

Numbers

“In the wilderness”

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1. Introduction

A. Title

Numbers has the title in Hebrew, bemidhbar, which means 'in the desert (wilderness)', and this comes from the fifth word in the Hebrew text of the book. This perhaps more aptly describes its contents than the English (from the Greek) title, Numbers (=arithmoi) which seems to be given to it because of the census returns found in chapters 1-4 and 26. The book is concerned with the forty years that the tribes of Israel spent wandering in the wilderness between Mount Sinai and the plains of Moab. The whole of the journey from Egypt to Canaan may be seen thus:

JOURNEY 1
Exod. 13:17-19:2

JOURNEY 2
Num. 10:11-12:16

JOURNEY 3
Num. 20:22-21

EGYPT	SINAI	KADESH	MOAB
Exod.12:1-13:16 Passover laws	Exod. 19:3-Num. 10:10 Laws for life in covenant and for and worship at the Tabernacle.	Num. 13-20:21 Laws for life of the priesthood and the purifying of the people	Num. 22-36 Law for life in the promised land.

B. Contents and Structure of the Book

Part of the difficulty a reader may have in approaching the book of Numbers is trying to get a sense of where the book is going. Many commentators have expressed difficulty in describing the organisation of the book of Numbers. To them, it has seemed that the book has just been thrown together, a random collection of pieces of legislation and narrative put together by a clumsy editor, what one commentator has called, 'the junk room of the Old Testament.' Dentan says, '...the book has no real unity and was not composed in accordance with any logical, predetermined plan...whatever outline may be imposed upon it will have to be recognised as largely subjective and arbitrary.'

Commentators recently have seen deficiencies with this view, and have sought to understand the arrangement of material both theologically and in the flow of the narrative on which it hangs. The suggested outline below (taken from Dennis Olson, and similar in many ways to that of Gordon Wenham) indicates this new approach, and flows from a careful comparison of the various sections of the book¹.

Section 1: Obedient Beginnings: Preparation For The March Of The Holy People Of God (Chh. 1-10)

- (a) Census of the twelve tribes (1)
- (b) The organisation and leadership of God's people (2)

- (c) The ministry of priests and Levites (3-4)
 - (c1) Preserving holiness in the camp (5-6:21)
 - (c2) The blessing of peace in the Presence (6:22-27)
 - (c3) The dedication offerings (7)
 - (c4) The separation and ministry of the Levites (8)
- (d) The inauguration of the march (9-10)

Section 2: An Abrupt Slide Into Rebellion: The Death Of The First Generation In The Wilderness Begins (Chh. 11-20)

- (a) Spreading rebellion (11-12)
- (b) The decisive rebellion (13-14)
- (c) A promise of hope (15)
- (d) The rebellion continues to spread (16)
- (e) The Aaronic authority is clarified (17-18)
- (f) Staying clean in the midst of death (19)
- (g) Moses' and Aaron's rebellion (20)

Section 3: Hitting Bottom: The End Of The First Generation Comes With Signs Of Hope (Chh. 21-25)

- (a) God-given victories to a continuing rebellious people (21)
- (b) What God has blessed cannot be cursed (22-24)
- (c) The final rebellion, and the death of the remainder of the old generation (25)

Section 4: The New Generation On The Edge Of The Promised Land (Chh. 26-36)

- (a) The second census (26)
- (b) The daughters of Zelophehad and the inheritance of land (27:1-11)
- (c) The succession from Moses to Joshua (27:12-23)
- (d) Offerings and vows (28-30)
- (e) War against the Midianites (31)
- (f) The Promised Land starts to grow (32)
- (g) The journey remembered and warnings given (33)
- (h) The division of the land (34-36)

C. Authorship

The composition of Numbers, along with the other books of the Pentateuch, was ascribed uniformly by Jewish tradition to Moses, the lawgiver of Israel. This would mean it dates from around either the middle of the thirteenth century BC or in the late fifteenth century BC. There is a variety of views about its literary origins today. Many would still hold that Numbers is one of the oldest parts of the Scriptures, dating from the time of Moses. Many critical scholars put it one thousand years later, after Israel's return from exile. A number of Israeli scholars date it much earlier, but not as early as Moses. The book of Deuteronomy shows great familiarity with Numbers, as does the prophet Ezekiel.

Each of the positions has its strong points and its weaknesses, and we would be foolish to allow our understanding of the text be dependent upon these understandings of its dating. There is much evidence that an earlier date than that suggested by the post-exilic school is required. Whether separate sources contributed to the book as a whole is not certain, but there

is a clear larger logic and unity to the organisation of the book, as we have seen in the structural outline. G. Wenham is helpful in his comments here, as he quotes Rendtorff: ‘‘We possess hardly any reliable criteria for dating pentateuchal literature. Every dating of the pentateuchal ‘sources’ rests on purely hypothetical assumptions, which only have any standing through the consensus of scholars.’ Such candor from one of the most eminent scholars in the field of pentateuchal criticism is noteworthy. If he is right, we could date almost any part of the Pentateuch to any period between the time of Moses and the time of Ezekiel.’

D. The Christian Value of Numbers

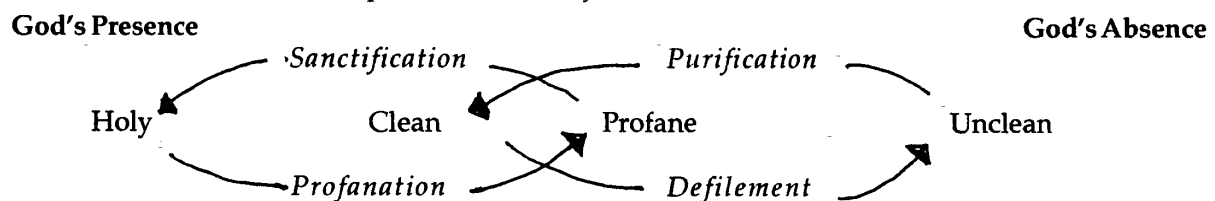
Numbers forms part of the canon, the Christian Scriptures. Paul says in Romans 15:4, ‘For whatever was written in former times was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.’ Jesus opened the whole of the Scriptures as the exposition of Himself on the Emmaus Road. In 1Corinthians 10:1-11 Paul says:

‘I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud [cf. Num. 9:15-23], and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea [cf. Num. 33:8], and all ate the same supernatural food [cf. Num. 11:4ff] and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ [cf. Num. 20:2-13]. Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness [cf. Num. 26:64-65].

Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance." We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day [cf. Num. 25]. We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents [cf. Num. 21:4-9]; nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer [cf. Num. 11:1ff, 14:1ff, 16:42ff]. Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come.’

In saying this to the Christians at Corinth, who were mostly Gentile in origin, Paul is making a remarkable claim. The Old Testament history is the family history of these ‘previously Gentile’ Christians; the fathers of Israel are their fathers also. In his body, Christ has made of the two, Jew and Gentile, one new man (Eph. 2:15), and the promises and gifts to the people of God are the promises inherited now by the Church. And similarly, the dealings of the Lord, the Holy One, with His people in judgment in previous times stands as a warning to us to live in the greatness of His holiness and in true worship.

To understand much of Numbers, particularly the arrangement of the camp and much of the legislation, it is important to have clear in our minds the distinction between holiness and cleanliness/purity. Holiness and purity are separate, but related, categories. Purity is also called cleanness; impurity is uncleanness. Holiness has its opposite in profanity, or commonness. John Kleinig¹ illustrates these two related polarities this way:



Holiness is that state conferred to people or objects by the presence of God. Holy things or holy people were set aside for divine use. To call something common or profane is then not

derogatory, but an indication that such items were for ordinary or common usage. Everything that is not holy is profane/common. Common things could be either clean or unclean. Uncleanliness or impurity was totally incompatible with the presence of God, and so cleansing, purification had to take place before such an item could come into contact with God in a way which led to blessing. Contact between the Holy One and the unclean one lead to death. In creation nothing was initially holy or unclean - it was all very good, but still needed the sanctifying work of God to become holy. Clean profanity is the 'groundstate' of creation - holiness or uncleanness are variations from this starting point. The Sabbath day was the day of blessing and sanctification, and the extension of Eden's boundaries was the mandate given to the man and the woman ('...fill the earth...' understood rightly as fill the earth with the sanctity, communion and worship of the Lord found within Eden).

Important themes that recur throughout the book are that of the holiness of God and His presence with His people (9:15-23), particularly as their King and leader of their army (10:33-36, 14:39-45). Linked to this is the need for purity in the camp (5:1-4) and later in the promised land (35:33-34). The book sets out the lines of leadership and authority in the people of God, with Himself as King, Moses as his 'prime minister' (and Joshua as his delegate) and then the familial, political and religious leadership of heads, elders and priests and Levites. Another important theme to be seen through the book is the intercession of Moses for the people. These we will pursue as we take up the book in the coming weeks.

E. Some Useful Resources

A. Commentaries

Gordon J Wenham, *The Book Of Numbers*, in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series, general. ed. D. J. Wiseman, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1981.

Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers*, in Interpretation series, general ed. James L. May, John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1996.

