

PART ONE
PREPARATION FOR DEPARTURE
NUMBERS 1:1 – 10:28

The Tabernacle

A. Matters relating to Holiness (1:1 – 6:27)

I. Organising for the Care of the Tabernacle (1:1 – 4:49)

YHWH chose to reveal himself in a special way to Israel. He liberated them from slavery in Egypt, and bore them on eagles' wings and brought them to himself, to his holy mountain, Sinai (Exodus 19:4). There he revealed himself to them and made a covenant with them, revealing how they were to live so as to welcome the blessing that he wanted to pour out upon them. They were to be 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6). He would dwell among them. As a witness to this, he instructed them to construct a tabernacle, with his tent-sanctuary at its heart. From the tent he communicated with Moses, and through Moses with the people. In Exodus we read:

Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought YHWH would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and YHWH would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent. Thus YHWH used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.

– Exodus 33:7-11

Exodus 25-40 is devoted to details about the construction of the tent and the tabernacle that contained it, but the essentials are that the tent was a symbol of God's continued presence, journeying with his people and guiding them. Exodus concludes with this magnificent scene:

The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle. Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of YHWH was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

– Exodus 40:34-38

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that when the priest authors of Numbers speak of the preparations for the journey, their first concern is for the tabernacle: for the care that must be taken not to contaminate its holiness, lest YHWH be forced to withdraw his presence. YHWH's withdrawal would have devastating consequences for them. The destruction of Jerusalem in 586BC was proof of that.

The theme of holiness, so central to Exodus and Leviticus, is central here as well. The God who has chosen Israel as his people is beyond being controlled by human manipulation. He is the Lord of creation and of history. He has chosen them in love, revealed his will to them and wants only what is good for them. The path of obedience is the only way to welcome his blessing. Disobedience can lead only to their destruction as a people.

Exact obedience to YHWH's instructions is a central theme in the opening chapters of Numbers, and in the first four chapters we witness Moses and the people meticulously obeying God's will in regard to the care and transport of the tabernacle, as they prepare to leave Sinai and journey to the Promised Land. The Levites play a key role here.

The origins of the 'tribe' of Levi – unique in that it has no tribal territories – are shrouded in mystery and the subject of much speculation. In Genesis Levi is listed as one of the twelve sons of Jacob (29:34), and the Levites are identified as one of the twelve tribes (49:28). Exodus offers a genealogy in which Levi's three sons are named: 'Gershon, Kohath, and Merari' (6:16). Amram is given as the eldest son of Kohath (6:18), and Aaron and Moses are given as sons of Amram (6:20). Exodus recounts the story of the Levites rallying to Moses after the incident of the golden calf (32:25-29). As a consequence of their fidelity they were 'ordained for the service of YHWH' (32:29). They are mentioned later as being responsible for drawing up the tabernacle records (38:21). Leviticus has only one reference to the Levites where it records special arrangement that apply to houses in the Levite cities (25:32-34).

In the post-exilic temple only the Levites descended from Aaron (the Amram clan) functioned as priests, the others played a secondary role in the temple cult. This seems to have been the result of a power-struggle within the priesthood which was settled only in post-exilic Judah. Prior to the exile, Deuteronomy (see 10:8-9; 17:9, 18; 18:1; 24:8; 33:8-11) and Jeremiah (see 33:17-22) speak of a priestly role for all Levites. Ezekiel 44:9-14 speaks of the Levites being demoted as a punishment, and it was this view that prevailed. Historical circumstances made some organisational development imperative. It was one thing for Levites to carry out priestly functions in the many sacred shrines belonging to the different tribes of Israel, but what was to happen when the northern kingdom collapsed in 721BC and the Levites poured into Jerusalem as refugees? What was to happen when Josiah insisted on disallowing all shrines except the Temple in Jerusalem? (2Kings 23:8-9) And what was to happen in the greatly reduced Judah to which the exiles returned?

The authors of Numbers, convinced that YHWH was guiding Israel, wished to show that the role played by the Levites in their day was always part of God's plan for them, and that it belonged to the original inspiration that brought Israel into being. This is one more example of their attempt to discover God's will by applying the revelation given to Moses to new situations. They express this conviction in the traditional way, by portraying YHWH as revealing his will to Moses, and having Moses carry out God's instructions (compare 2Chronicles 30:16). At the same time, the main focus is not on the Levites, but on the holiness of YHWH and on obedience, matters which are at the heart of Israel's faith.

Because of their role in relation to the tabernacle, a number of 'priestly' terms are used of the Levites in the following chapters, but not the key term *hiqdîš* (from *qādōš*). They have a sacred ministry, but they are not consecrated priests.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting,

From Exodus 27:21 to the end of Exodus, the ‘tent of meeting’ is mentioned thirty-two times. It is from this same tent that YHWH gave Moses the instructions that make up the Book of Leviticus (see Leviticus 1:1), and it is in this tent that YHWH addresses Moses here in the opening verse of the Book of Numbers.

on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt

This is a month after the setting up of the tabernacle (see Exodus 40:17). The fourteenth day of the first month, the day of the full moon, marked one year since they left Egypt (see Exodus 12:2,6). The Book of Numbers begins a fortnight later.

saying: ²Take a census of the whole congregation of Israelites, in their clans, by ancestral houses, according to the number of names, every male individually; ³from twenty years old and upward, everyone in Israel able to go to war. You and Aaron shall *muster* them, company by company.

