelry. The NIV puts the value of that at 16,750 shekels. TLB put this down as a value of more than \$300,000. They brought this gold as an atonement for their souls. The Hebrew word used here is *nephesh*. This does not mean that they could buy their salvation. Jesus' words stand: "What can a man give in exchange for his soul?"<sup>550</sup> But it shows the appreciation of those men for the fact that God had spared their lives. They were under no obligation to give it all to the Lord. They could simply have tithed their portion, and lived happily ever after. But their hearts were too full of gratitude to keep the golden trinkets to themselves. Those men had their priorities straight.

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<sup>549</sup> See Matt. 10:29.30

<sup>550</sup> Matt. 16:26<sup>b</sup>

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### III. The Conquest and Division of Israel 31:1-36:13

#### B. Division of the Land East of Jordan 32:1-42

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* gives the outline of this chapter as follows:

- I. The humble request of the tribes of Reuben and Gad for an inheritance on that side Jordan where Israel now lay encamped <v. 1-5>.
- II. Moses' misinterpretation of their request <v. 6-15>.
- III. Their explication of it, and stating it aright <v. 16-19>.
- IV. The grant of their petition under the provisos and limitations which they themselves proposed <v. 20, etc.>.

We read in the opening verse of this chapter that the tribes of Reuben and Gad specialized in animal husbandry. The acquisition of the spoil, described in the previous chapter, which provided each of the men of the tribe with more than 28,000 sheep, would be a likely cause to have triggered the request for the pasture land which had been conquered from the Midianites, and the Moabites, although it is true that every one of the tribes acquired a similar flock.

It is obvious that the Israelites had to leave an occupational force behind in the territory they had conquered, and in the light of this fact, the proposition of the men of Gad and Reuben seems to be a reasonable one. What, probably, triggered Moses' strong reaction was the words: "Do not make us cross the Jordan." This gave the impression that the men would not participate in the conquest of Canaan.

Much has been written about the motives of the Gadites and Reubenites in the making of this request. Some commentators have launched serious accusations at the address of the two tribes. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* says: "The judicious Calvin thinks there was much amiss in the principle they went upon, and that they consulted their own private convenience more than the public good, that they had not such regard to the honour and interest of Israel, and the promise made to Abraham of the land of Canaan (strictly so called), as they ought to have had." *Matthew Henry* further comments: "This land which they coveted was not only beautiful for situation, and pleasant to the eye, but it was good for food, food for cattle; and they had a great multitude of cattle, above the rest of the tribes, it is supposed because they brought more out of Egypt, than the rest did; but that was forty years before, and stocks of cattle increase and decrease in less time than that; therefore I rather think they had been better husbands of their cattle in the wilderness, had tended them better, had taken more care of the breed, and not been so profuse as their neighbours in eating the lambs out of the flock and the calves out of the midst of the stall. Now they, having these large stocks, coveted land proportional. Many scriptures speak of Bashan and Gilead as places famous for cattle; they had been so already, and therefore these tribes hoped they would be so to them, and whatever comes of it here they desire to take their lot."

It is difficult to deduct from this account whether the people who requested this were really driven by selfish motives, and that they changed their mind after hearing Moses' impassioned outburst, or whether they meant well, and Moses misunderstood their intentions. It seems quite permissible to give those men the benefit of the doubt.

On the other hand we understand Moses' reaction. The attitude of the people forty years ago, which prevented them from entering the land, was still fresh in his mind. It must have been one of the most traumatic experiences of his life. The request of the two tribes triggered flashbacks in him, and he bursts out in vehement accusations. He calls them "a brood of sinners," and he speaks as if the two tribes had already deserted the rest of the nation. We read in vs. 14: "And here you are, a brood of sinners, standing in the place of your fathers and making the LORD even more angry with Israel." And in vs. 7: "Why do you discourage the Israelites from going over into the land the LORD has given them?"

The first thing we learn from this is that God's promises are not self-fulfilling. If we do not act upon them in faith, nothing of what God wants us to be and to have will come to pass. There are many examples in Scripture that show us that God's promises did not materialize, or never came to complete fulfillment, because the people did not live up to their potential.

A strange phenomenon in this chapter is that the Lord is not consulted in this matter; at least we do not read that He is. The Reubenites and Gadites come up with their request because it seems to be a good plan, and Moses takes recourse to his memories of previous disasters, instead of asking the Lord if that is

what He wanted. It seems clear that the territories of Bashan and part of the land of the Midianites had been given by God to the Israelites for them to use. Yet, the whole matter is dealt with on a human level.

Moses compares these men unjustly with the twelve spies who spied out the land forty years earlier, ten of which spread false reports about the land, and told Israel that the conquest of Canaan was impossible. The men of Reuben and Gad never said anything detrimental about Canaan itself. So the comparison was unfair.

Although we do not read about this, Moses' reaction would indicate that there were some ambiguous feelings among the Israelites regarding their entry into the promised land, so that the danger of discouragement may not have been imaginary. And Moses must have felt uneasy about the public sentiment, otherwise he would not have reacted the way he did. His attitude in this is quite different from the one Joshua would later demonstrate. When, at one point some of the tribes showed reluctance to conquer certain territories, we read: "But Joshua said to the house of Joseph-- to Ephraim and Manasseh— 'You are numerous and very powerful. You will have not only one allotment but the forested hill country as well. Clear it, and its farthest limits will be yours; though the Canaanites have iron chariots and though they are strong, you can drive them out.'"<sup>551</sup> Whether there really was a lack of faith on the side of Moses, we cannot tell from the record that is left to us. It seem, however, that the whole matter was never brought before the Lord.

The Reubenites and Gadites pledge to go ahead of the whole Israelite army, taking the brunt of enemy fire, so to speak, and lead the whole nation to victory. This promise may have been hyperbolic more than realistic. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* reflects about his by saying: "Could the women and children even keep the defended cities, when placed in them? This certainly cannot be supposed possible. Many of the men of war must of course stay behind. In the last census, <Num. 26>, the tribe of Reuben consisted of 43,730 men; the tribe of Gad, 40,500; the tribe of Manasseh, 52,700; the half of which is 26,350. Add this to the sum of the other two tribes, and the amount is 110,580. Now from <Joshua 4:13> we learn that of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and the half of the tribe of Manasseh, only 40,000 armed men passed over Jordan to assist their brethren in the reduction of the land: consequently the number of 70,580 men were left behind for the defense of the women, the children, and the flocks. This was more than sufficient to defend them against a people already panic struck by their late discomfitures and reverses." The reference mentioned from the book of Joshua reads: "The men of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over, armed, in front of the Israelites, as Moses had directed them. About forty thousand armed for battle crossed over before the LORD to the plains of Jericho for war." So, not all the men of those tribes crossed the Jordan to fulfil the pledge they had made, only about one third of them did. It may not have been necessary for all to go, but in not going they broke, non-the-less, their promise.

