



**Coptic Orthodox Diocese
Of
The Southern United States**



COMMENTARY ON THE HOLY BOOK OF NUMBERS

Written by
Dr. Medhat S. Ibrahim

The Census of the Sons of Israel:

Moses, Aaron, and the heads of the twelve secular tribes of Israel counted all of the men of Israel above the age of twenty who could go out to war by tribe. The number totaled 603,550 men excluding the Levites who were not included in the census God commanded Moses to take. The Levites were reserved for the Tabernacle service. The Levites were substituted for the first-born of all Israel tribes. This was done on the first of the second month in the second year of the Exodus. (1:1-1:54).

The arrangement of the tribes around the Tabernacle when encamped and the pattern for marching with the Tabernacle in the midst of the camp physically illustrated the nation to be ruled by the Lord with His priests at the center around the Tabernacle (2:1-34). In the east Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun tribes totaled 186,400 men, then followed the Reuben, Simeon, and Gad tribes in the south which totaled 151,450, in the middle was the Tent of Meeting and the camp of the Levites, in the west Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin tribes totaled 108,100 men and in the north Dan, Asher, and Naphtali tribes totaled 157,600 men (2:1-2:34).

The names of the sons of Aaron who were anointed priests and were ordained to serve as priests were Nedab (the first born), Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar (of whom the last two replaced the first two because of the formers offering of strange fire before the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai and so the Lord killed them) (3:1-4).

The Lord commanded Moses and Aaron to take the Levites who were representative of the first-born of the nation and count them from the age of one month and older and they numbered 22,000. Also the Lord instructed Moses to count the first-born of Israel and they were 22,273. The Lord ordered Moses to redeem the 273 excess by five shekels per first born totaling 1,365 shekels which was to be given to Aaron and his sons. Only Aaron's sons served as priests while the rest of Levites were charged to take care of the Tabernacle (3:5-49).

Moses and Aaron were commanded to take a census of the sons of Kohath by their families and by their fathers' households from thirty years of age to fifty years of ages to do the work of the Tent of Meeting. Aaron and his sons were to first enter into the Tent of Meeting, cover the Holy objects and furnishings of the Tent of Meeting and then assign the Kohathites their work activities and what to carry among the Holy furnishings in the Tent of Meeting. Aaron's sons should ensure that Kohath's sons do not see the Holy objects lest they die (4:4-20).

Moses and Aaron are commanded to take a census of the Gershonites who are between thirty and fifty years old so that they can carry the curtains of the Tabernacle under the direction of Aaron and his sons (4:21-28).

Moses and Aaron were commanded to take a census of the Merarites who were between thirty and fifty years old so that they could carry the poles and tent pegs of the Tabernacle under direction of Ithamar the son of Aaron (4:29-34).

The grand total of Levites was 8,580 from 2,750 Kohathites; 2,630 Gershonites; and 3,200 Merarites (4:34-49).

The Law of Unclean:

The Lord ordered Moses to command the sons of Israel to send outside of the Israelite camp any man or woman who was a leper, was having a discharge, or was unclean because of touching a dead person, so that they would not defile the camp where the Lord dwelt and they obeyed (5:1-4).

The Lord ordered Moses to command the sons of Israel who have committed a sin against mankind and acted unfaithfully against the Lord to confess with his/her sin and make full restitution to the one who was wronged adding one fifth to the restitution, or to make this to the priest in addition to the ram if he has no relative with whom he may make this restitution, and the priest may keep the gifts (5:5-10).

When a woman went astray and defiled herself through adultery or when her husband became jealous and suspected his wife of committing adultery, she was brought before the priest with a Grain Offering and required to drink water with the dust of the Tabernacle floor contained in it; whereupon she would be shown to be guilty if her stomach swelled and her thigh wasted away, or she would be innocent if nothing happened (5:11-31).