The tradition included a story about a census that was carried out at Sinai in order to organise payment for the building and furnishing of the tabernacle. The men twenty and over were counted ‘six hundred three thousand, five hundred fifty men’ (Exodus 38:26). It is no accident that the census here in Numbers comes to the exact same figure (see Numbers 1:46). We are dealing with story, so it is best not to try to rationalise the figure. The number is impossible, for it would mean in the vicinity of two and a half million people with all the necessary food and possessions wandering through the Sinai (and leaving no trace). The number is there to impress. No more. Let it work its magic.

⁴A man from each tribe shall be with you, each man the head of his ancestral house. ⁵These are the names of the men who shall assist you: From Reuben, Elizur son of Shedeur. ⁶From Simeon, Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai. ⁷From Judah, Nahshon son of Amminadab. ⁸From Issachar, Nethanel son of Zuar. ⁹From Zebulun, Eliab son of Helon. ¹⁰From the sons of Joseph: from Ephraim, Elishama son of Ammihud; from Manasseh, Gamaliel son of Pedahzur. ¹¹From Benjamin, Abidan son of Gideoni. ¹²From Dan, Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai. ¹³From Asher, Pagiel son of Ochran. ¹⁴From Gad, Eliasaph son of Deuel. ¹⁵From Naphtali, Ahira son of Enan.

A tribe (*maṭṭeh*) is the largest unit, consisting of all those who trace themselves back to one of the twelve sons of Jacob. Each tribe is divided into a number of ancestral houses (*bêt ’ab*), consisting of all those who trace themselves back to a grandson of Jacob. Each ancestral house is divided into a number of clans (*mišpāḥâ*, 1:20), consisting of all those who trace themselves back to a great-grandson of Jacob. The units in the fourth generation are not included, for it is the fourth generation that will enter the Promised Land (see Genesis 15:16). The lists of the tribes in the Torah varies, but normally, as here, it begins with the sons of Leah, then the sons of Rachel, then the sons of the two maids. There are seven lists in Numbers. Levi is absent from each of them. The number twelve is made up by the tribe of Joseph counting as two: Ephraim and Manasseh. Names (and genealogies) are important in the Torah, and the names of the leaders mentioned here probably came from an older written list.

¹⁶These were the ones chosen from the congregation, the leaders of their ancestral tribes, the heads of the divisions of Israel.

A man from each of the twelve tribes is to help Moses take the census. He is described as chosen from the congregation, a leader (našî', 'raised up') from the ancestral tribe, and 'head' of the 'divisions' (fighting units, 'elep) of Israel.

¹⁷Moses and Aaron took these men who had been designated by name, ¹⁸and on the first day of the second month they assembled the whole congregation together. They registered themselves in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names from twenty years old and upward, individually, ¹⁹as YHWH commanded Moses. So he *mustered* them in the wilderness of Sinai.

Two lots of Three Tribes from the Sons of Leah

Note that Gad (1:24-25), the son of Leah's handmaid, replaces Levi in this list, to make two groups of three.

²⁰The descendants of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, individually, every male from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ²¹those *mustered* of the tribe of Reuben were forty-six thousand five hundred.

²²The descendants of Simeon, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, those of them that were numbered, according to the number of names, individually, every male from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ²³those *mustered* of the tribe of Simeon were fifty-nine thousand three hundred.

²⁴The descendants of Gad, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of the names, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ²⁵those *mustered* of the tribe of Gad were forty-five thousand six hundred fifty.

²⁶The descendants of Judah, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ²⁷those *mustered* of the tribe of Judah were seventy-four thousand six hundred.

²⁸The descendants of Issachar, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ²⁹those *mustered* of the tribe of Issachar were fifty-four thousand four hundred.

³⁰The descendants of Zebulun, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ³¹those *mustered* of the tribe of Zebulun were fifty-seven thousand four hundred.

Three Tribes from the Sons of Rachel

³²The descendants of Joseph, namely, the descendants of Ephraim, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ³³those *mustered* of the tribe of Ephraim were forty thousand five hundred.

³⁴The descendants of Manasseh, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ³⁵those *mustered* of the tribe of Manasseh were thirty-two thousand two hundred.

³⁶The descendants of Benjamin, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ³⁷those *mustered* of the tribe of Benjamin were thirty-five thousand four hundred.

Three Tribes from the Sons of the Handmaids

This is achieved by shifting Gad into the first list.

³⁸The descendants of Dan, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ³⁹those *mustered* of the tribe of Dan were sixty-two thousand seven hundred.

⁴⁰The descendants of Asher, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ⁴¹those *mustered* of the tribe of Asher were forty-one thousand five hundred.

⁴²The descendants of Naphtali, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: ⁴³those *mustered* of the tribe of Naphtali were fifty-three thousand four hundred.

⁴⁴These are those who were *mustered*, whom Moses and Aaron *mustered* with the help of the leaders of Israel, twelve men, each representing his ancestral house. ⁴⁵So the whole number of the Israelites, by their ancestral houses, from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war in Israel — ⁴⁶their whole number was six hundred three thousand five hundred fifty.

As noted earlier, the total of 603,500 is identical with the census mentioned in Exodus to organise payment for the building and furnishing of the tabernacle (see Exodus 38:26). Exodus 12:37 tells us that about 600,000 foot soldiers set out from Egypt. The number achieves its aim, which is to impress.

More specific information about the Levites is found in the following chapters. Here, the authors are content to give the key reason why they were not included in the military census: they are to guard ‘the tabernacle (miškan) of the testimony’ (‘ēdâ, 1:50, 53) – an expression found also in Exodus 38:21. Exodus speaks also of the ‘ark of testimony’ (25:16; 40:3,5), and of the ‘testimony’ (witness to the covenant) in the tent of meeting’ (30:36). The tabernacle itself is a testimony of YHWH’s desire to dwell among his people, and the decalogue (Exodus 30:15), kept in the ark, is a testimony to the covenant.