B. Articles

Lion Handbook to the Bible, pp. 185-194

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, volume 3, pp. 567-571

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, volume 3, pp. 561-567

Sharing In God's Holiness, John Kleinig, pamphlet produced by Lutheran Laymen's League 1984

R. C. Dentan, *Numbers, Book of*, in IDB, p.567

See, for example, G. Wenham, *Numbers*, pp. 14-18

Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers*, pp. 23-24

John Kleinig, *Sharing In God's Holiness*

2. The Camp of the Army of the Lord

The first 10 chapters of the book of Numbers cover a period of fifty days and describe the organisation of the people of Israel for the march to Canaan, the land promised by the Lord to Abraham and his descendants. These chapters spell out how the holiness of the Lord, revealed to Israel in the worship given in Leviticus and commanded for their life as the people of God, was put into practice in the organisation of the people for the march. Just as the holiness of God was represented to the people symbolically in the Tabernacle, now the arrangement of the camp of the people of God was of great importance symbolically. Both on the move and at rest, the camp was organised to express the presence and kingship of the Holy One, the LORD, who leads and directs the people in their journey through the wilderness.

These chapters are not ordered in strict chronological order, as 7:1 cf. 1:1 indicates, but by the placing chapters 1 to 6 before 7 to 9 we are helped to understand some of the significance of the latter chapters (as we will see.)

1:1-3

The taking of the census of the people comes directly as a command of the LORD to Moses: it was not Moses' initiative. The LORD spoke with him at the Tent of Meeting, the Holy Place in the tabernacle, in front of the Holy of Holies.

Census taking was largely a military exercise - an attempt to gauge the military and political strength of a nation or people. See 2Sam. 24:1ff (cf. 1Chron. 21:1ff), 2Chron. 2:17, and Luke 2:1 to see censuses in the Scriptures that arose from human command: they all have the intent of determining either the strength of one's own army or of the enemy (or possible enemy). In Exodus 30, a census is, by command of the LORD, to have a ransom of half a shekel ransom to be paid to the LORD to avert a plague. (This collection is used in the construction of the furnishings of the tabernacle in Exodus 38:25ff.) There is always an element of danger in the taking of the census. The census that David undertook in 2Sam. 24/1Chron 21 was a sinful exercise, coming as a judgment and bringing judgment to Israel - and the sinful element in this exercise is that David did not do so at the command of the Lord, but rather as a human exercise to determine his own military strength. It was an attempt to walk by sight and not by faith in the LORD who is the strength of His people.

This census was conducted whilst Israel was still at Mt. Sinai, about year after they had left Egypt. Those counted were those men over twenty years of age, suitable for warfare.

1:4-19

The counting was done by representatives from each of the tribes. These men, from each of the twelve tribes (including the two half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh), also present the offering for the tribes in Numbers, and each was head of his particular tribe (v. 16). We must be careful not to read too much of Israel's later unification under David into this time period. Each tribe was quite independent of the others in many ways; Israel functioned perhaps as a loose federation of the tribes of Israel. Under the headship of the LORD they become a unified army. An important principle that the book of Numbers brings out in various places is that each of the tribes has an important and co-equal place within the people of God, even though there may be distinctions in the various callings given to the tribes. So, here no tribe is numbered by another tribe - each makes its own contribution to the totality of Israel.

1:20-46

Each of the tribes is numbered, and then the total number of the army of Israel is given. The emphasis with each tribal sub-total is that the warriors are being counted. The total, 603 550, is the same as that found in the first census in Exod. 38:26, and similar to that in the third census of Numbers 26:51 (601 730). (The fact that this latter figure is still so large after the wandering in the desert and the attending judgments indicates the faithfulness of the LORD to His promises and His people.) Within that timeframe of forty years, there is a waxing and waning of the various tribes of Israel. Simeon declines remarkably and Manasseh grows significantly. This reflects the LORD's dealing with the tribes in blessing and judgment and in the flow of His salvation history.

Commentators discuss the large numbers of the people of Israel in their commentaries. Given that the total of 603 550 is of fighting men only, the population of Israel could be supposed to be about 2 million in all. This people has grown from a family of 70 members who left Canaan with Jacob and Joseph's brothers in a period of a few hundred years. Various proposals have been advanced as to how this could be. Jerome held the numbers to be mysterious (?symbolic), and Calvin noted the great increase and asserted to doubters God's miraculous ability to do so in a period of 250 years. Some have suggested that for 'thousand' we could use the term 'clan' or 'tent-group', taking the term as a military rather than arithmetical. So forty six thousand would be forty six ten groups. However, the way the writer add the numbers shows, I believe, that he understands them to be arithmetical. Perhaps then, some have argued, the figures are theologically significant rather than historically accurate. Certainly we can say that the promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:4-6 has by this time received a considerable down payment! And yet even with that, the very ability to count Israel indicates that the covenant promises have not yet come in their fulness.

1:47-54

The Levites were not included in the census of warriors because it was concerned with the establishing of the size of the army. The Levites had responsibility for the handling of the holy things in the movement of the camp. No one else could approach the holy things to dismantle them for the move - the penalty for doing so was death (1:51); the Levites were to act as a buffer zone in the camp of Israel between the tabernacle and the tribes, to ensure that there was no transgression of the holy things and so wrath breaking out on Israel (1:52-53.)

2:1-34

Here we have set out the arrangement of the tribes in camp and on the march. This was a matter of great importance. We have pictured for us an army camped around its general - the LORD - or an army marching into battle with its LORD. The camp of Israel can be pictured thus (taking into account also information about the Levites and priests from chapter 3):

Asher	DAN	Naphtali
Levites		(Merari)
Benjamin		Issachar
EPHRAIM		Levites
Tent of meeting		Priests
JUDAH		(Gershom)
Manasseh		Zebulun

Levites (Kohath)

Gad

REUBEN

Simeon

Israel was to face inwards as they camped, towards the Tent of Meeting (2:2). They were to be more preoccupied with the presence of the Holy One than they were with the threat of the enemy. There was distance between the tribes and the Tent - and so the tabernacle was a 'movable Sinai' which had been guarded by a fence lest an unholy foot should have come up on it. And yet, given the threat of His holy presence, the LORD was tabernacling among His people in His grace and kindness.

On the march, the Israelites were ordered thus (2:17, with 10:11-28):

The Presence- Judah - Issachar - Zebulun - Gershomites and Merarites - Reuben - Simeon - Gad - Kohathites (?and priests) - Ephraim - Manasseh - Benjamin - Dan - Asher - Naphtali

The Gershomites and Merarites carried the fabric of the tabernacle, the Kohathites were entrusted with the Holy Things. By the time the Kohathites got to the camp, the other Levites would have set up the Tabernacle for the holy things to be placed in directly. In this arrangement, the Levites protect the Israelites from transgressing the holiness of the LORD, rather than the Israelites protecting the holy things and the Levites from the enemy.

There may be significance in the fact that more warriors were at the rear of the army than at the front. The greatest danger to Israel was not from the enemies ahead, but that there would be a return to Egypt - i.e. the greatest danger to Israel was to be their own rebellion.

9:15-10:10

The beginning and end of the march was determined entirely by the LORD and this was made known to the people by the movement of the cloud of glory which had covered them from the Red Sea onwards, but which particularly had come down from Sinai and filled the tabernacle with the glory of the LORD at its consecration. The first coming of the cloud had come after the first passover festival (Exod. 13:21-22); here this section is linked to the description of the second Passover celebration. It is in the celebration of the redemption of the LORD from slavery that the knowledge of His presence is known. Psalm 32 picks this up with its great joy in the forgiveness of God (vv. 1-7) and in His promise of guidance (vv8-11).

The 'logic' of the march was determined entirely by the LORD and the length of stay in a place was entirely of His choosing. 9:19 indicates that at times there may have been an inexplicable element to the length of stay. The LORD provided, in the two silver trumpets, the means for the informing of the camp of the directions for setting out or summoning the camp. Moses could summons the whole people or simply the heads of the people. Alarms were to be blown to break the camp.

10:33-36

As well as being led by the cloud of the Presence, the people were led out by the ark of the covenant. The setting out of the ark from the tabernacle and the return of the ark to the tabernacle was seen as signifying the setting out of the LORD to do battle for His people against His and their enemies and the return of the LORD to His people. In these travels, the

LORD himself sought a resting place for them - it was not given to Israel to decide where to shelter Him; rather He determined where to shelter them under His wings. This was to be true also in the promised land. The LORD Always sets the destination, not His people. We look, with Abraham, for a city with foundations whose builder and maker is God.

3. The Priestly and Levitical Ministry in the Camp

3:1-13

In this section we are given:

vv. 1-4 a report on the family of Moses and Aaron at Mount Sinai, those who are permitted to serve as priests. They alone have the right to handle the sacrificial blood, to touch the altar, and to enter the Tent of Meeting. This was not a right that could be presumed upon, as the death of Nadab and Abihu showed. Their presumption took the form of offering incense to the Lord that was not commanded. (See Lev. 10:1-3);

vv. 5-10 a description of the role of the Levites as ministers to Aaron (and the priests) and to the whole people of Israel in the tabernacle. The two phrases 'perform duties' and 'minister' (v. 8) have quite explicit meanings - namely, 'keep guard' (i.e. protect the holy things from profanation or defilement) and 'do the heavy work' (i.e. the dismantling, carrying, and setting up of the tabernacle). The Levites are explicitly warned, on pain of death, to not let any non-qualified person 'come near' (v. 10) - that is approach the Holy Place to minister in a priestly manner - nor to do so themselves;

vv. 11-13 explains the first Levitical census by showing that the Levites are a ransom, a substitute for the first-born of Israel. (The first-born was the first son who was also the first child.) The ransom was necessary for the first-born in Egypt had been slain, and by the blood of the Passover Lamb the first-born sons in Israel had been spared. In this act of redemption they were consecrated by the Lord to himself. The Levites are a substitutionary offering for this consecrated generation.