As history would prove, they paid for this in becoming the first tribes in being carried away into captivity, never to return. We read in II Kings: "In the time of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and took Ijon, Abel Beth Maacah, Janoah, Kedesh and Hazor. He took Gilead and Galilee, including all the land of Naphtali, and deported the people to Assyria."<sup>552</sup> In the light of this global picture, we would tend to think that the Reubenites and Gadites made the wrong choice, and that they settled for less than what the Lord had in stock for them. It is difficult to come to the right conclusion though, for when we turn to the book of Joshua, we come to understand that Joshua felt that those tribes had fulfilled their obligation. We read: "Then Joshua summoned the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh and said to them, 'You have done all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded, and you have obeyed me in everything I commanded. For a long time now-- to this very day-- you have not deserted your brothers but have carried out the mission the LORD your God gave you. Now that the LORD your God has given your brothers rest as he promised, return to your homes in the land that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan. But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul.' Then Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their homes. (To the half-tribe of Manasseh Moses had given land in Bashan, and to the other half of the tribe Joshua gave land on the west side of the Jordan with their brothers.) When Joshua sent them home, he blessed them, saying, 'Return to your homes with your great wealth-- with large herds of livestock, with silver, gold, bronze and iron, and a great quantity of clothing-- and divide with your brothers the plunder from your enemies.' So the Reubenites, the Gadites

<sup>551</sup> Josh. 17:17,18

<sup>552</sup> II Kings 15:29

and the half-tribe of Manasseh left the Israelites at Shiloh in Canaan to return to Gilead, their own land, which they had acquired in accordance with the command of the LORD through Moses.”<sup>553</sup> The main problem, of course was that those tribes did not “love the LORD [their] God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all [their] heart and all [their] soul.”

There still remains the issue of the allotment to the half of the tribe of Manasseh. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says about this point: “[Half the tribe of Manasseh.] It is nowhere explained in the record how they were incorporated with the two tribes, or what broke this great tribe into two parts, of which one was left to follow the fortunes of its brethren in the settled life of the western hills, while the other was allowed to wander as a nomadic tribe over the pasture lands of Gilead and Bashan. They are not mentioned as accompanying Reuben and Gad in their application to Moses, neither were they included in his first directions <Num. 32:25>; but as they also were a people addicted to pastoral pursuit, and possessed as immense flocks as the other two, Moses invited the half of them to remain, in consequence, probably, of finding that this region was more than sufficient for the pastoral wants of the others, and gave them the preference, as some have conjectured, for their valorous conduct in the contests with the Amorites.”

The last part of this chapter, the verses 34-42, may be a compilation of facts that took place at a later date. It seems doubtful that the tribes that received the territory East of the Jordan would have been given enough time to completely rebuild the places they had destroyed in the conquest. But they must have made the territory safe enough for their women and children to be settled. It is true, of course, that if more than 70,000 men remained behind, they would rebuild the destroyed cities while the other soldiers entered Canaan.

*The Adam Clarke Commentary* writes about the rebuilding of the cities: “[The children of Gad built Dibon, and Ataroth, and Aroer] This was situated on the river Arnon, <Deut. 2:36; 2 Kings 10:33>, It was formerly inhabited by the Emim, a warlike and perhaps gigantic people. They were expelled by the Moabites; the Moabites by the Amorites; and the Amorites by the Israelites. The Gadites then possessed it till the captivity of their tribe, with that of Reuben and the half of the tribe of Manasseh, by the Assyrians, <2 Kings 15:29>, after which the Moabites appear to have repossessed it, as they seem to have occupied it in the days of Jeremiah, <Num. 48:15-20>.”

And *Matthew Henry's Commentary* adds to this: “They changed the names of them (v. 38), either to show their authority, that the change of the names might signify the change of their owners, or because their names were idolatrous, and carried in them a respect to the dunghill-deities that were there worshipped. Nebo and Baal were names of their gods, which they were forbidden to make mention of <Ex. 23:13>, and which, by changing the names of these cities, they endeavored to bury in oblivion; and God promises to take away the names of Baalim out of the mouths of his people, <Hos. 2:17>.”

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<sup>553</sup> Josh. 22:1-9

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### III. The Conquest and Division of Israel 31:1-36:13

#### C. The Summary of Israel's Journeys 33:1-49

This chapter gives us a digest of the forty year of wandering of Israel through the desert. All the experiences are condensed to a list of names, with the exception of a few places where a specific incident is recorded with the name of the place where it occurred.

*The Pulpit Commentary* sees in the existence of this list that is before us an additional proof of the Mosaic authorship of the book of Numbers, and remarks: "The direct statement that Moses wrote this list himself is strongly corroborated by internal evidence, and has been accepted as substantially true by the most destructive critics. No conceivable inducement could have existed to invent a list of marches which only partially corresponds with the historical account, and can only with difficulty be reconciled with it-- a list which contains many names nowhere else occurring, and having no associations for the later Israelites."

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* writes about this: "Some events are mentioned in this journal, as their want of water at Rephidim (v. 14), the death of Aaron (v. 38-39), the insult of Arad (v. 40); and the very name of Kibroth-hattaavah-- the graves of lusts (v. 16), has a story depending upon it."

What strikes us in this record of Israel's crossing of the desert is the minuteness of the details that are recorded. Every little place is written down, which is amazing in view of the fact that, with the exception of the first two years, Israel was wandering aimlessly through the wilderness to pay for their disobedience to enter the land. A careful record was kept of this exercise of futility; nothing was lost. It seems that the references to incidents connected to certain places are chosen at random. The most important one, the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, is never even mentioned; nor is the great turn-about spoken of which began Israel's forty-year wandering in the desert. The list speaks more to us for what it does not say than for what it says.

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* says about this portion of Scripture: "We may consider the whole book of Numbers as a diary, and indeed the first book of travels ever published. Dr. Shaw, Dr. Pococke, and several others, have endeavored to mark out the route of the Israelites, through this great, dreary, and trackless desert, and have ascertained many of the stages here described. Indeed there are sufficient evidences of this important journey still remaining, for the descriptions of many are so particular that the places are readily ascertained by them; but this is not the case with all." The commentary then goes into a detailed description of all the 42 places mentioned in this section. Some worthy sages from the previous century have tried to spiritualize this record. Clarke does not back them up at this point, but he says: "Israel was the church of God in the wilderness, and its unsettled, wandering state under Moses may point out the unsettled state of religion under the law. Their being brought, after the death of Moses, into the promised rest by Joshua, may point out the establishment, fixedness, and certainty of that salvation provided by Jesus Christ, of whom Joshua, in name and conduct, was a remarkable type. Mr. Ainsworth imagines that the forty-two stations here enumerated, through which the Israelites were brought to the verge of the promised land, and afterward taken over Jordan into the rest which God had promised, point out the forty-two generations from Abraham unto Christ, through whom the Saviour of the world came, by whose blood we have an entrance into the holiest, and enjoy the inheritance among the saints in light. And Mr. Bromley, in his *Way to the Sabbath of Rest*, considers each name and place as descriptive of the spiritual state through which a soul passes in its way to the kingdom of God. But in cases of this kind fancy has much more to do than judgment."

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* introduces this section: "This chapter may be said to form the winding-up of the history of the travels of the Israelites through the wilderness; because the three following chapters relate to matters connected with the occupation and division of the promised land. Since several apparent discrepancies will be discovered on comparing the records here given of the journeyings from Sinai, with the detailed account of the events narrated in the Book of Exodus, and the occasional notices of places that are found in that of Deuteronomy, it is probable that, as 2,000,000 of people with their flocks would spread over a wide tract of country, and as few stations would be large enough to receive them all at the same time, the stations enumerated in Exodus refer to the halting places of Moses and the chief men, including as many of the people as were associated with them, while the catalogue in this chapter embraces, ever and above these, the intermediate and adjoining stations, in those

parts of the desert over which the people spread in detached groups at the same time. This list was intended by the sacred historian to contain a full and particular account of all the stations where in the course of their journey they made a prolonged encampment, and whence they dispersed their flocks and herds to pasture on the surrounding plains. In short, the former is historical, while this is statistical. The catalogue extends from their departure out of Egypt to their arrival on the plains of Moab.”

There is little sense for us, within the framework of our study, to trace the archeological and historical significance of every place mentioned in this chapter. What draws our attention is, of course, the few comments made at the verses 3, 4, 8, 9, 14, 38, 39, and 40.