Tradition included the story of Moses, himself a Levite (see Exodus 2:1-2; 6:20), summoning the Levites who executed about three thousand of those who worshipped the golden calf (Exodus 32:25-29).

A key theme in the Book of Numbers (and throughout the Torah) is the necessity of respecting the holiness (transcendence) of the divine by ensuring that what is profane is kept at a distance, lest YHWH abandon his dwelling among them, with disastrous consequences such as they experienced at the time of the exile in Babylon. These disastrous consequences are referred to here as ‘wrath’ (1:53; on the ‘anger of God’, see pages 334-337).

Exodus describes the appearance of YHWH’s glory on Sinai as ‘like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel’ (Exodus 24:17). Leviticus describes fire emerging from the tent of YHWH and consuming the offering on the altar ‘and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces’ (Leviticus 9:24). This same fire consumed Aaron’s sons when they disobeyed YHWH’s commands (Leviticus 10:2).

The key mediators between the people and the Holy One were the priests. In the temple in post-exilic Judah the priesthood was exercised exclusively by a group of priests who claimed to be descended from Aaron. A subsidiary role, such as we find here in Numbers, was carried out by ‘Levites’.

As with the census (1:19), so here, the scene concludes with a statement stressing obedience (1:54).

⁴⁷The Levites, however, were not numbered by their ancestral tribe along with them.

⁴⁸YHWH had said to Moses: ⁴⁹Only the tribe of Levi you shall not muster, and you shall not take a census of them with the other Israelites. ⁵⁰Rather you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its equipment, and over all that belongs to it; they are to carry the tabernacle and all its equipment, and they shall tend it, and shall camp around the tabernacle. ⁵¹When the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up. And any outsider who comes near shall be put to death. ⁵²The other Israelites shall camp in their respective regimental camps, by companies; ⁵³but the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the covenant, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the Israelites; and the Levites shall perform the guard duty of the tabernacle of the testimony.

⁵⁴The Israelites did so; they did just as YHWH commanded Moses.

Organising the Camp

The Organisation of the Camp around the Tabernacle (2:1-34)

The leaders of each tribal group have already been mentioned (see 1:5-15), as have the numbers in each group (see 1:21-43), and the total (see 1:46).

¹YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ²The Israelites shall camp each in their respective regiments, under ensigns by their ancestral houses; they shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side.

Judah on the East, flanked by Issachar and Zebulun

Only Judah remained after the collapse of Samaria in 721BC. It was the king and leading citizens of Judah who went into exile and those who returned came to a much reduced Judah under Persian control. It is not surprising that the tribe of Judah is given pride of place here, as elsewhere in the Torah (see Genesis 37:26, 43:8, 44:14, and especially 49:8-12). In Jacob's blessing, too, Issachar and Zebulun are linked with Judah (Genesis 49:13-15).

³Those to camp on the east side toward the sunrise shall be of the regimental encampment of Judah by companies. The leader of the people of Judah shall be Nahshon son of Amminadab, ⁴with a company as *mustered* of seventy-four thousand six hundred. ⁵Those to camp next to him shall be the tribe of Issachar. The leader of the Issacharites shall be Nethanel son of Zuar, ⁶with a company as *mustered* of fifty-four thousand four hundred. ⁷Then the tribe of Zebulun: The leader of the Zebulunites shall be Eliab son of Helon, ⁸with a company as *mustered* of fifty-seven thousand four hundred. ⁹The total *muster* of the camp of Judah, by companies, is one hundred eighty-six thousand four hundred. They shall set out first on the march.

Reuben on the South, flanked by Simeon and Gad

¹⁰On the south side shall be the regimental encampment of Reuben by companies. The leader of the Reubenites shall be Elizur son of Shedeur, ¹¹with a company as *mustered* of forty-six thousand five hundred. ¹²And those to camp next to him shall be the tribe of Simeon. The leader of the Simeonites shall be Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai, ¹³with a company as *mustered* of fifty-nine thousand three hundred. ¹⁴Then the tribe of Gad: The leader of the Gadites shall be Eliasaph son of Reuel, ¹⁵with a company as *mustered* of forty-five thousand six hundred fifty. ¹⁶The total *muster* of the camp of Reuben, by companies, is one hundred fifty-one thousand four hundred fifty. They shall set out second.

¹⁷The tent of meeting, with the camp of the Levites, shall set out in the center of the camps; they shall set out just as they camp, each in position, by their regiments.

This is not inconsistent with the tradition that places the tent *outside* the camp (see Exodus 33:7-11; also Numbers 11:24-27 and 12:4-5). Though at the centre it is separated from and therefore 'outside' the surrounding campsites.

Ephraim on the West, flanked by Manasseh and Benjamin

¹⁸On the west side shall be the regimental encampment of Ephraim by companies. The leader of the people of Ephraim shall be Elishama son of Ammihud, ¹⁹with a company as *mustered* of forty thousand five hundred.

²⁰Next to him shall be the tribe of Manasseh. The leader of the people of Manasseh shall be Gamaliel son of Pedahzur, ²¹with a company as *mustered* of thirty-two thousand two hundred. ²²Then the tribe of Benjamin: The leader of the Benjaminites shall be Abidan son of Gideoni, ²³with a company as *mustered* of thirty-five thousand four hundred. ²⁴The total *muster* of the camp of Ephraim, by companies, is one hundred eight thousand one hundred. They shall set out third on the march.