3:14-51

This first census of the Levites is of all who are at least a month old. The purpose of this census is to ensure that the number of Levites is equivalent to the number of the first-born sons in Israel (vv. 14-16, 39 cf. vv. 40-43). What was found was that the number of Levites fell short of this number of first-born sons. A monetary redemption of five shekels per person was taken for the 273 first-born not matched by Levites (a total of 1365 shekels) and given to Aaron and his sons (vv. 46-48). The five shekels is the price that a slave would fetch if sold on the open market.

In this section the families of the Levites are also assigned their particular parts in the ministry and their place in the camp. We can see how this division of labour worked out in the diagram below taken from Wenham's commentary:4:1-49

In this chapter a second census of the Levitical families is taken, this time of those who are aged between thirty and fifty years of age, the age of service at the tabernacle. A person became an elder in Israel at thirty years; only those of maturity could serve in the tabernacle work. (There was no hijacking of the worship by the young!) The purpose of this census is to distribute the work among the families. It was heavy work, carrying the tabernacle fabric and furnishings, and dangerous work, for it involved the handling of holy items - and so was restricted to those who were likely to be of sober outlook and physically strong.

The most holy items were in the care of the Kohathites (v. 4), but they did not pack or unpack these items; Aaron and his sons did this work (v. 5ff). Even to look on the most holy things

when not authorised (v. 20) was punishable by death - see 1 Samuel 6:19-21. Uzzah (2Sam. 6:1-11) may well have been a Kohathite. He believed that the ark of the Lord was going to fall of the cart, and he presumed to touch what was not permitted for him to touch, and he died immediately. (As it was the ark should never have been carried by cart, but carried on poles.) The wrapping of the items (vv. 5-20) indicated the degree of holiness of the items. Blue cloth was the most holy colour, the purple and then scarlet. When Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders went up Sinai to eat in the presence of the Lord, they saw under the feet of the Lord a pavement as it were, of sapphire stone - blue is the colour of the holy presence.

The presence of the Lord amongst Israel was a constant threat to them, and yet Moses had interceded strongly for Israel after the affair of the golden calf that the Lord take not His presence from them (Exod. 33:12-34:10). As dangerous as the Presence was, there was no future for Israel without Him. Without God in their midst, God's people will be lost.

5:1-31

This section spells out the necessity of keeping the camp pure and clean. Various kinds of uncleanness and defilement are dealt with here. There is that of ritual uncleanness through disease, discharge or death (vv. 1-4). This dealt with by separation. The expulsion of the unclean from the camp did not exclude them from Israel, but kept them away from the Holy Place; they were placed on the fringes of the community. They followed the camp, living in tents separate from the community, or in caves (Lev. 13:46, 2Kings 7:3.)

Then there is the uncleanness of 'breaking faith with the Lord' (vv. 5-10). Leviticus 6:1-5 gives us an insight into the kind of offence here: it is deception of a neighbour with regard to property, and then a false oath of denial. This is dealt with by restitution plus a fifth to the defrauded person, or to the nearest relatives, or the priests. Also, an offering for atonement was to be made.

A third kind of defilement in the camp is linked to the last and is the case of a husband's unproven suspicion that his wife has broken faith with him through adultery (vv. 11-31). It is unusual to have such a detailed ritual set out for us, including the words to be said. The point of the ritual was to establish the guilt or innocence of the suspect, and to provide punishment to the guilty while leaving the innocent unscathed. The whole ritual took place in the presence of the Lord and involved ingredients from the holy place (water and dust). In the ritual the woman assents to the Lord's acting in curse if she has incurred guilt through this sin, and drinks in the possibility of the judgment. The curse, if it came, came from the Lord and resulted, perhaps, in the woman becoming childless (certainly the curse affects thigh and belly, those parts by which she sinned.) A husband making such a jealous charge incorrectly was free from any wrongdoing (v. 31).

6:1-21

The Nazirites were men and women, not Levitical, who took particular vows of separation from the common things of life to the Lord for a particular period of time, something like the monks and nuns of the Old Testament. In some way, the Nazirites symbolised to Israel the calling of the whole nation to be holy, set apart to the Lord. The laws in this chapter deal with the expression of the vow and with ways of dealing with the involuntary breaking of the vow (vv. 9-12), and the deconsecration of the Nazirite at the end of the vowed time (vv. 13-21).

The hair of the Nazirite, grown in the time of the vow and shaved off at the end, became a wave offering to the Lord - an offering of celebration and praise.

Vows to God were a regular feature of the life of Israel, and usually took the form of a promised action if the Lord helped the one vowing (e.g. Gen. 28:20-22, Judg. 11:30-40, 1Sam. 1:11ff). Vows were sacred promises and could not simply be broken - see Num. 30:1-2. A vow made by a woman was valid if not negated by the stated disapproval by her father or husband when he first hears of it (Num. 30:3-8). He could not later try to nullify the vow if he did not speak straight away. The vows of divorced women or widows stood. The story of Jephthah's vow is a warning against hastily made and unthoughtful vows, as well as an example of a man and a woman for whom faithfulness to the Lord was of paramount importance. Paul seems to have taken Nazirite vows (e.g. 18:18). Vows were always voluntary and freely offered to the Lord; there was no sin in not vowing. The sin only came in vowing and then not performing the words of the vow.

The proper keeping of vows and the proper deconsecrating of a Nazirite was an important part of maintaining the purity of the camp. The Levites and priests had an important function in this ministry.

6:22-27

The Aaronic blessing, the blessing of the people by the Lord through the word of the priests, was the heart of the holiness and purity laws of Israel. By the proper maintenance of purity and holiness in the camp, Israel was assured of the continuing presence of the Lord to bless His people.

The blessing consists of three pairs:

The Lord bless you	and keep you
The Lord make His face to shine upon you	and be gracious to you
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you	and give you his peace

The first element of the pairs speaks of the Lord's movement towards His people, and the second of His activity for them. The difference between 'make His face to shine' and 'lift up His countenance' is that the first indicates His pleasure and delight in His people, and the second indicates His favourable attention to their needs. The blessing of God issues in the people being kept safe, being forgiven, and being provided for abundantly with good things. All these flow from the presence of the Lord in the midst of His people.

7:1-89

This section deals with the offerings given by the twelve tribes for the dedication of the altar, after it had been anointed and consecrated. Each tribe gave identical gifts over twelve days - there was no tribe which had a greater gift to give; each tribe was duly represented in the worship of God. The gifts included silver and gold, incense and flour with oil, and animal sacrifices. Also given were six wagons and twelve oxen to pull them, which were used in the transporting of the tabernacle and fittings on the journey to Canaan. The Kohathites were not given wagons to use, for the most holy things were to be carried on the shoulder. The gifts were offered by the leaders, the same as who took the census of the people. At the end of the enumeration of the gifts, v. 89 stands as a great climax - 'And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy

seat that was upon the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim; and it spoke to him.'

8:1-26

How 8:1-4 fits with what has just preceded and what follows is not immediately obvious. It could be that the daily going of Aaron (and later his sons) into the holy place to attend to the lampstand indicates a continuation of the speaking of the Lord to His people, as when the Lord spoke to Moses in the Holy Place. The lampstand is more fully described in Exodus 25:31-40 and we see flower and tree imagery described there, which ties in with the symbolism of the tabernacle being the new Eden, the new place of the worship of, and communion with, the Lord.

8:5-26 spells out the dedicating of the Levites. This is a necessary precursor to the travel of Israel. They are set apart now for the task to which the Lord has called them, that of guarding and carrying the tabernacle.

4. Rebellion Begins and Spreads in the Camp: Numbers 11-15

The Rebellious People

In these chapters we see five separate rebellions (11:1-3, 11:4-35, 12:1-16, 13:25-14:25, 14:39-45), and the first three of these rebellions move closer and closer to the heart of the community. The rebellion moves from the outlying parts of the camp (11:2), into the camp proper (11:4) and right to the Tent of Meeting (12:4). This movement we will see finally ends up in Numbers with even Moses as a rebel against the Lord. What we see in the movement is that the Holy Place, and the dwelling of God with His people is most under threat not from the idolatrous nations around about, but from Israel itself.

In each case rebellion takes the form of complaint about either the Lord or Moses, who stands as the Lord's man. In 11:1, the complaint is not directed explicitly to the Lord, but is a general discontent about 'their misfortunes' which the Lord does not overlook or ignore. Just what these misfortunes are is not quite clear - all that can be surmised is the misfortune of not having the creature comforts of Egypt. It is a rebellious nostalgia which has forgotten the terrible cry of Exodus 2:23b-25, the mighty redemption from that situation that the Exodus to Sinai was, and the wonderful promise of the land of Canaan (e.g. Exod. 3:7-8, Lev 25:38 - 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.')