The exodus started at Rameses on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the day after the Passover. It was the first month of the new calendar of the Jewish people. This was the day their history, as a nation, began. It was a crucial day in the history of salvation. The actual history of salvation began in heaven, before the creation of time. The book of Revelation calls Jesus “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.”<sup>554</sup> But this day marked such an important event in the progression of God’s plan, that He decided to turn a new leaf of His calendar. The people of Israel “marched out boldly in full view of all the Egyptians, who were burying all their firstborn, whom the LORD had struck down among them; for the LORD had brought judgment on their gods.” These “gods” were not just Pharaoh and his cabinet but the spiritual powers of darkness that had ruled over Egypt, and kept Israel in bondage.

Israel’s leaving of Rameses was wrought with symbolic meaning. Rameses was one of the cities built by the Israelites for Pharaoh in their slave labor. The city was dedicated to Ra. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* says about this place that the Egyptian name for the place was “Ra-messu, ‘Ra created him’ (or ‘it’),” and that it was “One of the two ‘settlements’ ... built, or ‘built up,’ by the Hebrews for the Pharaoh, the other being Pithom.” Nothing symbolized more that tyranny of Egypt over Israel than this monument to Ra, which the children of God had been forced to build.

In the verses 8 and 9 the crossing of the Red Sea and the stops at Mara and Elim are mentioned without any further comment, yet these three names represent major events. Vs. 14 only mentions the fact that there was no drinking water at Rephidim, without reference to the miraculous way water was brought out of the rock when Moses hit it. The next comment is found in the verses 38 and 39 where Aaron died at Mount Hor. Vs. 40 dismisses the first major campaign of Israel against a Canaanite king, and the eradication of his kingdom<sup>555</sup> with the words: “The Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev of Canaan, heard that the Israelites were coming.”

About the visit to Kadesh mentioned in vs. 37, *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says: “[Kadesh]-- or Kadesh-barnea-- is supposed to be the great valley of the Ghor, and the city Kadesh to have been situated on the border of this valley ... But as there are no less than 18 stations inserted between Hazeroth and Kadesh, and only eleven days were spent in performing that journey <Deut. 1:2>, it is evident that the intermediate stations here recorded belong to another and totally different visit to Kadesh. The first was when they left Sinai in the second month <Num. 1:11; 13:20>, and were in Kadesh in August <Deut 1:45>, and ‘abode many days’ in it, and complaining at the report of the spies, were commanded to return into the desert ‘by the way of the Red Sea.’ The arrival at Kadesh, mentioned in this catalogue, corresponds to the second sojourn at that place, being the first month, or April <Num. 20:1>. Between the two visits there intervened a period of 38 years, during which they wandered here and there through all the region of Et-Tyh (wanderings), often returning to the same spots as the pastoral necessities of their flocks required; and there is the strongest reason for believing that the stations named between Hazeroth <Num. 33:8> and Kadesh <Num. 33:36> belong to the long interval of wandering.” The above comment seems to throw off the chronological accuracy of the account of this chapter. But then, the exact location of all the places mentioned is hard to pinpoint. That the visit to Kadesh, mentioned here, refers to the end of the wilderness wanderings is obvious from the fact that, immediately following, the death of Aaron on Mount Hor is mentioned.

*The Pulpit Commentary* writes about vs. 38, which mentions the death of Aaron: “This is the only place where the date of Aaron’s death is given. It is in strict accordance with the Divine intimation that Israel was to wander forty years in the wilderness (ch. xiv. 33, 34), that period being understood, according to the usual mercy of God, which shortens the days of evil, to include the time already spent in the wilderness.”

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<sup>554</sup> Rev. 13:8

<sup>555</sup> See ch. 21



**D. Division of the Land West of Jordan 33:50-56**

This section runs into the next chapter, and should have been fused to it to make a more logical division of the book of Numbers. The concluding verses of this chapter deal with the necessity to possess the land and to thoroughly cleanse it from all traces of idolatry, lest God's people should become contaminated themselves.

About the phrase: "And the Lord spake," *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "It is quite obvious that a new section begins here, closely connected, not with the Itinerary which precedes it, but with the delimitation which follows. The formula which introduces the present command is repeated in ch. xxxvi., thus giving a character of its own to this concluding portion of the Book, and to some extent isolating it from the rest."

While Israel is still east of the Jordan River God tells them: "Drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places." This warning was a repeat of the charge God had given to the first generation that came out of Egypt,<sup>556</sup> but those people had all died in the desert, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb. Therefore, these instructions are repeated here to those who had been too young to hear it the first time, or who had not been born yet.

We understand from the warnings God gave to Israel what the actual danger was for Israel in entering and occupying Canaan. The people in Canaan had been practicing spiritism for centuries, and their land was full of images that connected them to the unclean world of darkness. In attacking Canaan, Israel attacked Satan himself. If they would leave any of the symbols of Satanism intact, or allow any practice of spiritism to remain, they would soon be polluted themselves. This, in fact, did happen, and the one who re-introduced the heathen practices in Israel was the wise King Solomon, who must have considered himself too broadminded to take God's injunction seriously. We read: "He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods."<sup>557</sup>

*The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* writes about the religion of the inhabitants of Canaan: "New vistas of knowledge of Canaanite cults and their degrading character and debilitating effect have been opened up by the discovery of the Ras Shamra religious epic literature from Ugarit in N Syria. Thousands of clay tablets stored in what seems to be a library between two great Canaanite temples dating from c. fifteenth-fourteenth century B.C. give a full description of the Canaanite pantheon. Canaanite fertility cults are seen to be more base than elsewhere in the ancient world. The virile monotheistic faith of the Hebrews was continually in peril of contamination from the lewd nature worship with immoral gods, prostitute goddesses, serpents, cultic doves, and bulls. El, the head of the pantheon, was the hero of sordid escapades and crimes. He was a bloody tyrant who dethroned his father, murdered his favorite son, and decapitated his daughter. Despite these enormities, El was styled 'father of years' (abu shanima), 'the father of man' (abu adami, 'father bull'), i.e., the progenitor of the gods. Baal, the widely revered Canaanite deity, was the son of El and dominated the Canaanite pantheon. He was the god of thunder, whose voice reverberated through the heavens in the storm. He is pictured on a Ras Shamra stela brandishing a mace in his right hand and holding in his left hand a stylized thunderbolt. The three goddesses were Anath, Astarte, and Ashera, who were all three patronesses of sex and war. All were sacred courtesans. Other Canaanite deities were Mot (death); Reshep, the god of pestilence; Shulman, the god of health; Koshar, the god of arts and crafts. These Canaanite cults were utterly immoral, decadent, and corrupt, dangerously contaminating and thoroughly justifying the divine command to destroy their devotees <Deut. 20:17>."

It is obvious from the above that pornography had been raised to the level of a religion among the people of Canaan. This is the worst possible deviation of human sexuality. God intended sexuality to be a means to express, on a physical level, the deepest human emotions, and ultimately the deepest spiritual experience. That is why the Apostle Paul could write: " 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church."<sup>558</sup> In perverting human sexuality, Satan scored a major victory. Because of their practice of religion, the Canaanites would never be able to worship God in spirit and in truth, as Israel could.

<sup>556</sup> See Ex. 23:24, 31-33

<sup>557</sup> I Kings 11:5,7,8

<sup>558</sup> Eph. 5:31-32

Another abomination was the murder of children who were sacrificed to the idols. This practice made a complete caricature out of the worship of God. This is why God warns His people: "You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods."<sup>559</sup>

The chapter ends with a severe warning to their own spiritual wellbeing, if all traces of filthy idolatry were not wiped out in the country God gave them.