Dan on the North, flanked by Asher and Naphtali

²⁵On the north side shall be the regimental encampment of Dan by companies. The leader of the Danites shall be Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai, ²⁶with a company as *mustered* of sixty-two thousand seven hundred. ²⁷Those to camp next to him shall be the tribe of Asher. The leader of the Asherites shall be Pagiel son of Ochran, ²⁸with a company as *mustered* of forty-one thousand five hundred. ²⁹Then the tribe of Naphtali: The leader of the Naphtalites shall be Ahira son of Enan, ³⁰with a company as *mustered* of fifty-three thousand four hundred. ³¹The total *muster* of the camp of Dan is one hundred fifty-seven thousand six hundred. They shall set out last, by companies.

Conclusion

³²This was the *muster* of the Israelites by their ancestral houses; the total enrollment in the camps by their companies was six hundred three thousand five hundred fifty.

³³Just as YHWH had commanded Moses, the Levites were not *mustered* among the other Israelites.

³⁴The Israelites did just as YHWH had commanded Moses: They camped by regiments, and they set out the same way, everyone by clans, according to ancestral houses.

Once again (see 1:19, 1:54), obedience to YHWH's commands, mediated through Moses, is highlighted.

¹This is the lineage of Aaron and Moses at the time when YHWH spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. ²These are the names of the sons of Aaron: Nadab the firstborn, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar; ³these are the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests, whom he ordained to minister as priests.

⁴Nadab and Abihu died before YHWH when they offered illicit fire before YHWH in the wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children. Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests in the lifetime of their father Aaron.

⁵Then YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ⁶Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, so that they may assist him. ⁷They shall perform duties for him and for the whole congregation in front of the tent of meeting, doing service at the tabernacle; ⁸they shall be in charge of all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and attend to the duties for the Israelites as they do service at the tabernacle. ⁹You shall give the Levites to Aaron and his descendants; they are unreservedly given to him from among the Israelites.

¹⁰But you shall *commission* Aaron and his descendants; it is they who shall attend to the priesthood, and any outsider who comes near shall be put to death.

¹¹Then YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ¹²I hereby accept the Levites from among the Israelites as substitutes for all the firstborn that open the womb among the Israelites. The Levites shall be mine, ¹³for all the firstborn are mine; when I killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both human and animal; they shall be mine. I am YHWH.

The authors of Numbers want to clarify the relationship between the priests and the Levites, a relationship that had been in place since the exile. They begin by summarising the tradition concerning the priests: their consecration (Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8) and the punishment of Nabab and Abihu for using unauthorised coals to offer incense (Leviticus 10).

The Levites are to draw close to YHWH, for they are to represent the people in assisting the priests. The priests exercise their ministry inside the tent. The Levites carry out their ministry in the tabernacle, 'in front of the tent of meeting' (3:9), assisting the people when they come to offer sacrifices. As already noted (see 1:50), 'they shall be in charge of all the furnishings of the tent of meeting' when the community is on the move. Verse ten speaks of a register of priests. No one else can perform their special priestly duties (see pages 186, 208) under pain of death.

The tradition already included the following:

YHWH said to Moses: Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.

– Exodus 13:1-2 (also 22:29)

The authors of Numbers wanted to formalise what is already hinted at in Exodus 32:29, namely, that the Levites take the place of the firstborn, who are thus ransomed (see Exodus 34:20). The Levites, like the firstborn, are consecrated to YHWH: 'The Levites shall be mine' (3:13).

Census of all male Levites for Service of the Tabernacle

The heads of the various ancestral houses and clans of Levi are found in Exodus 6:16-25. Note that Moses and Aaron belong to the clan of Amram, of the ancestral house of Kohath.

¹⁴Then YHWH spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, saying: ¹⁵Muster the Levites by ancestral houses and by clans. You shall enroll every male from a month old and upward. ¹⁶So Moses *mustered* them according to the word of YHWH, as he was commanded.

¹⁷The following were the sons of Levi, by their names: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. ¹⁸These are the names of the sons of Gershon by their clans: Libni and Shimei. ¹⁹The sons of Kohath by their clans: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel. ²⁰The sons of Merari by their clans: Mahli and Mushi. These are the clans of the Levites, by their ancestral houses.

The two clans of Gershon are camped to the West (see 2:18-24)

²¹To Gershon belonged the clan of the Libnites and the clan of the Shimeites; these were the clans of the Gershonites. ²²Their *muster*, counting all the males from a month old and upward, was seven thousand five hundred.

²³The clans of the Gershonites were to camp behind the tabernacle on the west, ²⁴with Eliasaph son of Lael as head of the ancestral house of the Gershonites.

²⁵The responsibility of the sons of Gershon in the tent of meeting was to be the tabernacle, the tent with its covering, the screen for the entrance of the tent of meeting, ²⁶the hangings of the court, the screen for the entrance of the court that is around the tabernacle and the altar, and its cords—all the service pertaining to these.

For the objects for which this group is responsible see Exodus 26:1-14; 27:16.

The four clans of Kohath are camped to the South (see 2:10-17)

²⁷To Kohath belonged the clan of the Amramites, the clan of the Izharites, the clan of the Hebronites, and the clan of the Uzzielites; these are the clans of the Kohathites. ²⁸Counting all the males, from a month old and upward, there were eight thousand six hundred (seemingly a copyist's error for three hundred), attending to the duties of the sanctuary. ²⁹The clans of the Kohathites were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle, ³⁰with Elizaphan son of Uzziel as head of the ancestral house of the clans of the Kohathites.

³¹Their responsibility was to be the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the vessels of the sanctuary with which the priests minister, and the screen—all the service pertaining to these.

The Kohathites are responsible for the 'most holy objects', described in Exodus 25:10-40, 27:1-8, 30:1-10, 17-21 and 26:31-33.

The chief Kohathite is Eleazar the priest, son of Aaron

³²Eleazar son of Aaron the priest was to be chief over the leaders of the Levites, and to have oversight of those who had charge of the sanctuary.