Nazarite Vow:

The Lord commanded Moses that the one who makes a Nazarite vow to dedicate himself to the Lord will pollute himself if he partakes wine or other fermented drink, cuts his hair, or comes into contact with the dead, and at the fulfillment of his vow is to offer a Burnt Offering, Sin Offering and Peace Offering which the priest will present to the Lord (6:1-21).

Blessing by Aaron and His Sons:

Moses is to tell Aaron and his sons to bless the sons of Israel with His name whereupon, He will bless them and grant them peace (6:22-27). It is the same blessing the priest usually does at the end of every Divine Liturgy.

Israel's Offerings for the Tabernacle:

On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle, anointing and consecrating it, the leaders of the Tribes of Israel offered six covered carts and twelve oxen before the Tabernacle which were accepted and given to the sons of Gershon and Merari, nothing was given to Kohath's sons as they were to carry the Holy's furnishings upon their shoulders. Moses recorded the summery of the Dedication Offering as follows: twelve silver dishes, twelve silver bowls, twelve gold pans, twelve shekels of silver for the utensils, twelve golden pans full of incense, 24 bulls, 60 rams, 60 male goats and 60 one year old lambs for the Sin Offering and Burnt Offering (7:1-89).

The Lord spoke to Moses to tell Aaron that he is to mount the seven lamps on the lamp-stand so that they would give their light forward, and Aaron obeyed the Lord (8:1-4).

The Lord commanded Moses to purify the Levites that they may only do the hard work of erecting, dismantling and transporting the Tabernacle from ages 25-50 years whereupon, they are to retire and only help the younger men do "guard duty" (8:5-26).

The Second Passover:

On the first month of the second year of the Exodus, the Lord commanded the sons of Israel to observe the Passover on the fourteenth day according to its statutes and ordinances except those defiled by touching of the dead. Some men who were unclean because they had been with a dead person asked Moses why they should not be allowed to present their offering to the Lord at the Passover with the sons of Israel, and Moses agreed to seek the Lord's command concerning them. The Lord's response was as follows: If one has contact with a dead person, one may observe the Passover on the fourteenth day of the second month. If one is clean and not on a journey but does not keep the Passover, that one is to be cut off from the people. For a foreigner among the sons Israel, he must abide by the same statute and ordinance of the Passover (9:1-14).

On the day that the Tabernacle was erected a cloud covered the Tabernacle by day and in the evening it appeared like fire over the Tabernacle, leading the sons of Israel from campsite to campsite by going ahead of them and then resting on the Tabernacle (9:15-23).

The Lord commanded Moses to make two hammered trumpets of silver to be blown by the priestly sons of Aaron: two to gather the congregation at the Tent of Meeting to set out an alarm at war and at the offerings in the day of gladness and for the appointed feasts (10:1-10).

On the 20th of the second month of the second year the cloud was lifted from over the Tabernacle of the Testimony, and the sons of Israel set out in military array from the wilderness of Sinai to the wilderness of Paran where the cloud settled (10:11-36).

Complaining Against The Lord:

The rabble who were among the Israelites and the sons of Israel began to complain about only having manna to eat and desired to return to Egypt and the foods they had there. When Moses heard the people complaining about their food, he began to complain to the Lord about the burden He had given to him of these people and asked to die. The Lord's response to the complaints of Moses and the people was that He promised to share Moses' responsibility among the seventy elders by placing His Spirit upon them. He also would bring about meat for the people of Israel to eat for an entire month. The people gathered and ate the meat (quail) sent to them by God in great abundance and soon became sick of meat. The Lord struck them with a severe plague resulting in the burial of many and the naming of the place Kiborth-hattaavah from which they moved to Hazeroth and remained there (11:1-35).

Rebellion of Miriam and Aaron against Moses:

Because he married a Cushite woman the Lord was extremely angry at His servant Moses. He affirmed Moses' uniqueness. And when Aaron and Miriam began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, God brought leprosy upon Miriam. God responded to the humble Moses' intercession by healing Miriam after seven days of separation, whereupon, the people moved from Hazeroth to Paran (12:1-16).