God wanted Israel to be the instrument of purification of His land. Unless we see the conquest of Canaan against the background of the eternal confrontation between God and Satan, the whole of this part of history is debased to the same level as the colonial expansions of Western nations in centuries past, or of the territorial ambitions of Nazi Germany, and Japan during World War II. As God cleaned the world during the Flood, and kept Noah to replenish our planet with a cleaner human race, so God reclaimed His land from the Canaanites who had polluted it, and replaced a race, perverted by sin, with a holy kingdom of priests. At least, this was His intention. The fact that Israel, in the end, became worse than the original inhabitants of Canaan<sup>560</sup> is one of the darkest pages in the history of salvation, and in world history. God had told His people in the book of Leviticus: "Be holy, because I am holy."<sup>561</sup>

The fact that both Noah and Israel failed does, in no way, change *our* position in the Kingdom of Heaven. Many Christians compromise and make deals with the enemy. But God wants us to "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power, [and] put on the full armor of God so that [we] can take [our] stand against the devil's schemes."<sup>562</sup> He intends to defeat the enemy, not with armies of angels, but by men and women who had fallen victim to his schemes. That is the reason the Apostle Paul can write to the church in Rome: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you."<sup>563</sup> This is what the grace of our Lord Jesus will do; it crushes Satan under our feet.

Vs. 54 actually belongs to the next chapter in which the division of the land is spelled out in greater detail. The allotment of the land to the various tribes was done by lot. How exactly this was done is not known. We read in the Joshua: "Joshua then cast lots for them in Shiloh in the presence of the LORD, and there he distributed the land to the Israelites according to their tribal divisions."<sup>564</sup> Ultimately, this meant that the people left the matter of which parcel would be given to whom, in the hands of God. We consider casting of lots as an equivalent of leaving things to chance, but in this instance the dice, or whatever was used for casting lots, was a means to determine the will of God. The Bible is quite emphatic about this: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD."<sup>565</sup>

This chapter ends with a very vivid illustration of what it will be like if all traces of evil were not wiped out of the land. We read: "But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them." "Barbs in [the] eyes and thorns in [the] sides" are foreign bodies of the worst kind, that not only mean torture, but that can lead to blindness and death through infection. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments on this: "Under these metaphors, the continual mischief that should be done to them, both in soul and body, by these idolaters, is set forth in a very expressive manner. What can be more vexatious than a continual goading of each side, so that the attempt to avoid the one throws the body more forcibly on the other? And what can be more distressing than a continual pricking in the eye, harassing the mind, tormenting the body, and extinguishing the sight?"

On the surface, God's injunction to Israel seems to overlook the sinful nature of the people themselves. It sounds as if the only threat to their spiritual health came from the outside. Some Christians, usually those of charismatic persuasion, believe that sin is demonically introduced in each human life, and that every sin can be overcome by casting out the demon that causes it. This verse seem to sanction such faulty theology. We are, however, obviously wrong if we draw such conclusions from God's warning to His people. Sin is the enemy within. Jesus said: "The things that come out of the mouth come from the

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<sup>559</sup> Deut. 12:31

<sup>560</sup> See II Chr. 33:9

<sup>561</sup> Lev. 11:44,45; 19:2; 20:7,26

<sup>562</sup> Eph. 6:10,11

<sup>563</sup> Rom. 16:20

<sup>564</sup> Josh. 18:10

<sup>565</sup> Prov. 16:33

heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean' ”<sup>566</sup>

It hard to understand that God would use people, who by the very fact that they are polluted inwardly, and who are susceptible in the extreme to temptation, to crush Satan. Yet, this seems to be the essence of God's plan of salvation for the world. The defeat of the devil will ultimately be brought about by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of the testimony of the follower of Christ, and by their willingness to give their lives for Jesus.<sup>567</sup> It is brought about by the grace of God.

The last words of this chapter: “then I will do to you what I plan to do to them,” is one of the rare promises of God in the Bible He has not kept. The existence of Israel in our present day is proof of it.

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<sup>566</sup> Matt. 15:18-20

<sup>567</sup> See Rev. 12:11

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

**D. Division of the Land West of Jordan** (continued) 34:1-29

This chapter deals in a concise manner with the division of the promised land (vs. 1-15), and it lists the names of those who were responsible to oversee the division (vs. 16-29). What we read here is the basic allotment God gave to Israel.

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes: "There was a much larger possession promised them, which in due time they would have possessed if they had been obedient, reaching even to the river Euphrates, <Deut. 11:24>. And even so far the dominion of Israel did extend in David's time and Solomon's, <2 Chr. 9:26>. But this which is here described is Canaan only, which was the lot of the nine tribes and a half, for the other two and a half were already settled." Moses indicated later that the territory could be increased, depending upon the people's obedience. In Deuteronomy we read: "If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow-- to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways and to hold fast to him-- then the LORD will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and stronger than you. Every place where you set your foot will be yours: Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the Euphrates River to the western sea."<sup>568</sup> This promise became a reality for a short time during the reign of king Solomon. The book of Second Chronicles reports: "He [Solomon] ruled over all the kings from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt."

It appears that some of the border lines drawn in this chapter are difficult to trace on today's map, because the exact location of each place mentioned is not known.

About the Southern border, *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says: "The line which bounded it on the south is the most difficult to trace. According to the best Biblical geographers, the leading points here defined are as follows: The southwest angle of the southern boundary should be where the wilderness of Zin touches the border of Edom, so that the southern boundary should extend eastward from the extremity of the Dead Sea, wind around the precipitous ridge of Akrabbim (scorpions), thought to be the high and difficult Pass of Safeh, which crosses the stream that flows from the south into the Jordan-- i. e., the great valley of the Arabah, reaching from the Dead to the Red Sea." The same commentary observes that "The Israelites never actually possessed all the territory comprised within these boundaries, even when it was most extended by the conquests of David and Solomon." But there is little value to investigate these details within the scope of our study. We agree, at least in part with *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, which says: "All description here is useless. The situation and boundaries of the land of Canaan can only be known by actual survey, or by consulting a good map."

The verses 16-29 give us a list of names of the ten tribal leaders, who were to oversee and direct the occupation of each tribal territory, according to the allotment given to each tribe by the drawing described in the previous chapter. The nomination was an act of faith, since no territory had been conquered yet, except for the kingdoms of Og and Sihon, which had been allotted to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh. The order in which the names were given is also remarkable, since it is the order of the allotments to the various tribes, for which, at that time the lots had not yet been cast. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* remarks: "Some observe that the order of the tribes here very much differs from that in which they hitherto, upon all occasions, had been named, and agrees with the neighborhood of their lots in the division of the land. Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin, the first three here named, lay close together; the inheritance of Dan lay next them on one side, that of Ephraim and Manasseh on another side; Zebulun and Issachar lay abreast more northerly, and, lastly, Asher and Naphtali most northward of all, as is easy to observe in looking over a map of Canaan; this (says bishop Patrick) is an evidence that Moses was guided by a divine Spirit in his writings. Known unto God are all his works beforehand, and what is new and surprising to us he perfectly foresaw, without any confusion or uncertainty." This is indeed a remarkable feature, which can hardly be called a coincidence, unless we take this whole chapter to be out of place. That would mean, however, that Moses could not have written it, and that leads to unacceptable assumptions.