Guarding the Tabernacle

The two clans of Merari are camped to the North (see 2:25-31)

³³To Merari belonged the clan of the Mahlites and the clan of the Mushites: these are the clans of Merari. ³⁴Their *muster*, counting all the males from a month old and upward, was six thousand two hundred. ³⁵The head of the ancestral house of the clans of Merari was Zuriel son of Abihail; they were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle.

³⁶The responsibility assigned to the sons of Merari was to be the frames of the tabernacle, the bars, the pillars, the bases, and all their accessories—all the service pertaining to these; ³⁷also the pillars of the court all around, with their bases and pegs and cords.

The parts of the tabernacle for which this group is responsible are described in Exodus 26:15-30 and 27:9-19.

The Priests are camped to the East (see 2:3-9)

³⁸Those who were to camp in front of the tabernacle on the east—in front of the tent of meeting toward the east—were Moses and Aaron and Aaron's sons, having charge of the rites within the sanctuary, whatever had to be done for the Israelites; and any outsider who came near was to be put to death.

This is the third time we have been warned that unauthorised persons who come in contact with the holy are 'to be put to death'(see 1:51 and 3:10).

Conclusion

³⁹The total *muster* of the Levites whom Moses and Aaron *mustered* at the commandment of YHWH, by their clans, all the males from a month old and upward, was twenty-two thousand.

The total of twenty-two thousand requires the correction noted in verse twenty-eight (a change from six (šš) to three (šlš)).

The fact that the Levites substitute for the firstborn has already been stated (see 3:11-13). These verses speak of a census and give details concerning the ransoming of the firstborn.

The livestock of the Levites also substitute for the firstborn of the livestock of the Israelites (see Exodus 13:2,12). This does not take away the obligation on the Israelites to offer the firstborn of their livestock as a sacrificial offering (Exodus 22:30).

There is no way of reconciling the number of firstborn males (22,273) with the earlier census in which the number of males over twenty was given as 603,550 (see 1:47).

The difference between Hebrew *pādâ* ('ransom', used here and regularly in relation to the firstborn), and *gā'al* ('redeem') is that only the owner can redeem. The firstborn belong to YHWH; others can ransom but not redeem them.

The extra 273 firstborn (according to 3:39 there are only 22,000 Levites) have to be ransomed by an offering of five sanctuary shekels (as distinct from the merchant shekel, which varied with the market, Genesis 23:16, or the royal shekel, determined by the royal court, 2Samuel 14:26). Five shekels is the monetary equivalent to a child under five years old (see Leviticus 27:6).

Moses diligently carries out YHWH's command.

⁴⁰Then YHWH said to Moses: *muster all the firstborn males of the Israelites, from a month old and upward, and count their names.* ⁴¹But you shall accept the Levites for me—I am YHWH—as substitutes for all the firstborn among the Israelites, and the livestock of the Levites as substitutes for all the firstborn among the livestock of the Israelites.

⁴²So Moses *mustered* all the firstborn among the Israelites, as YHWH commanded him. ⁴³The total of all the firstborn males from a month old and upward, counting the number of names, was twenty-two thousand two hundred seventy-three.

⁴⁴Then YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ⁴⁵Accept the Levites as substitutes for all the firstborn among the Israelites, and the livestock of the Levites as substitutes for their livestock; and the Levites shall be mine. I am YHWH. ⁴⁶As the price of *ransom* of the two hundred seventy-three of the firstborn of the Israelites, over and above the number of the Levites, ⁴⁷you shall accept five shekels apiece, reckoning by the shekel of the sanctuary, a shekel of twenty gerahs. ⁴⁸Give to Aaron and his sons the money by which the excess number of them is *ransomed*.

⁴⁹So Moses took the *ransom* money from those who were over and above those redeemed by the Levites; ⁵⁰from the firstborn of the Israelites he took the money, one thousand three hundred sixty-five shekels, reckoned by the shekel of the sanctuary; ⁵¹and Moses gave the *ransom* money to Aaron and his sons, according to the word of YHWH, as YHWH had commanded Moses.

Transporting the Tabernacle

The general areas of responsibility for the three Levite groups were noted in chapter three after stating their camping arrangement around the tabernacle. Now another census is taken with a view to organising for the transporting of the tabernacle. The Kohathites are mentioned first since they are responsible for transporting the most holy objects of the tabernacle, objects which they cannot look upon or touch.

The Kohathites are to carry the most holy objects of the tabernacle A (see 3:31)

¹YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ²Take a census of the Kohathites separate from the other Levites, by their clans and their ancestral houses, ³from thirty years old up to fifty years old, all who qualify to do work relating to the tent of meeting. ⁴The service of the Kohathites relating to the tent of meeting concerns the most holy things.

The priests must prepare the most holy things for transporting

⁵When the camp is to set out, Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the screening curtain, and cover the ark of the covenant with it; ⁶then they shall put on it a covering of fine leather, and spread over that a cloth all of blue, and shall put its poles in place. ⁷Over the table of the bread of the Presence they shall spread a blue cloth, and put on it the plates, the *cupped utensils* for incense, the bowls, and the flagons for the drink offering; the regular bread also shall be on it; ⁸then they shall spread over them a crimson cloth, and cover it with a covering of fine leather, and shall put its poles in place. ⁹They shall take a blue cloth, and cover the lampstand for the light, with its lamps, its snuffers, its trays, and all the vessels for oil with which it is supplied; ¹⁰and they shall put it with all its utensils in a covering of fine leather, and put it on the carrying frame. ¹¹Over the golden altar they shall spread a blue cloth, and cover it with a covering of fine leather, and shall put its poles in place; ¹²and they shall take all the utensils of the service that are used in the sanctuary, and put them in a blue cloth, and cover them with a covering of fine leather, and put them on the carrying frame. ¹³They shall take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth over it; ¹⁴and they shall put on it all the utensils of the altar, which are used for the service there, the firepans, the forks, the shovels, and the basins, all the utensils of the altar; and they shall spread on it a covering of fine leather, and shall put its poles in place.