Spying Upon the Promised Land:

Under the direction of the Lord, Moses sent twelve spies (leaders from the Tribes of Israel) into the Land of Canaan to spy upon the land with regard to the strength of the people, the nature of the land, its cities and to bring back some of its fruit. When the spies went into Canaan they performed the assigned tasks and then brought back a cut branch of grapes from Eshcol. After forty days the spies returned to the sons of Israel at Kadesh and reported (with the exception of Caleb and Joshua) that although the land was rich (as testified to by the fruit they brought) it was also inhabited by mighty people who had the capability to conquer them (13:1-33).

The people responded with despair and grumblings weeping all night, expressing their discontentment against Moses and Aaron proclaiming that they wished that they had died in Egypt or in the wilderness; accused the Lord of bringing them into this land for them to die by the sword with their wives and children becoming plunder; and further desired to appoint a leader to help them return to Egypt causing Moses and Aaron to fall on their faces in the presence of them all. When Joshua and Caleb rebuked the people for their rebellion against the Lord and affirmed that He would enable them to take the land, the people decided to stone them, but the Lord interrupted them as He appeared in His glory in the Tent of Meeting. When the Lord responded to the rebellion of the people by intending to destroy them and raise up a new generation from Moses, Moses interceded for the people on the basis of God's character and the Lord pardoned the people but required that the generation from age twenty and upward (except for Caleb and Joshua) would wander for forty years and die in the wilderness for their rebellious actions. The people continued to demonstrate their contemptuous nature as they went into the land to conquer it against the command of the Lord resulting in their defeat by the Amalekites and Canaanites (14:1-45).

Laws in the Promised Land:

When the sons of Israel enter the Promised Land they are to provide specified accompaniments of meal, oil and wine to their Thanksgiving Offering to the Lord (15:1-16).

When the sons of Israel enter Canaan they are to offer the first of their dough (cake from the first of the ground meal) to the Lord for blessing, and to seek out a Sin Offering for inadvertent sin, but defiant sin is to be dealt with by cutting the people off as is illustrated by the man who was stoned for gathering wood on the Sabbath (15:17-36).

The Lord commanded Moses to tell the sons of Israel to put tassels on the corners of their garments with a cord of blue through each as a reminder to obey the

commandments of the Lord who brought them out of Egypt rather than following their own demise (15:37-41).

The Rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram:

1. Korah (of Levi), Dathan and Abiram (of Reuben) rose up against Moses and Aaron with 250 other leaders to seize the right of priesthood. Moses humbly affirmed that the Lord would decide this matter by choosing the one who is holy either these leaders with their censers of incense and fire, or Moses and Aaron.
2. Moses rebuked the Levites under Korah and his company for rebelling against God by wanting themselves to be priests and grumbling against Aaron. When Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram to come to him, they refused and accused him of misleading them away from their inheritance of the land and of lording it over them, whereupon, Moses asked the Lord not to regard their offering since he had not harmed them.
3. The next day when Korah and his company, along with Moses and Aaron came to the Tent of Meeting the Glory of the Lord appeared with the intention to destroy the entire congregation, but when Moses interceded, the Lord decided to destroy the dwellings of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. After Moses announced what was about to happen was to be God's confirmation of him, the Lord opened the ground and swallowed up the households of Korah, Dathan and Abiram and with fire consumed the 250 men who were offering incense.
4. When the Lord ordered Eleazar to hammer the censers of the sons of Korah into plating for the Altar as a warning, the people though rebelled accusing Moses and Aaron of having caused the death of the Lord's people, whereupon, the Lord brought a plague upon the congregation. Aaron was confirmed through stopping the plague via atonement and through causing his rod (Aaron's Rod) to uniquely blossom from among the rods of the other tribes thus causing the people to fear and respond with panic (16:1- 17:28).