*The Pulpit Commentary* remarks about the sequence in which the names of the tribal leaders are mentioned: "Of these tribe princes ..., Caleb is the only one whose name is known to us, and he had acted in a somewhat similar capacity forty years before. This may of itself account for the tribe of Judah being

<sup>568</sup> Deut. 11:22-24

named first in the list, especially as Reuben was not represented; but the order in which the other names follow is certainly remarkable. Taken in pairs (Judah and Simeon, Manasseh and Ephraim, &c.), they advance regularly from south to north, according to their subsequent position on the map. Differing as this arrangement does so markedly from any previously adopted, it is impossible to suppose that it is accidental. We must conclude either that a coincidence so apparently trivial was Divinely prearranged, or that the arrangement of the names is due to a later hand than that of Moses.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### III. The Conquest and Division of Israel 31:1-36:13

#### E. Special Cities in Canaan 35:1-34

The verses 1-8 of this chapter deal with the towns that were to be given to the Levites, six of which were to be set apart as cities of refuge. The remainder of the chapter regulates the use of these towns of refuge (verses 9-34). Both the allotment of cities to the Levites, spread out over the whole of the country, and the designation of some towns as cities of refuge, with the stipulations regarding their use, is full of spiritual significance.

The allotment of certain cities, within the territory of the other tribes, to be occupied by the tribe of Levi was the logical outcome of the fact that the Levites were not receiving any heritage in the land of Canaan. The Lord had said specifically to Aaron: "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites."<sup>569</sup> The Lord has extended this to the whole tribe of Levi. We read: "It is the Levites who are to do the work at the Tent of Meeting and bear the responsibility for offenses against it. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. They will receive no inheritance among the Israelites."<sup>570</sup> Moses would later reiterate the status of the Levites, by emphasizing in a more beautiful way their task description, by saying: "At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister and to pronounce blessings in his name, as they still do today. That is why the Levites have no share or inheritance among their brothers; the LORD is their inheritance, as the LORD your God told them."<sup>571</sup>

From *The Pulpit Commentary* we copy the following regarding the allotment given to the Levites in the promised land: "The dispersion of the Levites (however mysteriously connected with the prophecy of Gen. xlix. 5-7) was obviously designed to form a bond of unity for all Israel by diffusing the knowledge and love of the national religion, and by keeping up a constant communication between the future capital and all the provinces.... The priestly family was at present too small to be influential, but the Levites were numerous enough to have leavened the whole nation if they had walked worthy of their calling. They were gathered together in towns of their own, partly no doubt in order to avoid disputes, but partly that they might have a better opportunity of setting forth the true ideal of what Jewish life should be."

The prophecy, mentioned by *The Pulpit Commentary* was part of the curse Jacob put on his two sons Simeon and Levi, which read: "Simeon and Levi are brothers-- their swords are weapons of violence. Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly, for they have killed men in their anger and hamstringed oxen as they pleased. Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel."<sup>572</sup> As far as Levi was concerned, God kept to the letter of Jacob's prophecy, but He changed the curse into one of the richest blessing that could befall the nation of Israel. The dispersion of this tribe throughout the land dotted the country with towns that could become havens of justice and spiritual refreshment.

The Levites did not only embody the service to God in the tabernacle, of which they were obviously a part, but they also administered justice in the various regions in which they resided. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* records: "Since the Levites were to have no territorial domain allocated to them, like the other tribes, on the conquest of Canaan <Num. 18:20>, they were to be distributed throughout the land (cf. <Gen. 47:7>) in certain cities appropriated to their use; and these cities were to be surrounded by extensive suburbs. There is an apparent discrepancy between <Num. 35:4> and 5 with regard to the extent of the suburbs; but the statements in the two verses refer to totally different things-- the one to the extent of the suburbs from the walls of the city, the other to the space of 2,000 cubits from their extremity. In point of fact, there was an extent of ground, amounting to 3,000 cubits, measured from the wall of the city. One thousand were most probably occupied with out-houses for the accommodation of shepherds and other servants, with gardens, vineyards, or olive yards. And these which were portioned out to different families <1 Chr. 6:60> might be sold by one Levite to another, but not to any individual of

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<sup>569</sup> ch. 18:20

<sup>570</sup> ch. 18:23

<sup>571</sup> Deut. 10:8,9

<sup>572</sup> Gen. 49:5-7

another tribe <Jer. 32:7>. The other 2,000 cubits remained a common for the pasturing of cattle <Lev. 25:34>; and, considering their number, that space would be fully required.”

*Matthew Henry's Commentary* writes about these cities: “The number allotted them was forty-eight in all, four out of each of the twelve tribes, one with another. Out of the united tribes of Simeon and Judah nine, out of Naphtali three, and four apiece out of the rest, as appears, Josh. 21. Thus were they blessed with a good ministry, and that ministry with a comfortable maintenance, not only in tithes, but in glebe-lands.” These forty-eight cities were donated to the Levites by each of the other tribes, as appears from *Matthew Henry's* comment, in proportion to the size of the tribe.

*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* writes about these cities donated to the Levites: “48 cities assigned to the tribe of Levi. When the land of Canaan was divided among the tribes of Israel, each tribe, except Levi, received a specific region or territory for its inheritance. The tribe of Levi, however, was made up of priests who were to serve the religious and spiritual needs of the other tribes. Thus, instead of receiving a territory of their own, they were scattered throughout the entire land. <Numbers 35:1-8> sets forth a plan whereby the tribe of Levi was to live in 48 cities scattered throughout Palestine. (This plan was fulfilled according to assignments described in <Josh. 20--21> and <1 Chr. 6:54-81>.) The 48 cities were apportioned in this way: the AARONITES, one of the families of the Kohathites, received 13 cities <Josh. 21:4,9-19; 1 Chr. 6:54-60>; the rest of the KOHATHITES received 10 cities <Josh. 21:5,20-26; 1 Chr. 6:61>. The GERSHONITES received 13 cities <Josh. 21:6,27-33; 1 Chr. 6:62>, and the MERARITES received 12 cities <Josh. 21:7,34-40; 1 Chr. 6:63>. These 48 cities and their surrounding common-lands--pastures, fields, and vineyards-- were to be used exclusively by the Levites. Six of these Levitical cities were to be CITIES OF REFUGE <Num. 35:6,9-34; Josh. 20--21>. A person who caused the death of another could flee to one of these cities for protection from anyone who wanted to avenge the life of the person killed (see AVENGER OF BLOOD). The refugee thus was protected until he received a fair trial, or until the high priest of that particular city of refuge died (after which he was free to return home and claim the protection of the authorities). Three of the cities of refuge were east of the Jordan River: Bezer (in the tribe of Reuben), Ramoth in Gilead (in Gad), and Golan (in Manasseh; <Josh. 20:8>). The other three cities of refuge were west of the Jordan: Kedesh (in the tribe of Naphtali), Shechem (in Ephraim), and Kirjath Arba, also known as Hebron (in Judah; <Josh. 20:7>). According to this plan, the Levites were situated throughout the land and could assist the other Israelites in spiritual matters. As a practical matter, since six of these Levitical cities were cities of refuge, citizens living in every part of Palestine had a refuge that was relatively near their homes. A look at a map will demonstrate how carefully the cities were spaced out to facilitate ease of access. Some of the ancient Levitical cities, such as Bethel and Gilgal, became an important part of the religious system of Israel <1 Kin. 3:4; Hos. 4:15; 12:11; Amos 4:4-5>.”