In the second rebellion there seems to be two groups - the 'rabble' and the 'people of Israel.' Possibly the rabble are non-Israelites who had joined the caravan train in the Exodus (see Exod. 12:38, Lev. 24:10), or but more probably they are Israelites (given that Pss. 78 and 106 indicated that it was the Israelites who had the craving.) Whatever, they were people who were ruled by their appetites and passions, they have cast off restraint absorbed by their bodily needs and appetites. Their craving was heard and led to a sympathetic discontent amongst the Israelites. Again there was a rekindled and idealised nostalgia about Egypt (11:4b-6). And there was a blatant ingratitude to the Lord for the provision of the manna (11:6b-9). The discontent with the manna was self-pity which led to weeping in the tents (11:4,10). It was really anger - which is at the heart of much depression.

In the third rebellion the complaint was by Miriam and Aaron, and not specifically against the Lord, but against Moses. The charge was that Moses should not be the only one who claims to be the mouthpiece of the Lord (12:2). It was linked with a complaint about Moses' wife, a Cushite woman (12:1). The real issue was about the right to speak; the issue of the Cushite wife was one to deflect the rebellious nature of the first charge, and perhaps to give it credibility. Miriam and Aaron were trying to arrogate to themselves a responsibility not given them by the Lord.

The fourth rebellion was the decisive one in the flow of Israel's history. It was the refusal to enter the Promised Land. Spies had been sent and had seen the promises of the Lord to be true concerning the fruitfulness of the land (Num. 13:27). Num. 13:21-24 gives a very cool, straightforward picture of what the spies saw. Num. 13:25-29 shows how the spies elaborated the picture with more colourful language. What the majority report of the spies reflected was their own distrust of the promise of the Lord to give them the land. They did not even think of the land in those terms in the report - they stood aside from the promises of God. 'We came to the land to which you sent us...' (Num. 13:27 cf. 13:2, 14:16). This report had its effect of

disquieting the people, whose response indicated their own refusal to believe the promises of God. Caleb gave a contrary report, and the fullness of the unbelief of the rebel spies came through in their contradicting of Caleb. Now the land is not 'flowing with milk and honey', but rather a hostile environment which 'devours its inhabitants' (13:32). Again the self-pity of the congregation was brought to a head, and issued in (i) murmuring against Moses and Aaron; (ii) complaining about the Lord; (iii) a pretence that the concern is for the wives and little ones (14:1-3). A real rebellion was mooted (14:4), and was met by the leadership only in worship of the Lord in mourning for the people. Joshua and Caleb who had brought the good report were in danger of being stoned to death for their faithful words (14:10).

The fifth rebellion (Num. 14:40-45) of the Israelites stemmed from their refusal to accept the Lord's judgment. Again it issued from self-pity (14:39). We see their rebellion in their attempt to rectify their previous failure by a concocted late obedience rather than living in obedience to the actual will of God now. Their attempt to go into the promised land is doomed, given that neither the ark nor Moses went with them. Running from the judgment of God by an attempt to 'correct the record' is rebellion.

These elements of 'rebellion' we see then from these events: it involves primarily ingratitude; it refuses to hope in the promises of God; it is forgetful about redemption; it rationalises away the effects of sin and bondage; it issues from self-pity; it looks for self-elevation; it always expresses itself in grumbling or complaining; it hides itself by criticism, seeking to justify itself by the 'failures' of others; it never addresses the one being complained about. Elsewhere in the Scriptures we see similar elements. Deut. 28:47 spells out the heart of Israel's rebellion and the main cause of God's judgment of them - the refusal to serve the Lord with joyfulness and gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things. The account of Saul's refusal to destroy Agag of Amalek and the choice items of the Amalekite possessions (1Sam. 15:9) and his attempt to claim it as obedience later by promising to offer them later in sacrifice (1Sam. 15:20-21) is described by Samuel as rebellion (1Sam. 15:22-23). Offering as worship what the Lord has not commanded is rebellion.

It is for these reasons that the conversation of Moses with the Lord in Num. 11:10-23 is not a case of rebellion, although it may seem so initially to our ears. Moses complained (the word is never used in the text) to the Lord about the great difficulty the Lord had given by burdening him with the people. The Lord promised to equip others for the burden of sharing the leadership of the people, and also to give to the people a great abundance of meat to eat. Moses' response to this latter promise was one of incredulity, which the Lord answered with a divine 'wait and see, then.' The difference here to the rebellion of Israel is that Moses took his complaint to the Lord, rather than complaining about the Lord. Moses prayed, and then listened to the word of the Lord, and reported that word faithfully to the people (11:24a). He obeyed the word in calling the elders together (11:24b). He took nothing into his hands, but waited for the Lord to act, even if he was somewhat skeptical of the Lord's promise to do all that He said. (He submitted his incredulity to the promise.) And in his anticipation of the Spirit coming upon all God's people, he showed his delight in the plan of God, rather than seeking to elevate himself (11:26-29).

The Lord's Dealing With Rebels

Through these five cases of rebellion, we see also the Lord's dealings with rebels. First and foremost is that the Lord remains who He is, the Lord who revealed himself to Moses at the Mount following the terrible rebellion of the golden calf, the Lord of covenant grace and

holiness. Moses focussed on this in his prayer after the Israelites had refused to enter Canaan. He argued with the Lord that He cannot destroy the people, lest the name of the Lord be despised among the nations. 'And now, I pray you, let the power of the LORD be great as you have promised, saying, 'The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation.' Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray you, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, and according as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.' (Num. 14:17-19).

Secondly, it is quite clear that the Lord, in his forgiveness of the people for their rebellion, does not tolerate rebellion. It is an evil He roots out from the congregation. The very existence of the congregation as the holy people of God is threatened by rebellious murmuring and complaining. Witchcraft and idolatry obviously have no place among God's people; so too with the rebel (1Sam. 15:23). The Lord acted by fire, plague, and disease to root out the first complainers, the rabble, and Miriam. The rebellious generation who refused to enter the land were then refused entry. Those who went up to take the land after being refused entry died in large numbers. Judgment begins with the household of God; grace does not avoid the judgment but carries us through the judgment.

Thirdly, in His dealing with rebels the Lord provided an interceder for them, one who stood with them and for them. Moses' intercession is a key motif throughout the Exodus account. It is through his praying that time and again the people of God are spared. This is the Lord's own gift to Israel; Moses does not intercede against the Lord for the people, but rather from the Lord for the people. It is only in the revelation of the sovereign grace and holiness of the Lord that Moses is enabled to pray. In Jer. 7:16 we see a terrible thing - the Lord refuses to let the prophet pray for the people, and refuses to hear any intercession he may make. This is an indication of his determination to bring judgment on the people. The provision of the intercessor is the provision of grace. The continual intercession of Christ for us at the Father's right hand is the guarantee to us of the continuing grace of God in which we stand (Heb. 7:25, Rom. 8:34). That intercession which flows eternally is the culmination of his great intercession at the cross, where he stepped into the place of rebels, pouring out his soul to death, being numbered with the transgressors (Isa. 53:12).

Chapter 15 is an interesting sequel to these chapters of rebellion. It is a series of laws that the Lord gave to Moses to give to the people and each is prefaced by the words, 'When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I give you...' and 'When you come into the land to which I bring you...' The two sets of laws deal with (i) the offering of vow or freewill burnt offerings, and (ii) what to do if the offerings are not made in the right way inadvertently. These laws are laws of promise, laws that indicated that the promise of God to His people is irrevocable. They are laws that deal with the ongoing grace of God in the new home. Within these laws are reassurances of the grace of God to His people. God is not against His people, trying to force them away from Himself; rather He is determined that His people will enjoy the blessing of His holy presence amongst them.

5. The Rebellion of Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and the People: Numbers 16

The Rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram

The Levites had not been mentioned in the uprisings of chapters 11 to 14. The reader may wonder if they were included in the generation that was under condemnation, or if their status as Levites spared them from death in the wilderness. Chapter 16 provides the solemn and sad answer.

The rebellion in this chapter was actually three linked rebellions. (Rebels always join forces at least initially, garnering support from one another, but failing to see that their different agendas will inevitably lead to further splintering and division.) There was the rebellion of Korah, a Levite, and a band of 250 lay leaders in the community, and he was joined in this rebellion by another faction, Dathan and Abiram. They seem to be on about different issues. The third rebellion involves the whole congregation of the people of Israel.

Korah's rebellion was prompted by envy of the priestly role given to Aaron and his sons. In Numbers 15 Israel had been called to wear tassels on their clothes as a reminder of their holiness as a nation (15:40). Korah's heresy was to emphasise that one fact to the exclusion of the rest of the revelation of the Lord (Num. 16:3). Korah's rebellion then expressed itself in presuming the 'right' to offer incense before the Lord. Such an approach flows out of unthankfulness for the totality of what has been given by the Lord. Envy is always linked to unthankfulness. Envy is anger with God for giving good gifts to others (see Matt. 20:18). Proverbs 14:30 speaks of the intensity and destructiveness of envy, as opposed to the life of thankfulness: 'A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh, but passion (=qinah, envy) makes the bones rot.' Nothing is so dynamic in human sinning as envy (Prov. 27:4 - 'Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming; but who can stand before envy?') - it was envy of God that lay behind the original sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:4-5), and also that of Satan (Ezek. 28:15,17). It was envy that motivated the chief priests to have Christ crucified (Matt. 27:18).

Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century bishop wrote this in his Life of Moses as he reflected on the passage before us:

'The envy of his brothers rose against him. Envy is the passion which causes evil, the father of death, the first entrance of sin, the root of wickedness, the birth of sorrow, the mother of misfortune, the basis of disobedience, the beginning of shame.... Envy fought against many who lived before Moses, but when it attacked this great man, it was broken like a clay pot being dashed against a rock.'

Dathan and Abiram (On the son of Peleth is also mentioned in 16:1, but not after that) were Reubenites who had a different thrust in their rebellion. They did not so much want to claim the prerogatives of the priests to themselves, but rather to dispense with the necessity to participate in the worship of Israel at all (16:12, 27) - they were secularists. They had rejected the covenant promises and purposes of God and longed for a return to Egypt which they saw as the promised land (16:13-14). In effect they denied the Lord, the living God (see 16:30). In the face of this rebellion Moses responded with six actions. Firstly, he fell on his face (16:4) - an act of intercession and worship. The attack on Aaron and the priesthood was more an attack on the Lord (cf. Eph. 6:12). Secondly, he called Korah and his company to see the Lord's verdict by presenting themselves before Him in the morning (16:5-7). This was a reversal of their charge that Moses had gone too far: in fact the Levites have claimed to

themselves that which was not given. The third response was to Korah particularly, facing him up with his own ingratitude and envy (16:8-10) and with the fact that in fact he, despite his claim to holiness, was setting himself against the Lord (16:11). The fourth thing that Moses did was to call Dathan and Abiram (16:12), in so doing highlighting their utter disobedience, not to Moses but to the voice of the Lord. In fact, in their reply to Moses they parodied the word of God that he had given to Korah (16:13 cf. 16:9). The fifth response of Moses was to become very angry and to call on the Lord to vindicate him (16:15). This was to happen by the refusal to accept the offerings of the rebels - indicating the severing of the relationship between them and the Lord. The sixth response was to repeat the instructions for the next day to Korah and the company of 250 men (16:16-17).

The following morning, Korah and his men were gathered at the Tent of Meeting, with the congregation of Israel in attendance (16:18-19). Key to what follows was the appearing of the Lord's glory - this is His action and self-vindication. This occurred through judgment. The Lord declared His intention to destroy the whole congregation, thus indicating the rebellious heart not of only a few but of the whole nation. Moses and Aaron interceded to the Lord in a manner reminiscent of the prayer of Abraham for Sodom (Gen. 18:23-33). In their intercession, they identified with the people, and the Lord made a distinction between the high-handed sinners and the people who were relatively less guilty. (In Christ, we have one guiltless man who made intercession for the many, who bore their sin and came into their judgment that they may know his righteousness - Isa. 53:10-12). The people then had the choice of standing in the judgment with Dathan and Abiram (16:26) or of standing in grace with Moses and Aaron. The judgment that came was the declaration that the Lord is the living God who sent Moses, and that Dathan and Abiram have despised the Lord (16:28-33). The Israelites acknowledged their own guiltiness in their fearful reaction (16:34). (How often does tragedy bring to people a sense of their guiltiness? At this time also fire came from the presence of the Lord, consuming those who were offering up incense illegitimately. The censers used by these men were then beaten into a covering for altar, a sign to the people of Israel of the Lord's holiness and of the requirement that only the descendants of Aaron should offer incense before the Lord.

The following day saw the rebellion of the people of Israel come to full blossom. Whereas before they had been uncommitted observers to the rebellion (?supporters - Mar. 9:40, Luk. 11:23), they now accused Moses and Aaron of being against them, the people of the Lord. The judgment that had come upon Korah, Dathan and Abiram was seen to be proof that the Lord was against them. (In fact, those judgments saved the whole people from judgment.) Again the Lord acted to vindicate the holiness of His Name. Again Moses was called to separate himself from the congregation: but here he could not separate the more guilty from the less guilty. The only thing to be done is for atonement to be made - and this is done by the offering of incense by Aaron, with coals from the altar of the Lord. The reason for the protection of the Aaronic prerogative in offering sacrifices and incense is now seen - it is the provision of grace which is being safeguarded. Apart from the Aaronic ministry, Israel is a dead people, for it is in the Aaronic priestly ministry that the Lord has given them a means for atonement, a means for them to continue to be the people amongst whom the Holy One dwells. Had the offerings of Korah been acceptable or tolerated, then grace would have been lost to the community.

The worship of Israel was participation in the Lord's ministry of grace, not an offering of worship from themselves to procure grace. P. T. Forsyth says that 'sacrifice is the fruit, not

the root, of grace.' If anyone can claim the 'right' to offer sacrifice, then the action is primarily human and is antithetical to grace; if only those who are given to sacrifice may sacrifice, then the worship is a gift, and is the expression of God moving to Man in His grace. The amazing fact, but also the indispensable fact, is that God moves in His grace to act amongst us through men and women. The choosing of Aaron is a sign, a pointer to the coming incarnation of the Son.

6. The Ministry of the Priests: Numbers 17:1-20:13

Chapter 17 - Aaron's Authority

The Godgivenness of Aaron's ministry was reiterated in a dramatic way. It was this very fact that was contested in the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram; the Lord in the events of 17:1-13 provided the people of Israel with a lasting sign of the fact of the Godgivenness of Aaron's ministry as priest.

The proving of Aaron's authority is told simply (17:1-7) in the events of the taking of rods, the writing of the tribal heads' names on the rods and their being deposited in the Tent of Meeting, in the presence of the Ark, where the Lord met with Moses. The Lord Himself promised to end the murmuring of the Israelites by causing the rod of the man of His choosing to sprout.

On the next morning, when the rods were examined, it was absolutely incontestable that the Lord had chosen Aaron. Not only had the rod bearing his name sprouted, it had put forth buds, blossomed and borne ripe fruit. Each other man took his rod - he held in his hands the evidence of the fact of his not being chosen. Aaron's rod was placed in the Most Holy Place as a continuing sign for rebels, to save them from death (17:10) by turning them from rebellion.

The sign was very important. It showed that Aaron's ministry alone was the ministry that brought life. It hinted at the fact that through the ministry of the given priests, re-entry to Eden is promised. It promised that the land of Canaan - so rich and fruitful - was accessible, but only in obedience to the given order of the Lord. The sign which conquered the rebels was the sign of life. In Luke 5:21-26, the scribes and Pharisees questioned, murmured about Jesus' claimed authority to forgive sins. The sign he gave was the sign of life restored, the sign of the lame man made well. The man born blind argued with the Pharisees about their inability to read the sign - no one else in all history had been able to bring life as this man Jesus had brought life (John 9, esp. vv. 16-17, 24-33). Jesus promised that the only sign that his generation would receive was the sign of Jonah (Matt. 12:38-41, 16:1-4) - that is the sign of resurrection from death. It was the reality of this sign which broke through the hardness of those who heard the preaching on Pentecost - see Acts 2:22--40.

The people heard the threat in the sign - rather than the promise of life given with the sign rightly received - and yet their cry (17:12-13) , was true. Should they approach the Tabernacle carelessly, arrogantly, or even inadvertently with sin - and they recognised that this included every occasion - then they were under threat of destruction. Only by the grace and mercy of God can they approach Him - the sign brought home this central reality well to them. That grace and mercy was guaranteed to them in the gift of the ministry of the priesthood and the Levites.

Chapter 18 - The Privileges and Duties of The Tribe of Levi

The answer to the frightened cry in 17:12-13 is given in this chapter. Aaron and his sons 'shall bear iniquity in connection with the sanctuary... and in connection with your priesthood' (18:1) - that is, the inadvertent polluting of the fabric of the Tabernacle by a man

coming unknowingly unclean shall be borne not by the man (through destruction), but rather by the priests. In a sense they were spiritual lightning conductors. The Day of Atonement rituals (Leviticus 16) spell out this ministry. The Levites had the charge of keeping watch on the Tabernacle to ensure that no unprepared person drew near (18:3-4). In their sacrificial ministry the priests ensure that 'there be wrath no more upon the people of Israel' (18:5). 18:6-7 are extremely important verses - the priesthood and the Levitical ministry were both the Lord's gift (cf. Heb. 5:5-6). The priesthood was God's gift to Aaron's family, and such a gift - to be able to draw nearer than any other family in Israel to the presence of the Lord - that the priests and Levites were not to share in the inheritance of the land (18:20). The Lord Himself became their portion and their inheritance. The Psalmist sees the beauty and joy of this in Psalm 73:26.

In recognition of their altar service, the priests and Levites had a share in the tithes and sacrifices of the people of Israel. There were two kinds of priestly provisions made. Firstly there were those sacrifices to which they had sole right except for a representative portion which was to be burnt on the altar (e.g. the cereal offerings). These were most holy, were to be eaten in a holy place, and were available to any male of the priestly family (18:9-10). Secondly there were offerings described simply as holy (e.g. the wave offerings) which could be eaten in the homes and by both male and female members of the priestly family, so long as they were not unclean (18:11-19). The Levites received the tithe as inheritance in gift for their service in the tent of meeting. From this gift, the Levites themselves were commanded to tithe (18:25) to Aaron and his family (18:28), and not just any part but the best part of the tithe, the hallowed part of them (18:29). The rest of the tithe could be consumed where and when they liked (18:32).