The Priests' Rights:

The Lord told Aaron that he and his sons would exclusively be priests and the Levites may assist them. Only the priests may come near the inside of the Sanctuary, if others come in contact with the inner Sanctuary they will die (18:1- 7).

The Lord gave the priests a portion of the offerings of the sons of Israel. The Lord announced to Aaron that he would have no inheritance in the Promised Land, but that the Lord shall be their portion and the tithe from the sons of Israel shall be the Lord's provision for the sons of Levite who shall represent the sons of Israel at the Tent of Meeting. The Lord told Moses that the Levites were to take a tenth of the tithe offered to them from the sons of Israel and to offer the best of it to the Lord, whereupon, they would be able to enjoy the remainder as their compensation for service (18:8-32).

The Red Cow:

The sons of Israel were to bring to Eleazar the priest an unblemished red cow to be slaughtered outside of the camp whereupon he is to sprinkle some of its blood toward the front of the Tent of Meeting, then the cow is to be completely burned, its ashes mixed with cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet material, then it is to be used to clean those who have been defiled by coming into contact with a corpse, by being sprinkled on the third and seventh days. When anyone touches one who has died or enters the tent of one who has died, or when an open vessel is in the tent of one who has died they are unclean for seven days and need to be sprinkled with a mixture of water and ashes from the red cow on the third and seventh day to be clean (19:1-22).

The Sin of Moses and Aaron:

When the sons of Israel came to the Wilderness of Sin in the first month and stayed at Kadesh, Miriam died and was buried there.

While the people were at Kadesh they again rebelled against Moses and Aaron because of the lack of water whereupon the Lord commanded Moses to "speak to the rock" and water would come forth, but Moses became angry and "struck the rock" twice which resulted in the Lord providing water for the people but Moses and Aaron being forbidden from leading the sons of Israel into the Promised Land of Canaan and the place being named Meribah because the sons of Israel were bitter with the Lord (20:1-13).

Although Israel requested twice of Edom permission to pass through their land giving assurances that they would not take of anything within their land, Edom twice refused the request and supported their refusal with force, resulting in Israel turning away (20:14-21).

The Death of Aaron:

When the sons of Israel came to Mount Hor near the border of Edom, Moses, in accordance with the Lord's command, took Aaron upon Mount Hor, gave his garments to Eleazar, and then returned with Eleazar down the mountain after Aaron's death (due to his rebellion at Meribah) whereupon the people wept for thirty days (20:22-29).

Israel's Victories:

When the Israelites move northward toward the land of Canaan, the Canaanites under the King of Arad attacked them and took some of them captive causing the Israelites to vow to destroy their cities if the Lord would allow them to defeat them, whereupon the Lord delivered the Canaanites into the hand of Israel and they completely destroyed them causing the place to be named Homah (destruction) (21:1-3).

When the people were traveling from Mount Hor by the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, they began once again to grumble against God and Moses for their wilderness wandering causing the Lord to judge them with fiery serpents which bit the people so that they died and could only be delivered by looking upon the bronze serpent which Moses made and set upon a pole (21:4-9).

Israel moved from Mount Hor, around Moab between Armon and Moab to Bamoth. When Sihon the king of Ammon forcefully refused Israel's peaceful request to simply pass through their land, Israel defeated the Ammorites and lived in their cities (especially Hesbon the former home of the king) (21:21-32).

When Og, the King of Bashan, came out against the Israelites who were going up the way of Bashan, the Lord told Moses not to fear him and He gave them and the land into Israel's possession (21:33-35).