The apparent discrepancy between the 1500 feet, mentioned in vs. 4 and the 3000 feet in vs. 5 has caused a good deal of confusion among the scholars. We read in *Adam Clarke's Commentary*: [And ye shall measure from without the city on the east side two thousand cubits, and on the south side two thousand cubits, and on the west side two thousand cubits, and on the north side two thousand cubits; and the city shall be in the midst: this shall be to them the suburbs of the cities.] Commentators have been much puzzled with the accounts in these two verses. In <Num. 35:4> the measure is said to be 1,000 cubits from the wall; in <Num. 35:5> the measure is said to be 2,000 from without the city. It is likely these two measures mean the same thing; at least so it was understood by the Septuagint and Coptic, who have dischilious pecheis, 2,000 cubits, in the fourth, as well as in the fifth verse, but this reading of the Septuagint and Coptic is not acknowledged by any other of the ancient versions, nor by any of the MSS. collated by Kennicott and De Rossi. We must seek therefore for some other method of reconciling this apparently contradictory account. Sundry modes have been proposed by commentators, which appear to me, in general, to require fully as much explanation as the text itself. Maimonides is the only one intelligible on the subject. ‘The suburbs,’ says he, ‘of the cities are expressed in the law to be 3,000 cubits on every side from the wall of the city and outwards. The first thousand cubits are the suburbs, and the 2,000, which they measured without the suburbs, were for fields and vineyards.’ ” TLB compacts both verses in one phrase by saying: “Their gardens and vineyards shall extend 1500 feet out from the city walls in each direction, with an additional 1500 feet beyond that for pastureland.”

The fact that the Lord, Himself, was the inheritance of the whole tribe of Levi did not mean that they would not be provided for on an earthly level. It did not reduce them to charity, at least not in the sense that we tend to interpret the word. The so called Protestant Work Ethics that have dominated Western

society for centuries, was based upon Paul's statement: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."<sup>573</sup> But Paul also said: "Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel."<sup>574</sup> And, speaking to His disciples who campaigned in the cities of Israel, Jesus said: "When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages."<sup>575</sup> If we consider the payment of the servants of the Lord to be hand-outs, like undeserved alms for those who do not labor in the sweat of their brows, we have turned God's truth upside-down.

Material sustenance is the image of a spiritual reality. Bread is a picture of the Word of God. That is why "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."<sup>576</sup> Treasures on earth are shadows of the real treasures in heaven. Jesus, therefore, advises us: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."<sup>577</sup> If we understand this, we see the right relationship between that which we need on a temporary basis to live on earth, and the reality of life in eternity; and we put things in their right perspective.

The ministry of the Levites was of greater importance for the health of the nation of Israel than any other branch of work. Israel could weather periods of drought and hunger, but when the nation began to neglect the worship of YHWH, they ceased to exist as a nation. The Levites were to be the salt of the earth; their being spread out over the country would keep corruption in abeyance.

The second part of this chapter deals with the cities of refuge. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes about these cities: "Six cities, three on each side of the Jordan, were set apart and placed in the hands of the Levites, to serve as places of asylum for such as might shed blood unwittingly. Location: On the East of the Jordan they were Bezer in the lot of Reuben, Ramoth-Gilead in the tribe of Gad, and Golan in the territory of Manasseh. On the West of the Jordan they were Hebron in Judah, Shechem in Mt. Ephraim, and Kedesh in Naphtali (<Num 35:6,14; Josh 20:2,7> ff.; <21:13,21,27,32,38>; Bezer is named in verse 36, but not described as a City of Refuge). ... <Deut 19:2> speaks of three cities thus to be set apart, referring apparently to the land West of the Jordan."

The function of those cities of refuge was to give asylum to people who had committed manslaughter, and who would be subject to the revenge of the next of kin of the victim. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines manslaughter as: "the unlawful killing of a human being without express or implied malice."

In Exodus these cities of refuge were first hinted to when God said to Moses: "Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate. But if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from my altar and put him to death."<sup>578</sup> "A place I will designate" is, in the same sentence called "my altar." God considered the cities of refuge to have the same function as the altar at the tabernacle, that is the place where guilt was atoned for by substitutional death. It is also significant that accidental death in this verse is described with the words "God lets it happen." We will see the importance of this later on.

In order to comprehend the intent of this passage we have to understand the background and mentality of Israel in the Old Testament. None of this makes much sense to us in a society that is governed by a judicial system, based on the Pax Romana, which is exclusively in the hands of a central government. This was not the case in Israel at that time. They were in an in-between stage. There were judges and there was a judicial system, but there was also a tribal tradition in which the lives of the members of the clan were in the hands of the heads of clans. An illustration is found in the story of Judah and Tamar. We read in

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<sup>573</sup> II Thes. 3:10

<sup>574</sup> I Cor. 9:13,14

<sup>575</sup> Luke 10:5-7

<sup>576</sup> Deut. 8:3

<sup>577</sup> Matt. 6:19-21

<sup>578</sup> Ex. 21:12-14



Genesis: "About three months later Judah was told, 'Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant.' Judah said, 'Bring her out and have her burned to death!'" <sup>579</sup>

We also have to understand that the Israelites were a hot-blooded race, who when provoked, would be liable to shoot first and ask questions later. That feature, more than anything else, created the need for the cities of refuge mentioned in this chapter. Revenge was in the hands of the next of kin, who is called *ga'al* in Hebrew. *Strongs'* defines the word as: "to redeem (according to the Oriental law of kinship), i.e. to be the next of kin (and as such to buy back a relative's property, marry his widow, etc.)."

The term is used both of God and of man. When God reveals Himself to Moses, for instance, He says: "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment."<sup>580</sup> David uses the term for God in the Psalms, when he says: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer."<sup>581</sup> Isaiah calls God "*ga'al*" when he says: " 'In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,' says the LORD your Redeemer."<sup>582</sup> The most common use of the word is in connection with the right to redeem property. As such it is used several times in Leviticus, as for instance in: "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold."<sup>583</sup> And in the story of Ruth, Boaz is the *ga'al* who restores the property to Naomi and marries Ruth. We read: " 'The LORD bless him!' Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. 'He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.' She added, 'That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers.' "<sup>584</sup>

This variety of applications of the word shows that behind its use is the concept of justice. The root meaning of the word is a blood relation, and the positive aspect of this relationship comes out in redemption, but negatively it means revenge, which is also part of justice.

*The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* says about the avenger of blood: "(Heb. *go'el haddam*, lit., 'Redeemer of blood'). At the root of the enactments of the Mosaic penal code lies the principle of strict but righteous retribution, the purpose being to eradicate evil and produce reverence for the righteous God. This principle, however, was not first introduced by the law of Moses. It is much older and is found especially in the form of blood revenge among many ancient peoples. It appears almost everywhere where the state has not yet been formed or is still in the first stages of development, and consequently satisfaction for personal injury falls to private revenge. This custom of 'blood calling for blood' exists among Arabs of today. If a man is slain there can never be peace between the tribes again unless the man who killed him is slain by the avenger. By this custom the life, first of all, but after it also the property of the family, as its means of subsistence, was to be protected by the nearest of kin, called a redeemer. The following directions were given by Moses: (1) The willful murderer was to be put to death, without permission of compensation, by the nearest of kin. (2) The law of retaliation was not to extend beyond the immediate offender (<Deut. 24:16; 2 Kin. 14:6; 2 Chr. 25:4>; etc.). (3) If a man took the life of another without hatred, or without hostile intent, he was permitted to flee to one of the cities of refuge (which see). It is not known how long blood revenge was observed, although it would appear <2 Sam. 14:7-8> that David had influence in restraining the operation of the law. Jehoshaphat established a court at Jerusalem to decide such cases <2 Chr. 19:10>."

The first intent of the establishment of these cities of refuge was to give a man a chance for a fair trial. God did not want any lynching in Israel. We read in vs. 12: "so that a person accused of murder may not die before he stands trial before the assembly." This would include both murder and manslaughter. In a case of murder the offender had to be executed. We should not have too much of a problem in reconciling this part with our concept of justice.