Chapter 19 - The Priestly Ministry of Cleansing in the Face of Death

The most serious, and obvious, type of uncleanness was that caused by death. Anyone who came in contact with a corpse, bone, or grave themselves became unclean. Such uncleanness was contagious and would spread to those with whom they came in contact. This would eventually defile the Tabernacle of the Lord. This would result in sudden, God-dealt death. (This we take as the meaning of the phrase '...shall be cut off from Israel...') Chapter 19 deals with the provisions made to purify the camp from the uncleanness of death in its midst. Provision was to be made ahead of time, through the sacrifice and burning of a red (symbolising shed blood) heifer without defect and unused for plowing etc. outside the camp with specific details of the ritual used spelled out. Ashes from this sacrifice were to be kept in a clean place outside the camp, to be used in the 'water of impurity', to cleanse a person or an object who had become unclean through contact with death. The ashes, because of the actions and components used in the ritual, takes the place of blood in cleansing. Sacrificial blood was only useful for cleansing when used properly - apart from that it actually a person unclean.

This law is given at an appropriate time; it is given to assure the people of Israel that the Lord does not wish that they be destroyed or perish (as they believe in 17:12-13), but rather that they continue to know and live in His gracious presence.

Chapter 20:1-13 - The Rebellion of Moses

Again, this chapter has the murmuring and rebellion of the people of Israel in focus. This time it was over a lack of water, and led them to complain that it would have been better for them to have died in the judgment on Korah, Dathan and Abiram's rebellion (20:1-5). Again Moses

and Aaron responded in prayer, and the Lord answered their prayer with quite specific instructions (20:6-9). Up to this point, the account had largely paralleled a similar occasion in Exodus 17:1-7, but the key difference here was the instruction of the Lord given to Moses. On the first occasion, Moses had been commanded to strike the rock once; here he was commanded to command the rock to yield its water.

When Moses gathered the people, he addressed them as an angry man. He had taken judgment into his own hands. And in so doing, he implied also that the sign of the giving of water was in his own hands. 'Hear now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?' (20:10). He then struck the rock twice, and water came forth for the congregation, abundantly. It was this action that constituted his disobedience and for which the Lord immediately judged him. The judgment was that Moses also will not enter the Promised Land, along with the rest of that rebellious generation.

The Lord identified the heart of Moses' disobedience as unbelief and this issues in a refusal to sanctify the Lord in the sight of others (20:12). Anger which issues in taking vengeance into our own hands is essentially unbelief - it is refusal to trust that the Lord of all the earth will do right. It is an urgency for justice completely separated from grace and forbearance. It has its own definition of justice, which does not acknowledge that God is both just and the justifier of the unjust one who has faith in His justifying action (Rom. 3:26). Moses had been angry before this time (e.g. Num. 16:15) but now he had let his anger consume him. Such anger always ends up in anger against God. So, Moses struck out at the rock - God's gift to the people - twice. Paul identified the rock as Christ (1Cor. 10:4). Moses, in his vengeful, seemingly righteous, anger, is thus lined up with those who beat Christ in his trial and who nailed him to a cross of wood. But not just Moses - any of us who thus judge and take vengeance (that is, all of us) are caught into the crowd at the Cross. And yet as the Lord opened the rock with an abundant stream for the congregation - all lined up against Him in unbelief - so too at the Cross a fountain is opened, a fountain which streams through history and nations, a fountain of refreshing and cleansing grace.

7. On The Way Up: Numbers 20:14-24:25

20:14-29

This account has a large history behind it. Edom is the nation descended from Esau, Jacob/Israel's brother. Their relationship was complex, but issued mostly from the varied response of the two to the covenant purposes of God. This rejection by Edom of Israel forms the background to Amos 1:11-12; there what lies behind this refusal of generosity is identified as anger, the keeping of wrath. Edom believed that they had been duped out of the covenant blessing; this in fact was not the case, although Jacob had not acted in a completely straightforward manner in the matter. Edom came under judgment for their bitterness.

It may be that Moses' attempt to go through Edom was an attempt to by-pass the Lord's judgment that he not enter the Promised Land. This was the most direct route; the refusal of Edom ensured they took a longer way around. It may be that this parallels in some degree the abortive attempt of Israel to enter the Promised Land after their refusal to enter following the spies' negative report. Moses was given no word from the Lord to approach Edom.

The refusal of Edom to let Israel pass made them travel a longer way to Canaan, and on the way Aaron was gathered to his people. The transfer of the high priesthood of Aaron to his sons was symbolised (and thus verified) by the taking of Aaron's robes and the vesting of Eleazar his son with them. The transfer of the high priesthood is a signal of the approaching possession of the Promised Land, for it is a further indication of the passing of the generation which was refused this possession.

21:1-22:3

In this chapter we see a further indication of the changed situation. Hormah (21:1-3) was first encountered in Numbers 14:35, the site of the defeat of Israel after their first and wrongful foray into the Promised Land. The victory in this second account is what should have happened the first time.

The impatience of the people to enter the land led again to grumbling and rejection of the goodness of God (21:4-5). In this last of the complaint accounts in Numbers, the people were for the first time open in their complaining against the Lord. In the face of the Lord's judgment on their grumbling, the people came to Moses with a confession and asked him to intercede for them - again the first time in the book of Numbers. (At 14:40 there was a pseudo-confession, but no asking for intercession; rather there was an attempt to rectify the situation themselves. True confessors look primarily to God to act rather than to ourselves, for they recognise the dire situation in which we are placed by our sins. We need one who makes intercession for the transgressors who cannot act for themselves.) Moses did not immediately intercede for the people himself, as had happened on the other occasions, indicating perhaps bitterness in him towards the people for the judgment of Meribah (cf. Ps. 106:32-33). Still, the Lord heard his prayer and answered him with the command to make a serpent on a pole. The snake on the pole represented a snake that had been killed; that is, it represented the action of the Lord for the people that the people themselves couldn't perform, the taking away of the curse and judgment of their guilt. By looking at the serpent on the pole, a person bitten by a snake was made well. The looking to the serpent personalised the confession of sin, the confession of inadequacy to deal with the sin, and the declaration of

faith in the Lord to deal with it. Jesus indicated that this event prophesied his own coming from heaven to stand with and for sinners under judgment in John 3:13-14. What is impossible to us all - being born again to eternal life - is made possible by faith in him who has borne our death-dealing sins.

This event in Israel's history marks then a watershed in the transition from the old generation to the new. The new generation is not sinless! Yet there seems to be an appreciation of the covenant promises not seen in the old generation. This is seen in their eagerness which becomes impatience to enter the promised land - rather than the despair at loss of old 'luxuries' which marked the old generation. It is seen too in their readiness to confess and to seek Moses' intercession; they seem to have a greater sense that they belong to 'the LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Ex. 34.6).'

The rest of the chapter then picks up tempo. Victories and travel are recounted along with songs of celebration and joy. Sihon and Og, kings in the Transjordan region, were decisively defeated, and this land was added to Israel's territory, though not part of the Promised Land. The defeat of the Amorites provides a way into the account of Balaam in the following chapters, for Sihon had defeated a weak Moab. If then Israel defeated Sihon and the Amorites, then Moab needed to take desperate measures to defeat Israel (22:1-3).

22:4-24:25

The response of Moab to the 'problem' of the Israelites was to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites (22:4-6). In the account that follows there are four main characters. The first is Balaam, who was a prophet with power who worked for profit. Great power was ascribed to him (22:6b) and he took the ascription without question. Some have tried to see in Balaam an essentially faithful prophet, but his speaking of the word of God is not from willingness but from pragmatism. He cannot do anything else, for the power of blessing and cursing is not his, but is the Lord's gift. The second main character is Balak, the king of Moab. Moab was descended from Lot, but in Balak there was no sense of the covenantal promise that had surrounded Lot when he left Haran with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-4). There it was clear that blessing and cursing was intimately tied to relationship with the people of God. The third main character in these events is God Himself. The chapters bear witness to the indisputable fact that all power is the Lord's, and that the ruling will on the earth is the Lord's and none other. That will and power are exercised in covenant faithfulness to His people. The fourth character in these chapters is the people of Israel, and they had no active role in the drama at all. They rested, camped in the plains of Moab oblivious to the life and death struggle surrounding and centred on them.

The chapters fall into three main sections: the calling of Balaam by Balak (Num. 22:1-40); the attempted cursing of Israel (Num. 22:41-24:13); and the final discourse of Balaam pronouncing blessing for the distant future of Israel (Num. 24:14-25). The calling of Balaam came in a double approach to him. On the first attempt, the sending of a fee (22:7) assumed that this would guarantee a positive outcome, that is that Israel would be cursed. In seeking the Lord at this first approach, Balaam was refused permission to go with the men of Balak to curse Israel (22:9-14), although it may be that he was interested in the proposition. It seems that he kept the fee. On the second attempt, a more distinguished party was sent and a great reward was promised to Balaam. Balaam's reference to silver and gold (22:18) may be an

oblique demand for a very large fee (cf. Gen. 23:11-15). Despite the quite unequivocal answer given by the Lord on the first occasion, Balaam decided to see if there was anything more (22:19) the Lord had to say. On this approach, the Lord gave Balaam permission to go with the messengers - the fact of His wrath concerning this (22:22) indicated that there is a provisionality about the permission given. In the third encounter with the Lord, Balaam's spiritual blindness was shown in his inability to see what a donkey could see. The donkey acted as a visible sign to Balaam of what was to come to him. Just as the donkey was caught between the impossible demands of Balaam to go on, and the prohibiting sword of the angel, so Balaam is to be caught between the impossible demands of Balak to curse and God's prohibition, and his command to bless. Disobedience to the Lord will mean death.