Balak and Balaam (22-24):

1. When the sons of Israel were on the border of Moab, Balak, the King of Moab became fearful, sought an alliance with the Medianites against Israel, and twice called Balaam, a prophet, to curse Israel but he refused to come the first time under God's direction and then agreed to come the second time under God's direction but only to speak what God told him to say.
2. As Balaam begun to leave with the leaders of Balak, he was stopped by his donkey who three times tried to avoid the Angel of the Lord who was before him, and then learned from the angel that he may go, but he must speak the words which he is told to speak.
3. Although Balak was disappointed that Balaam did not come with his first invitation, he entertained Balaam with a banquet and then took him to a high place where he could see Israel whereupon they tried to win God's favor through seven sacrifices (seven bulls and seven rams). Balak went to receive Word from the Lord and returned to Balak and the leaders of Moab with God's Word. God, and thus Balaam, both blessed Israel and warned of a curse upon any who cursed her.

4. Balak rebuked Balaam for blessing rather than cursing his enemies, but Balaam remained constant in speaking the Lord's Word. Balak took Balaam to a place where he would see less of Israel in hopes that he would curse Israel. Again Balak offered seven sacrifices to the Lord to win His favor and Balaam received a message to give to Balak. Balaam proclaimed that God is with and the strength of the Israelite Nation.
5. Balak became exceedingly frustrated commanding Balaam to say nothing, but Balaam remained unwavering to what the Lord said. Then Balak took Balaam to another place in hopes that the Lord would change His mind and curse Israel. Balak offered seven more sacrifices to the Lord, but offered blessing to whomever blessed Israel, a curse upon whoever cursed them.
6. After that Balaam predicted the rise of the Messiah, a future kingdom, and the fall of present kingdoms. Then, Balaam and Balak both go their separate ways back to their homeland.

Israel's Worship of Baal (25):

1. While the sons of Israel were at Shittim, they were drawn into the worship of Moab's god, Baal of Peor, through the Moabite women, causing the Lord to be angry with Israel. The Lord commanded Moses to slay all of the leaders of Israel so that He might turn His anger away from the entire people, so Moses ordered the judges to slay the men who had joined themselves with Baal of Peor.
2. When one of the leaders of Israel came with a Midianite woman to his tent to have sexual relations with her, Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron through Eleazar, killed them both and so the plague which killed 24,000 people ceased. Because Phinehas had God's jealousy for uprightness among the people, the Lord proclaimed that he had His covenant of peace and would have a perpetual priesthood having made atonement for the sons of Israel. The Lord commanded Moses to be hostile to the Midianites and to strike them down because they had been hostile with the people through their deceptive tricks at Peor.

The Second Census:

Under the command of the Lord, Moses and Eleazar took a census of the sons of Israel who survived God's wilderness judgment by the Jordan at Jericho which numbered the men at 601,730 and the Levites at 23,000 so that the land might be apportioned. The Lord commanded Moses that the apportioning of the Promised Land was to be by lot to the names of the heads of families, the larger inheritance to the larger families, and the small inheritance to the smaller families (26:1-65).

The Right of Women to Inherit Land:

When the daughters of Zelophehad brought their case before Moses of their father dying without sons, the Lord commanded Moses to allow the daughters to their father's inheritance. The Lord then proclaimed as a rule of inheritance that if a man dies without any sons, then his inheritance shall be transferred to his daughter, and if he has no daughter then to his brothers, and if he has no brothers, then to his father's brothers, and if his father has no brothers, then to his nearest relative in his own family to possess it (27:1-11).

The Succession of Moses by Joshua:

When the Lord commanded Moses to go up to the Mountain of Abarim to see the land which He was giving to the sons of Israel whereupon he too would die, Moses pleaded with the Lord to replace him with another leader of the congregation, and the Lord appointed Joshua as Moses' successor, and Moses transferred his authority to Joshua before Eleazar and the people (27:12-23).

A Calendar and Pattern of Daily Observances in the Promised Land:

1. The Daily Offering: Two one-year male lambs were to be offered each day as Burnt Offerings to the Lord, one in the morning and the other at twilight with a Grain Offering and a libation (28:3-8).

2. The Sabbath Offering: In addition to the daily offering two male lambs one year old without defect were to be offered to the Lord with a Grain Offering and its libation (28:9-10).