A big difference between now and then is that execution of the guilty party had to be carried out by the next of kin. What differs even more in the concept of justice in our time, and in the days of Moses, is the case of a man who was guilty of manslaughter. The examples given in the verses 22 and 23 all deal with accidental death. Hostility and malice are excluded. We read: "But if without hostility someone suddenly shoves another or throws something at him unintentionally or, without seeing him, drops a stone

<sup>579</sup> Gen. 38:24

<sup>580</sup> Ex. 6:6

<sup>581</sup> Ps. 19:14

<sup>582</sup> Isa. 54:8

<sup>583</sup> Lev. 25:25

<sup>584</sup> Ruth 2:20

on him that could kill him, and he dies, then since he was not his enemy and he did not intend to harm him....” In the twentieth century in our western world, such a person would be declared “not guilty,” and would be set free. Not so in Israel of old! He would be kept in the city of refuge to which he fled for protection, and be severely limited in his freedom. He was condemned to a form of house arrest for the remainder of his life, or till the death of the high priest. If the man ventured outside the city limits, he put himself in severe jeopardy, and if the avenger would kill him, he would not be deemed being guilty of murder. This all sounds rather strange to our ears.

Where our philosophy deviates from Israel’s is on the point of accidents. We define an accident as something that is unrelated to design. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “accident” as: “An event occurring by chance or unintentionally.” Even if we call certain events “an act of God,” we do not really mean that God has any place in what happened. But the Israelites saw the hand of God even in accidents. They may not have been able to establish a direct link between every event and moral condition, but they believed that the connection was there, although not visible to the human eye. The remarks of the disciples to Jesus about the man who was born blind is typical of this world view. We read in John’s Gospel: “His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’”<sup>585</sup> One of the students at the Theological School in Nabire, Irian Jaya, Indonesia, a tribal Papua, told me once that he could not be bitten by a poisonous snake because he had never committed adultery. We consider such a view of life to be primitive. But our concept of what is an accident may not be realistic either because it leaves God completely out of the picture. And any picture from which God is excluded is not a representation of reality. The Israelite believed that the man who committed manslaughter was marked by God, although he might not be guilty of murder. The city of refuge with all its limitations was, therefore, meant to be an act of mercy: it gave protection from the law of the state by the law of grace. Next to the law that regulated the ceremonial sacrifices, those cities exemplified God’s grace in the Old Testament.

Specifically, the mention of the death of the High Priest seems to us completely unrelated to the matter of guilt or the absence of it. The only connection seems to be that guilt was expiated, if not by the death of the guilty one, then by the High Priest who died in the place of those who were marked by death. Evidently, God accepted the death of the High Priest as a substitution for the guilty party. It is obvious what lesson the Holy Spirit wants us to draw from this. We are all set free from guilt in all its forms by the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the background of all this is God’s concept of death and guilt. Death, in all its forms, is a foreign element in God’s thinking, and it is always tied up with guilt. Whether a man kills intentionally, or causes death without meaning to, it all reminds God of the fall. This is the argument Paul advances in his epistle to the Romans: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned--.”<sup>586</sup> And in God’s eye death can only be blotted out by death: the death of him who committed the act, or the death of one who substitutes for him.

In the Old Testament order the sequence was turned around. The man who was guilty of man slaughter was protected by the life of the High Priest, and freed by his death. In the New Testament we are first of all freed by the death of Christ, and then protected by His life. Paul, again, says: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”<sup>587</sup>

*The Adam Clarke Commentary* agrees with this. We read: “[Until the death of the priest.] Probably intended to typify, that no sinner can be delivered from his banishment from God or recover his forfeited inheritance, till Jesus Christ, the great high priest, had died for his offenses, and risen again for his justification.”

As we have seen above, God calls the place He designates for a person who is guilty of manslaughter as “My altar.”<sup>588</sup> This characterizes the cities of refuge as places which foreshadow the cross on which our Savior died.

*Matthew Henry’s Commentary* remarks: “We never read in the history of the Old Testament of any use made of these cities of refuge, any more than of other such institutions, which yet, no doubt, were

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<sup>585</sup> John 9:2

<sup>586</sup> Rom. 5:12

<sup>587</sup> Rom. 5:8-10

<sup>588</sup> See Ex. 21:14

made use of upon the occasions intended; only we read of those that, in dangerous cases, took hold of the horns of the altar <1 Kin. 1:50; 2:28>; for the altar, wherever that stood, was, as it were the capital city of refuge.”

We must conclude that this chapter is full of spiritual significance. Whether the designated cities were actually used for the purpose for which they were set apart is evidently of less importance than the image of the New Testament reality they project. We may assume that the Levites occupied the cities that were set apart for them; whether their being spread out over the whole of the promised land had any bearing on the spiritual life of the nation as a whole is another question. God meant them to be the salt of the earth, but the salt must have lost its saltiness.<sup>589</sup> If the Levites had carried on an effective ministry throughout the ages, the people of Israel would never have gone into captivity.

Even if the cities of refuge were never used for the purpose for which God intended them, they still point us to the place of refuge to which we can flee with our guilt which we accumulated intentionally or unintentionally. The cities of refuge represented hope. About this hope the writer to the Hebrew says: “We who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”<sup>590</sup>

The chapter ends with an explanation as to why these measures had to be taken. The verses 30-34 tell us what happens to the land when blood is poured out upon it, without atonement: murder pollutes a land. God says: “Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the LORD, dwell among the Israelites.”

This statement pertains, of course, primarily to Canaan, the land God promised to Israel, but the principle is applicable to our whole planet. When the first murder was committed God said to Cain: “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.” And Jesus held the generation of His time responsible for all the blood that was shed on earth. He said to the scribes and Pharisees: “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.”<sup>591</sup>

We cannot take these words in a literal sense, of course, as if earth would be anything else but inert material, and blood would have spiritual meaning in itself. Shedding of blood means death, and death is connected with sin. Murder is sin that has grown to its ugly maturity. The words “pollute,” and “defile” have spiritual significance. It is sin that defiles; it has to be atoned for in the presence of a holy God. Man cannot buy his way out. “The wages of sin is death.”<sup>592</sup> And death can only be atoned for by death. The price for blood is blood. A ransom payment, in this case, would mean that a person with means could buy his way out, and pay off his responsibility for the sin he committed. This would make a mockery of the absolute justice of God.

One of the great clauses in the Mosaic law was that of the need of two witnesses for the conviction of any crime. The law stated: “One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”<sup>593</sup> And particularly in case of murder, no one could be executed on the basis of the testimony of only one witness. “On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.”<sup>594</sup> The Apostle Paul applies this principle in general to the church of Jesus Christ by writing to Timothy: “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.”<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>589</sup> See Matt. 5:13

<sup>590</sup> Heb. 6:18-20

<sup>591</sup> Matt. 23:35

<sup>592</sup> Rom. 6:23

<sup>593</sup> Deut. 19:15

<sup>594</sup> Deut. 17:6

<sup>595</sup> I Tim. 5:19

This clause would greatly limit the number of legal executions in Israel. It would not happen too often that two people would be witnesses of a murder. It also seems to rule out anything that, in our modern court of law, would qualify as “circumstantial evidence.”