In the section 22:41-24:13 we see the frustrating of the purposes of Balak and the fulfilling of the purposes of God. In each of the three attempts to curse Israel, there are six common elements:

- (i) Balak brought Balaam to a point where he can overlook Israel - he searched for an auspicious place, and found none [a warning against geographic superstition].
- (ii) Balak built seven altars and offered sacrifices of bull and ram [a warning against ritual superstition].
- (iii) Balaam went apart to consult with God on each occasion, the first two times by 'consulting the omens' (an occult practice, forbidden to God's people) [a warning against occult attempts to control the future].
- (iv) Balaam, instead of the curse pronounced a blessing on Israel. The first two oracles were not so much blessings, as recognitions of 'un-curse-ability' of Israel because of the Lord's faithfulness in His own being and in His relationship with Israel. The third oracle, when Balaam had not consulted the omens, is the one in which the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. This oracle has, throughout, elements of blessing for the future.
- (v) Balak was angry with each blessing, becoming more and more frustrated, and failing to recognise the hand of God on the situation.
- (vi) In varied words Balaam made the same response to Balak's growing anger:

'Must I not take heed to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?' (Num. 23:12)

'Did I not tell you, 'All that the LORD says, that I must do'?' (Num. 23:26).

'Did I not tell your messengers whom you sent to me, 'If Balak should give me his house full of silver and gold, I would not be able to go beyond the word of the LORD, to do either good or bad of my own will; what the LORD speaks, that will I speak'?' (Num. 24:12-13).

(In the third of these responses, Balaam disowned any claim on the money but this seems to be only because Balak has already withdrawn the promise of giving it! - 24:11)

In his fourth oracle, Balaam was given to see the future of Israel and also of other nations in the region. The metaphorical language of the three previous oracles are now given concrete historical application. As he prophesied here in the Spirit of God, Balaam knew something of 'the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories' (1Pet. 1:11).

8. Preparation for Entry: Numbers 25-29 (and 36)

Chapter 25: The Death of The Old Generation

This chapter is linked with the preceding Balaam cycle in a number of ways. Firstly the Moabites and Midianites were set against Israel in both. The hiring of Balaam by Balak the Moabite king involved the Midianite elders (22:7); Israel played the harlot with Moabite and Midianite women (25:1,6). Balaam, so central in chapters 2-24, is in Numbers 31:16 identified as the one who instigated the plan to entice the Israelites into apostasy through the women. (There is a strong link in the Scriptures between harlotry/fornication/adultery and apostasy/idolatry. The words for the former are often used with regard to describe latter.) By being thus led, Israel 'yoked himself to the Baal of Peor' - that is became willingly enslaved to a false god. The faithfulness of God to Israel declared overwhelmingly in the last chapters is matched by a faithless people. Such faithlessness does not undermine the faithfulness of the God of covenant grace, but his faithfulness is seen in both blessing and curse.

The leadership of Israel was singled out by the Lord for particular judgment (25:4). Moses commanded the judges to slay any under their jurisdiction who had joined themselves to this false worship. This judgment produced some repentance among the people (25:6b), but not amongst all. A man of Simeon (25:14-15) brought a Midianite woman as a concubine right into the camp of Israel (25:6a). Such flagrant disobedience threatened the whole of the camp which was to be holy to the Lord, and roused the jealousy of Phineas for the holiness of the Lord. He executed the Lord's judgment on the man, and thus stayed the judgment coming on the people through this act of atonement, and so received a particular reward because of his act, with regard to the worship (25:7-13). The Midianite woman was the daughter of one of the chiefs of Midian and this act was seen rightly as a plot by the Midianite leadership to lead Israel astray (25:16-18).

This event parallels the events of golden calf in Exodus 32 in a number of ways. In both accounts, when the Lord is seeing to the blessing of the people, they are busy worshipping and sacrificing to another god. In fact, in the aftermath of the incident of the golden calf, the people of Israel are warned about the events of the Baal Peor (Exod. 34:15-16). Just as the Levites were singled out for privilege and responsibility in worship because of their executing of judgment at Sinai, Phineas and his family is given an eternal priesthood for his execution of Zimri the Simeonite. A plague is sent in judgment on the people in both accounts.

Chapter 26: The Second Census

In this second census we have some differences with the census of the first few chapters of Numbers. Firstly, it is important to note that none of those counted were counted in the previous census, except for Joshua and Caleb - this is the census of the new generation (26:64-65). The census is of those men who are old enough to be in the army - and so is preparatory for the possession of the Promised Land. Primary of the concerns in this census is the determining of tribal size for a fair allocation of territory in the Promised Land. Within the census there is also given indication of the various clans that made up the tribe - a feature of this census. The other main point of difference is that there is some variation in the numbers of each tribe in comparison to the first census. This may be indicative of covenant blessing and curse in the intervening period. Reuben, Gad, Ephraim and Simeon (dramatically) all

record declines, and we know that Reuben supported Dathan and Abiram in their rebellion, and that Zimri who took the Midianite woman into the camp, was a Simeonite.

In 26:33 we are given a piece of information which is important in setting the scene for chapters 27 and 36, where the inheritance rights of daughters is discussed and clarified.

The law for the distribution of the land is given in 26:52-56. First consideration was the size of the tribes - the area was to be commensurate with tribal size. However, large tribes could not necessarily take the best portion; the distribution of the portions of land was to be decided by lot (probably with the Urim and Thummim), i.e. the land was distributed by the Lord's choosing, and so was received as a gift. This also ensured that it was clear that no tribe had any intrinsic ownership of the land, but lived under the Lord's perpetual gift.

The Levites were numbered separately from the rest of Israel, as they were not to be men of war, and also because they were not to receive an inheritance of land (26:62).

27:1-11, 36:1-13

The daughters of Zelophehad were introduced in the census, and the importance of his not having sons is seen here. The concern of the daughters when they came to Moses and Eleazar and the leadership was that he had died without sons and so his name would be lost due to the lack of inheritance. His death had not been as a judgment for a particular sin (such as Korah), but because he belonged to the rebellious generation. (This was unlikely to be a unique case in Israel's history!) The concern of the tribe, raised in Numbers 36:1-13, was that the land may be lost to the tribe through the marriage of the daughters to members of the other tribes. The Lord gave clear guidelines for the passing on of property and for the keeping of property within the tribal line. By asking the question, the daughters of Zelophehad showed themselves to be women of faith, for they trusted before the land was given that they would, with all Israel, inherit the Promised Land.

27:12-23

Moses had been told that he would not enter the Promised Land. The Lord in His kindness here promised to allow Moses to see the land before his death. Moses then prayed for the people - knowing it was essential for them to be sheep with a shepherd (27:17). Such shepherding was, as Moses knew well, by bringing the word of the Lord to the people, and so was really under-shepherding. The man whom the Lord will appoint will 'go out before them and come in before them' and will 'lead them out and lead them in.' This is a mixture of warfare language with shepherding language. The going out and the coming in may refer to worship at the Holy Place. Leading the people is more likely warfare language. The shepherding of the people will be by attention to worship and by strong leadership in battle. The Lord appointed Joshua as the man, and he was commissioned publicly before the high priest. He is given only 'some of [Moses's] authority' (27:20) for he did not speak with the Lord face to face, but rather was to be instructed by Eleazar the priest through the use of the Urim and Thummim (27:21). The transfer of authority was symbolised by the laying on of hands ((27:23).

Chapters 28 -29: Appointed Offerings and Cycles of Time

A central issue at the start of the book of Numbers was the ordering of Israel's camp in a manner that was consonant with God's holiness, and so ensured the continued blessing of His presence. In this latter part of the book, as Israel starts to enter the Promised Land and to take

up the inheritance of the land and to settle down, the focus moves from sustaining this holiness spatially to temporally. The holiness of the people will be preserved by the given worship at the right time. The regularity of the worship is the reminder that they belong to the Lord; the sacrifices are His (28:2). The sacrifices for the Promised Land give a hint too that there is a sense of a return to Eden in the inheritance, for the cycle of sacrifices have some parallels to the creation account in Genesis 1. Just as the Lord marked day from night, so Israel marks this transition by morning and evening sacrifices (Num. 28:3-8). Just the Lord rested from the work of creating and sanctified the seventh day, Israel has special sacrifices that mark off the sabbath day as sanctified (Num. 28:9-10). The Lord gave sun and moon to mark seasons and times in creation; those seasons are commemorated by sacrifices in Israel (Num. 28:11-16). The year was also divided into two halves by major festivals - Passover in the first month of the year, and the Festival of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Festival of Booths in the seventh month of the year. By this regularised worship, Israel was kept in the holiness of the Lord, and so continued to enjoy His presence. One of the reasons given for the exile some time later is that Israel's failure to keep the Sabbath years meant that the land had to be evacuated (in order that it have rest) - their failure to keep the rhythm of sacrifice meant that they were excluded from the Holy Presence.