3. At the beginning of each month: In addition to the offerings above the sons of Israel were to offer two bulls, one ram, seven male lambs one year old without defect, and a male goat for a Sin Offering along with appropriate Grain Offerings and libations at the beginning of each month (28:11-15).

4. The Paschal Sacrifice and Unleavened Bread: On the Lord's Passover (the fourteenth day of the first month) and for the Feast of Unleavened Bread (the fifteenth day of the first month and for the next seven days) the sons of Israel were on the first day to rest and to present an offering of two bulls, one ram and seven male, one year old lambs without defect along with their Grain Offering and a male goat for a Sin Offering to make atonement for them in addition to the offerings above (28:16-25).

5. The Feast of Weeks: Then fifty days after the Feast of Unleavened Bread on the day of First Fruits (or Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks), the sons of Israel were to rest and offer two young bulls, one ram, seven male lambs one year old with their Grain Offerings and libations and one male goat to make atonement for them in addition to the offerings above (28:26-31).

6. The First Day of the Seventh Month: On the first day of the seventh month the sons of Israel were to rest and offer one bull, one ram, seven male lambs one year old without defect, the appropriate Grain Offerings, and one male goat as atonement for them besides the other offerings and libations (9:1-6).

7. The Tenth Day of the Seventh Month: On the tenth day of the seventh month the sons of Israel were to rest and offer one bull, ram, seven male lambs one year old without defect, appropriate grain offerings, and a male goat for atonement in addition to the other offerings and libations (29:7-11).

8. The Fifteenth to the Twenty-First of the Seventh Month: On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the sons of Israel were to rest and offer thirteen bulls, two rams, fourteen male lambs one year old without defect, the appropriate Grain Offerings, and a male goat as atonement repeating these on the second through seventh days minus one bull each day (29:12-34).

9. The Eighth Day: On the eighth day from the fifteenth (or 22nd of the seventh month) the sons of Israel were to rest and offer one bull, one ram, seven male lambs one year old without defect, the appropriate Grain Offerings and one male goat for a Sin Offering in addition to the regular offerings (29:35-38).

Status of Female Vows:

The Lord commanded Moses that although all the vows of men are binding, the vow of a woman may be annulled by either her father (if she was a daughter who lived in his house) or by her husband if he annulled it on the day that he heard of it; if he did not, the vow stood and he was responsible for it if he annulled it at a later time (30:2-1).

Defeat of Midian:

As a consequence to the sinfulness caused by the Midianites, the Lord commanded the sons of Israel to fight against them, they utterly destroyed them, purified themselves and then distributed the spoils as the Lord denoted with a portion of it going to the Lord (31:1-54).

Settlement of Trans-Jordan:

When the sons of Reuben and Gad requested to settle in the Trans-Jordan area, Moses at first rejected their request as a sin which would discourage the sons of Israel to take the land much as their fathers had done, but when the sons of Gad and Reuben volunteered to enter into Canaan and fight with the sons of Israel for their inheritance, Moses agreed and gave them, along with Manasseh, the Trans-Jordan for an inheritance (32:1-42).

Levitical Provisions in the Land:

The Lord commanded Moses that the sons of Israel should proportionately provide forty-eight cities for the Levites and their flocks, six of which were to be cities of refuge, from five hundred to 1,000 yards away from the city walls (35:1-8).

The Cities of Refuge:

The Lord commanded Moses to have the sons of Israel select six cities of refuge, three in the Trans-Jordan, and three in the land of Canaan for the person to flee to, whether Jew, alien or sojourner, who unintentionally killed another (5:9-15).

The Right of Women to Inherit Land:

When the heads of the fathers' households of the family of the sons of Gilead, Machir, and Manasseh brought their concern that land from one family could be lost to another through the right of women to inherit land the Lord spoke through Moses commanding that women who inherit the land must marry within their tribe so that their land will not be lost just as the daughters of Zelophehad did in marrying their cousins (36:1-13).