The greatest truth of this chapter is the evidence of the presence of God in the land. The almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, the one who redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt, would live among His people in the land. The promised land is the land that is permeated with His presence. “Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the LORD, dwell among the Israelites.” Most of Israel, however, would be born in Canaan, and die there, without ever knowing the presence of the Lord. They would never come to the discovery of their father Jacob, who said: “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”<sup>596</sup>

But the greatest truth of all is that these verses are pointing toward the man who would be born in Bethlehem, who would be called Immanuel, God with us, and who would not be recognized as the Lord who dwelled among the Israelites. “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”<sup>597</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> Gen. 28:16

<sup>597</sup> John 1:10,11

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

### III. The Conquest and Division of Israel 31:1-36:13

#### F. Special Problems of Inheritance in Canaan 36:1-13

The book of Numbers ends with an incident that was related to a matter already brought up in ch. 27, the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad. This time the young ladies are the cause of another piece of legislation which became part of the Mosaic law; that is that land could not be transferred from one clan to another by means of intermarriage. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* says: "Jewish writers, however, say that this ordinance, interdicting the transference of lands from a family in one tribe to one of another, was binding only in the early period of their settlement in Canaan.... Here was an instance of progressive legislation (see also <Exo. 18; Num. 27>) in Israel, the enactments made being suggested by circumstances; but it is deserving of special notice that those additions to, or modifications of, the law were confined to civil affairs, while the slightest change was inadmissible in the laws relating to worship or the maintenance of religion."

As we have seen in relation to the matter mentioned in ch. 27, the desire of the daughters of Zelophehad to keep their father's name alive had a definite bearing upon their freedom to marry. Their inheritance in the promised land became the first priority to which all other things were subject. Marriage was not an obsession which pushed everything else in the background. Their lives were governed by the promise of God, and everything else became subservient to this.

This chapter deals with the subjects of God's promises, man's identity, and priorities. The promises are embodied in the inheritance of the land; the identity in the belonging to the tribe, and the priorities in the placement of personal desires. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* makes some very astute observations on this portion of Scripture. As far as the promise is concerned, he comments: "They [the heads of the tribe of Manasseh] speak of the land of their possession, and the inheritance of their fathers, with as great assurance as if they had it already in their hands, knowing whom they had trusted." Their request is proof of their faith, of which the writer to the Hebrews says: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."<sup>598</sup> It is the attitude Jesus recommends: "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."<sup>599</sup>

On the subject of the marriage of the heiresses, we read in *Matthew Henry*: "They represent the inconvenience which might, possibly, follow hereupon, if the daughters of Zelophehad should see cause to marry into any other tribes, v. 3. And it is probable that this was not a bare surmise, or supposition, but that they knew, at this time, great court was made to them by some young gentlemen of other tribes, because they were heiresses, that they might get footing in this tribe, and so enlarge their own inheritance. This truly is often aimed at more than it should be in making marriages, not the meetness of the person, but the convenience of the estate, to lay house to house, and field to field. Wisdom indeed is good with an inheritance; but what is an inheritance good for in that relation without wisdom? But here, we may presume, the personal merit of these daughters recommended them as well as their fortunes; however, the heads of their tribe foresaw the mischief that would follow, and brought the case to Moses, that he might consult the oracle of God concerning it. The difficulty they start God could have obviated and provided against in the former order given in this case; but to teach us that we must, in our affairs, not only attend God's providence, but make use of our own prudence, God did not direct in it till they themselves that were concerned wisely foresaw the inconvenience, and piously applied to Moses for a rule in it."

We have already seen, in connection with ch. 27, that the ladies themselves had character and determination, since they were the ones that had thought through the problem of their father's death in connection with the promised inheritance. They were worthy of a good match in marriage, and they should not be married off to just any young man who cared more for the money than for the person.

We already touched upon the matter of identity, in connection with ch. 27 also, by referring to the importance of the name of a departed relative. The daughters did not want the name of Zelophehad to disappear from the annals of Israel. There is more behind this than the concept of immortality; there was the expectation of the coming of the Messiah. Even though it may have been clear from Jacob's prophecy

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<sup>598</sup> Heb. 11:1

<sup>599</sup> Mark 11:24

to Judah that the Messiah would come from that tribe,<sup>600</sup> the hope that other tribes would play a role in the plan of salvation must have been alive among the people. Malachi's prophecy points in that direction. In his prophecy we read: "Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed."<sup>601</sup> We take this "godly seed" to refer to the coming of the Messiah. There must have been, in the minds of the people, a connection between the inheritance they were to receive and the promise of the Messiah who would bring complete salvation to the world. God's promise to Abraham: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you," was an essential part of Israel's inheritance. Israel's identity as a nation, and the identity of each Israelite individually was bound up in this promise. That is why the Apostle Paul can say: "... the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."<sup>602</sup>

For us, as New Testament Christians, the matter of our identity is, in the same manner, linked to the revelation of the Messiah. What Paul writes to the Galatians pertains to every human being; we will never be fully human until Christ is formed in us.<sup>603</sup>

Then there is the matter of priority. Zelophehad's daughters gave God's promises a higher priority than their personal happiness. The point this chapter makes is that their choice severely limited their options for marriage. We read: "This is what the LORD commands for Zelophehad's daughters: They may marry anyone they please as long as they marry within the tribal clan of their father." We are told nothing more about the marriage of those five girls than that they all married their cousins on their father's side. Whether those marriages were happy ones or not is not revealed to us. As a general principle, however, we see that if a person gives priority to the things of God in his or her life, God richly compensates. A sacrifice of personal happiness seldom turns into a sacrifice. After all, God's knows more about our happiness than we do ourselves. A feeling of being in love is no guarantee of a happy marriage. If we endeavor to love God more than our spouse, we discover that we have connected to the source from which all love flows, and loving one another becomes the most effortless thing in the world. "We love because he first loved us."<sup>604</sup> And also, in Jesus' words: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."<sup>605</sup> If we seek God's priorities, He will seek ours.

The last verse of this chapter wraps up this part of the book of Numbers which began with ch. 26, by saying: "These are the commands and regulations the LORD gave through Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho." The book of Numbers opens in the desert of Sinai. We read in the opening verse: "The LORD spoke to Moses in the Tent of Meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt." Here the people have arrived at the verge of the promised land, one generation, and forty years later.

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* gives the following moving comment on this: "Thus ends the book of Numbers, containing a series of astonishing providences and events. Scarcely any piece of history in the sacred writings is better calculated to impress the mind of a serious reader with a sense of the goodness and severity of God. In every transaction his holiness and justice appear in closest union with his benevolence and mercy. From such a Being what have the wicked not to fear! From such a Father and Friend what have the upright not to hope! His justice requires him to punish iniquity, but his mercy inclines him to pardon all who truly repent and believe in the Son of his love.

The journeyings of this people, from the time they left Egypt, exhibit a series of providential wonders. Every where, and in every circumstance, God appears: and yet there is no circumstance or occasion that does not justify those signal displays of his GRACE and his JUSTICE. The genuine history of God's providence must be sought for in this book alone; and as every occurrence happened as an example, we have authority to conclude that in every case where his own glory and the salvation of man are interested, he will interfere and give the fullest proofs that he is the same today that he was yesterday, and will continue unchangeable forever and ever. Reader, are these matters ensamples to thee? Art thou, like

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<sup>600</sup> See Gen. 49:10

<sup>601</sup> Mal. 2:14,15 (KJV)

<sup>602</sup> Rom. 9:4,5

<sup>603</sup> Gal. 4:19

<sup>604</sup> I John 4:19

<sup>605</sup> Matt. 6:33

the Israelites, come into the plains of Moab, on the very verge of the promised land? Jordan alone separates thee from the promised inheritance. O, watch and pray, that thou come not short of the glory of God. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death; see then that the sting of death, which is sin, be extracted from thy soul, that, being justified by Christ's blood, thou mayest be made an heir according to the hope of an eternal life. Amen, amen."