The Kohathites are to carry the most holy objects of the tabernacle B

¹⁵When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, as the camp sets out, after that the Kohathites shall come to carry these, but they must not touch the holy things, or they will die. These are the things of the tent of meeting that the Kohathites are to carry.

The Responsibilities of Eleazar (see 3:32)

¹⁶Eleazar son of Aaron the priest shall have charge of the oil for the light, the fragrant incense, the regular cereal offering, and the anointing oil, the oversight of all the tabernacle and all that is in it, in the sanctuary and in its utensils.

See Exodus 35:14 for the oil for lighting the Menorah lamps. See Exodus 30:7, 31:11 for the incense used on the golden incense altar. See Leviticus 6:12-16 for the ingredients of the cereal offering to be carried out by the high priest as a priestly sacrifice. See Exodus 25:6, 30:25-31 for the oil of priestly anointing.

A warning

¹⁷Then YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ¹⁸You must not let the tribe of the clans of the Kohathites be destroyed from among the Levites. ¹⁹This is how you must deal with them in order that they may live and not die when they come near to the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in and assign each to a particular task or burden. ²⁰But the Kohathites must not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment; otherwise they will die.

The parts of the Tabernacle to be carried by the Gershonites (see 3:25-26)

²¹Then YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²²Take a census of the Gershonites also, by their ancestral houses and by their clans; ²³from thirty years old up to fifty years old you shall *muster* them, all who qualify to do work in the tent of meeting. ²⁴This is the service of the clans of the Gershonites, in serving and bearing burdens: ²⁵They shall carry the curtains of the tabernacle, and the tent of meeting with its covering, and the outer covering of fine leather that is on top of it, and the screen for the entrance of the tent of meeting, ²⁶and the hangings of the court, and the screen for the entrance of the gate of the court that is around the tabernacle and the altar, and their cords, and all the equipment for their service; and they shall do all that needs to be done with regard to them.

²⁷All the service of the Gershonites shall be at the command of Aaron and his sons, in all that they are to carry, and in all that they have to do; and you shall assign to their charge all that they are to carry. ²⁸This is the service of the clans of the Gershonites relating to the tent of meeting, and their responsibilities are to be under the oversight of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest.

The parts of the Tabernacle to be carried by the Merarites (see 3:36-37)

²⁹As for the Merarites, you shall *muster* them by their clans and their ancestral houses; ³⁰from thirty years old up to fifty years old you shall enroll them, everyone who qualifies to do the work of the tent of meeting. ³¹This is what they are charged to carry, as the whole of their service in the tent of meeting: the frames of the tabernacle, with its bars, pillars, and bases, ³²and the pillars of the court all around with their bases, pegs, and cords, with all their equipment and all their related service; and you shall assign by name the objects that they are required to carry.

³³This is the service of the clans of the Merarites, the whole of their service relating to the tent of meeting, under the hand of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest.

YHWH's Instructions are Obeyed

³⁴So Moses and Aaron and the leaders of the congregation *mustered* the Kohathites, by their clans and their ancestral houses, ³⁵from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who qualified for work relating to the tent of meeting; ³⁶and their enrollment by clans was two thousand seven hundred fifty. ³⁷This was the *muster* of the clans of the Kohathites, all who served at the tent of meeting, whom Moses and Aaron enrolled according to the commandment of YHWH by Moses.

³⁸The *muster* of the Gershonites, by their clans and their ancestral houses, ³⁹from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who qualified for work relating to the tent of meeting — ⁴⁰their *muster* by their clans and their ancestral houses was two thousand six hundred thirty. ⁴¹This was the *muster* of the clans of the Gershonites, all who served at the tent of meeting, whom Moses and Aaron *mustered* according to the commandment of YHWH.

⁴²The *muster* of the clans of the Merarites, by their clans and their ancestral houses, ⁴³from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who qualified for work relating to the tent of meeting — ⁴⁴their *muster* by their clans was three thousand two hundred. ⁴⁵This is the *muster* of the clans of the Merarites, whom Moses and Aaron *mustered* according to the commandment of YHWH by Moses.

⁴⁶All those who were *mustered* of the Levites, whom Moses and Aaron and the leaders of Israel *mustered*, by their clans and their ancestral houses, ⁴⁷from thirty years old up to fifty years old, everyone who qualified to do the work of service and the work of bearing burdens relating to the tent of meeting, ⁴⁸their *muster* was eight thousand five hundred eighty. ⁴⁹According to the commandment of YHWH through Moses they were appointed to their several tasks of serving or carrying; thus they were *mustered* by him, as YHWH commanded Moses.

II. Removal from the camp of anything that contaminates the holy

Behind the regulations of the opening four chapters of Numbers is the notion of God's holiness. This theme continues in the opening verses of chapter five.

YHWH alone is 'holy' (qādōš); which is to say that YHWH totally transcends creation, is absolutely other; there is an unbridgeable separation of God from human beings and from everything that we human beings experience. Because the all-holy God has chosen to dwell among his people, his dwelling place is a holy place, a sanctuary – not because of any inherent quality it has, but because, and only because, the Holy One dwells there. God's holiness permeates the inner shrine and emanates out through the tent and to the altar in the courtyard. It also embraces those who alone can minister in the sanctuary – the high priest who alone can enter the inner shrine, and the priests who alone can serve at the altar.