In his commentary Gordon Wenham gives a helpful table illustrating the sacrifices that were to be given. Note that the numbers in brackets indicate the cumulative total for the day, including all the sacrifices.

9. Numbers 30-35

Chapter 30: Men, Women and the Fulfilment of Vows

The sections of law that we see given in from chapter 28 onwards are given to indicate the way in which the holiness of Israel in the presence the Lord was to be seen in the communal life. The transfer of life from camp to settled nation changed the centrality of the Tabernacle and the maintenance of the holy space. The holiness of God's people was now to be seen less spatially, and more temporally through the ordering of the year. This section on vows is linked to the section on the calendar of sacrifices, for the fulfilling of a vow often included the offering of a sacrifice at the Tabernacle/Temple, and was often made when a person travelled to the Holy Place for one of the major feasts.

A vow is a promise made to the Lord, often associated with the granting of the Lord's help in a particular situation. Often when the crisis has passed, people are less inclined to take seriously their promises. The commands concerning vows makes it very clear that vows given are to be fulfilled. Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 says, 'When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake; why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands?' The fool in wisdom literature is the one who acts as though there is no God. To forget the vow is to act as though there is no God to remember the promise given; it is to invoke the wrath of the Lord. The keeping of vows flows out of the knowledge of the grace and kindness of the Lord, as Psalm 65 celebrates so richly. Vow keeping is really a participation in God's own covenant faithfulness.

In this section, it is again reiterated that what a man vows, that he must do (v. 2). The vows made by women have to be considered carefully, for the woman who vows may be in a relationship under the authority of her father or husband. Underlying this section is the understanding that women are by creation in a relationship with men that places them under the care, protection and authority of either husband or father. The whole matter of headship in relationships underlies this section, and is presumed to be understood by Israel. The Biblical teaching on the nature of male-female relationships is never grounded upon cultural assumptions, but always returns to the matters of creation (and also the Fall.) The creation of woman from man in Genesis 2 indicates both a close interconnectedness and interrelatedness ('This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!') so that neither man nor woman can now be understood apart from each other, and also an ordering of authority within this oneness, with the man called on to give the lead in the relationship. (See 1Corinthians 11:2-16, 1Timothy ,2:8-15 for Paul's use of the creation accounts in the designation of male-female authority structures.) Hence in this section in Numbers 30, a woman cannot operate independently. Her vows are considered valid if they are not immediately negated by her husband or father when he first hears of it (30:3-8); his disapproval and invalidating of the vow is to be seen as part of his protective ministry to the woman. A widow or divorced woman is bound by the vows she makes whilst in that state because of her being outside that relationship of authority (30:9-15). The responsibility of the unmarried woman lasts whilst she lives in her father's house (30:16).

Chapter 31: The Midianites Punished

The last act that Moses had to perform before being gathered to his people was to see Israel avenged on the Midianites (31:2). This avenging is in relation to the events surrounding the hiring of Balaam to curse Israel and the incident of the Baal of Peor where Israel was led into idolatry. The history of Midian is interesting. Midian was the son of Abraham by one of his concubines (Gen. 25:1-6). He, with other such sons, was given a gift, though no part of the inheritance, and sent away to the east. The Midianites should then have known of the covenant the Lord had made with Abraham. Initially it seems he settled in the area of Moab, but was forced out that area by Edom (Gen. 36:35). It seems that following this Midian became a largely nomadic people who roamed the arid regions of the Negeb, Sinai and the Transjordan. Moses fled to the region of Midian from Egypt, and he married Zipporah, one of the daughters of the priest of Midian, Jethro. The opposition of Midian to Israel in Numbers was a rejection of the covenant promises made to Israel, and a refusal to be those who were blessed through the blessed nation. Later, in the book of Judges, Midian was a constant thorn against Israel until a final defeat by Gideon, which was a day that became synonymous with great victory in Israel (see Jud. 6-8, Psa. 83:9, Isa. 9:4, 10:26, Hab. 3:7).

The war against Midian was the execution of the Lord's vengeance on Midian (31:3) - the Lord acting to uphold his honour in the matter of the Baal of Peor. Adultery was punishable by death, and the seduction of Israel from her true husband, the Lord, was quite appropriately punishable by death. This judgment was as strong within the people of God as it was on those outside the community (e.g. Korah, Dathan and Abiram, the plagues on the people, etc.) All perish for sin, apart from the action of God in His grace. The army, a thousand men from each tribe, was led by Phineas, son of the high priest, indicating that this is holy war, God Himself in action (31:4-6). The high priest remained in camp, and was not to be defiled by blood. Of the people of Midian only women who were virginal were spared, for this indicated their innocence of the sin of the Baal of Peor (31:9,13-18). All men, including male children were killed, as they were the future army of Midian (31:7-8,17). The booty captured had to be purified, by passing through fire if it could stand the flame, and sprinkling or washing with the water of impurity for all items (31:21-24). Those who had been in the battle and had come into contact with blood or had killed any person were to go through a time of purification outside the camp before re-entering (31:19-20). The slaughter, even though commanded by the Lord as judgment, was still a catastrophic disruption of God's creation.

The booty was divided between the soldiers and the people. The soldiers received half, the people received half. From the soldiers' portion, 1/500th was to be given to the priestly family; from the people's portion, 1/50th was to be given to the Levites; i.e. the priests received a tithe (tenth) of what the Levites received. This is in line with Num. 18:26. No member of Israel failed to receive from the victory. That Israel is now in the flow of the blessing and promises of God is seen in the fact that not one member of the army was killed in the battle (31:49). The new generation now stood where the old generation had once stood, on the verge of the Promised Land, and that history stood as a warning to them, to not fall into disobedience and unbelief towards the Lord. It is this issue which is taken up in the next chapters.

Chapters 32-33: A Crisis Averted, the Journey Remembered, and a Warning Given

Chapter 32 deals with fact that Reuben and Gad claimed territory for their homeland which lay outside the Promised Land. They said (32:5), 'If we have found favour in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession; do not take us across the Jordan.' The land was granted them, but Moses feared from their last words that these tribes would now not participate in the conquest of the land. This would be discourage the others from entering and would jeopardise the whole of the people (32:14-15). The rebellion on the boundary would be repeated. The tribes took Moses' words to heart and promised their involvement in the inheriting of the land.

In chapter 33, there is a record of the stages of the travel of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. in this chronicle of the journey, there is little, if any, criticism of the actions of Israel in this history. The sins of Israel are not remembered. The closest to it is 33:14, with the comment that there was no water for the people to drink at Rephidim. The history of God's people is always in the long run the history of his gracious dealings with them. His gracious promise to us concerning our sins is that He will remember them no longer (Isa. 43:22, Jer. 31:34, Heb. 8:12, 10:17). This is then to be also the basis of our relating to one another, not holding on to past sins in unforgiveness but relating to one another as new creations, where the old has been made new (1Cor. 13:6, 2Cor. 5:14-19, etc.!).

From this recounted history, the Lord commanded the people concerning their taking of the Promised Land. It is essential for them to drive out the inhabitants and to destroy all the elements of idolatry in the land (33:50-53). Failure to do so will mean that those left behind become the means of God's judgment in Israel for their disobedience (33:55-56). That is what we see in the book of Judges particularly. The dispossession of the previous inhabitants was God's judgment on them; in fact, Israel had to spend the time in Egypt and in wandering to bring the judgment of the Canaanites to full ripeness for judgment (Gen. 15:13-16). The possessing of the land is linked to the dispossessing not only of the Canaanites, but also their gods. Whilst there was false worship, Israel could never truly possess the land. The Old Testament ends with this sad reality still in place.

Chapter 34: The Boundaries of the Land and Its Allocation

In this chapter the Lord spells out the boundaries of the Promised Land (34:1-12), makes clear the fact that only the nine tribes and half tribe of Ephraim will inherit in the land, because the others have the land of the Transjordan (34:13-15), and appoints those men who are to divide the land for inheritance (34:16-29). Manasseh which took some land in the Transjordan is involved in the allocation of land (34:23) and received an allocation in the inheritance, probably because it was not given a proportionately large enough share in the area of the Transjordan.

Chapter 35: The Cities of the Levites

Provision is made in this chapter for towns where the Levites may dwell, and associated pasture lands for them to keep their livestock. A little less than 1km² was associated with each town. 48 such cities were to be allocated throughout the entire area of Israel. Thus the

Levites, who had the responsibility of guarding the holiness of the worship of Israel, were spread for that task throughout the nation.

Of those 48 cities, six were given over to be cities of refuge. A person who had killed a person without intent was able to flee there and whilst there was safe from the close relative of the deceased who had the role of being avenger of blood (35:9-15). There was no refuge for the murderer; he was to be put to death (35:16-21), but this could be done only if the act was witnessed by more than one person (35:30). There was no way that the life of the murderer could be ransomed (35:31). Similarly, a man who had killed without intent was to stay in the city of refuge; there was no ransom for his life (35:32). Blood required death; for blood shed in the land which was not dealt with properly defiled the land and so threatened the presence of the Lord with his people (35:33-34). For the manslayer by accident, the death of the high priest could substitute for his own death (35:32). Only by that death could such a man be ransomed. The cities of refuge thus provided a place of forbearance and grace. The grace was provided in the death of the high priest; the forbearance was that a man could continue to live until the grace became effective.