For the authors of the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-27), holiness is not limited to the sanctuary and its priests. All the congregation of the people of Israel is called to be 'holy' (qādōš). The separateness of God remains (God is qādōš, Israel is called to be qādōš), but Israel is called to live within the ambience of God's radiant glory. The way to enter into this radiance of YHWH's unique holiness is to heed YHWH's commandments. 'I am YHWH your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy' (Leviticus 11:44-45). To ensure this they are to camp around God's holy dwelling.

Ancient Israel shared with its contemporaries the conviction that there are forces at work which threaten the 'holy' (qōdēš). Their prosperity, their very existence as a nation, depended on God's presence among them, blessing them and protecting them. The most serious threat to YHWH's presence is deliberate sin ('transgression', peša'): consciously and deliberately acting against God's declared will, breaking the covenant. God is 'forgiving' and 'slow to anger', but sin has consequences that cannot be pretended away. The most extreme proof of the threat posed by sin was the destruction of the temple in 586: 'The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary; he has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces' (Lamentations 2:7). The danger of God abandoning his dwelling and leaving Israel to its own resources was an issue that concerned the whole nation.

To a lesser degree even inadvertent 'sin' (ḥaṭṭā't) had to be atoned for, and contact with anything that belonged to the sphere of death had to be carefully managed. Death and life, 'impurity' and 'holiness', cannot co-exist. The key demand, of course, was for obedience to the covenant and repentance where the covenant had been broken. In the all-important symbolic world of the cult, however, sorrow for sin and repentance was to be expressed in sacrificial rites, which also had an educative role. The cult was a constant reminder that, thanks to the Presence of God among them, and to the extent that they obeyed God's will, the forces of evil, of impurity and death, would be overcome by the power of life issuing from the divine presence. But the divine presence could not be taken for granted.

It is in this context that the following instructions are recorded.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

²Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who has *scaly skin disease*, or has a discharge, and everyone who is unclean through contact with a corpse;

³you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp; they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them.

⁴The Israelites did so, putting them outside the camp; as YHWH had spoken to Moses, so the Israelites did.

The main threat to God's presence was disobedience, deliberate or inadvertent. However, there were other less dangerous, but still serious, ways of threatening the sacred, and so risking losing God's presence. The common factor is that they all bespeak death. These matters are dealt with in detail in Leviticus (see page 193). The regulations here are supplementary in that there is a clear insistence that people who have any of these conditions must not be allowed to stay in the camp. The purpose of this exclusion was to keep people aware in their day to day living of the need to discern between what gives life and what gives death, and to choose life.

The first condition is that of scaly skin (*ṣāra'at*, see Leviticus 13-14). In spite of a long history of mistranslation, what is being described is not leprosy (Hansen's disease). This was unknown in the Near East till the hellenistic period (late fourth century BC). The problem is that such skin has the *appearance* of death, and it is this that gives it a special 'power' to pollute. Leviticus already demanded that people in this condition must live 'outside the camp' (Leviticus 13:46).

Genital discharge (*zāb*, see Leviticus 15) was fraught with meaning in this highly symbolic world. In the ancient world, there is ample evidence of fear in the face of the loss of genital blood in menstruation, and, to a lesser extent, the loss of life-giving semen. Both evoke images of wastage of life in the very places from which life comes. Israel shared this fear and contact with the sacred had to be managed. Leviticus 15:31 insisted on isolating people with this condition. Numbers makes it clear that this means they are to dwell outside the camp.

Obviously contact between a corpse and the holy had to be managed with the greatest care, for death and life are in constant tension. Leviticus legislates for priests (see Leviticus 21:1-3). The legislation here in Numbers covers all Israelites.

The authors of Numbers follow the tradition in attributing these regulations to YHWH, mediated through Moses. They are claiming to draw on the essential insights given by YHWH to Moses and so the roots of the regulations go right back to the beginnings of their existence as God's holy people on Mount Sinai. Obedience to them is part of the covenant. Strict observance of these laws makes it possible for the Holy One, the source of all blessing, to dwell among them.

III. Making restitution

The previous verses speak of ritual purity. Ethical behaviour is also essential, for to wrong a fellow Israelite is to sin against God, for the people belong to YHWH. These verses supplement the following regulation of Leviticus:

When any of you sin and commit a *sacrilege* against YHWH by deceiving a neighbour in a matter of a deposit or a pledge, or by robbery, or if you have defrauded a neighbour, or have found something lost and lied about it —if you swear falsely regarding any of the various things that one may do and sin thereby —when you have sinned and *experience* guilt, and would restore what you took by robbery or by fraud or the deposit that was committed to you, or the lost thing that you found, or anything else about which you have sworn falsely, you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it. You shall pay it to its owner when you *experience* your guilt. And you shall bring to the priest, as your *reparation* offering to YHWH, a ram without blemish from the flock, or its equivalent, for a *reparation* offering. The priest shall make atonement on your behalf before YHWH, and you shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and *experience* guilt thereby.

– Leviticus 6:2-7

Numbers adds the ideas of confessing the sin (5:7), and regulates what is to happen if there is no next of kin. The restitution is to be made as an offering to support the priests (5:8). The ‘holy things’ (5:9) are what the people have offered in sacrifice to God. Some of this can be given to the priest as restitution for wrongs committed against one’s neighbour, when there is no way of making restitution to the offended party.

⁵YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: **‘Speak to the Israelites: When a man or a woman wrongs another, breaking faith with YHWH, that person incurs guilt ⁷and shall confess the sin that has been committed, and make full restitution for the wrong, adding one fifth to it, and giving it to the one who was wronged.**

⁸**If the injured party has no next of kin to whom restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution for wrong shall go to YHWH for the priest, in addition to the ram of atonement with which atonement is made for the guilty party.**

⁹**Among all the offerings and holy things of the Israelites, every gift that they bring to the priest shall be his.**

¹⁰**The holy things of all are their own; whatever anyone gives to the priest shall be his.**

IV. Where there is suspicion of adultery

Adultery (nā'ap) was taken very seriously in the ancient world. It is called the 'great sin' (Genesis 20:9; see Genesis 39:9). In Israel this is partly because the covenant between man and woman in marriage was a 'sacrament' of YHWH's covenant with his people. However, in a world in which there was no legal restriction on how many wives a man could have, the focus of adultery was very much on the wife being faithful to her husband, thus ensuring the proper handing on of the blessing, including inheritance. A man could commit adultery only by having intercourse with a *married* woman. He is acting against the rights of her husband. A married man having intercourse with an unmarried woman was not considered guilty of adultery. His wife was not considered to have any rights.

Such legislation, especially when YHWH is claimed as its author, warns us to be careful when reading biblical texts to remember not to ignore the human limitations of the inspired writers, especially the limitations inherent in their culture. They rightly believed that there was a special providence guiding them, but when they claim God for their legislation care must always be taken. As Christians, we have learned to read scripture in the light of the revelation of God that is in Jesus. This is one area where he could say: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you' (Matthew 5:31-32). He is quoted as speaking of a husband committing adultery against his wife (see Mark 10:11).

A similar case must be made for the legislation in Exodus where YHWH declares that there is no punishment for a slave-owner who maltreats a slave who recovers 'for the slave is the owner's property' (Exodus 21:21). The fact that this verse was used for centuries by 'Christian' slave-owners to justify having slaves and treating them as less than human should be a warning against treating these words, without qualification, as expressing God's will, even though the authors certainly considered them in this way: 'YHWH said to Moses: these are the edicts that you shall set before them' (Exodus 20:22, 21:1).

Adultery is proscribed in the decalogue (Exodus 20:14) and the punishment is spelt out in the Book of Leviticus 20:10 'If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.' The authors of Numbers supplement this legislation here. What is to happen when adultery is suspected, but not proven? The first thing we notice is that the attention is entirely on the suspected woman. Unfortunately, this is not untypical.

There is another element in the legislation that deserves comment. Since adultery cannot be proven, the death penalty cannot be applied. The legislation, however, brings to bear powerful psychological forces that are likely to get a guilty woman to confess out of sheer fear. If, however, she is innocent and is strong enough to maintain her innocence, the judgment is left to God in what we would consider a primitive and naive way. God is supposed to use the drink made up of holy water from the basin in the tabernacle (see Mishna Sotah 2.2-3), mixed with the dust from the floor, also holy because it is from the tabernacle, to make her sterile if she is guilty.

At one stage it seems that the Urim and Thurrim were used in a similar way (see 1 Samuel 14:41), trusting that God would intervene and reveal guilt by, as it were, the throwing of a dice (Exodus 22:9 seems to be referring to such a practice).

¹¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ¹²Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If any man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, ¹³if a man has had intercourse with her but it is hidden from her husband, so that she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her since she was not caught in the act; ¹⁴if a spirit of *suspicion* comes on him, and he is *suspicious* of his wife who has defiled herself; or if a spirit of *suspicion* comes on him, and he is *suspicious* of his wife, though she has not defiled herself; ¹⁵then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. And he shall bring the offering required for her, one-tenth of an ephah of barley flour. He shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of *suspicion*, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance.

The nearest parallel offering to this is the poor person's purification offering in Leviticus 5:11. The quantity is the same and it is also without oil or incense. Every precaution is being taken in case she is guilty, so that when she comes into the tabernacle she will not pollute it.

¹⁶Then the priest shall bring her near, and set her before YHWH;

The Mishna (Sotah 1.5) identifies the Nicanor Gate as the location in the tabernacle to which she is brought.

¹⁷the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. ¹⁸The priest shall set the woman before YHWH, dishevel the woman's hair, and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of *suspicion*. In his own hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse.

Disheveled hair is part of the process of shaming the woman into confessing if she is in fact guilty. If she is innocent and strong enough to defend her innocence, or if she is guilty and determined to hide her guilt, the climax comes in the following verses where she is forced to accept a curse laid on her that God will punish her with miscarriage if she is pregnant (and perhaps permanent sterility).

¹⁹Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, "If no man has lain with you, if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while under your husband's authority, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings the curse. ²⁰But if you have gone astray while under your husband's authority, if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has had intercourse with you," ²¹— let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse and say to the woman—"YHWH make you an execration and an oath among your people, when YHWH makes your uterus drop, your womb discharge; ²²now may this water that brings the curse enter your bowels and make your womb discharge, your uterus drop!" And the woman shall say, "Amen. Amen."

Suspicion of Adultery

²³Then the priest shall put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness. ²⁴He shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter her and cause bitter pain.

²⁵The priest shall take the grain offering of *suspicion* out of the woman's hand, and shall elevate the grain offering before YHWH and bring it to the altar; ²⁶and the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering, as its memorial portion, and turn it into smoke on the altar, and afterward shall make the woman drink the water.

²⁷When he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall discharge, her uterus drop, and the woman shall become an execration among her people.

²⁸But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be immune and be able to conceive children.

²⁹This is the law in cases of *suspicion*, when a wife, while under her husband's authority, goes astray and defiles herself, ³⁰or when a spirit of *suspicion* comes on a man and he is *suspicious* of his wife; then he shall set the woman before YHWH, and the priest shall apply this entire law to her.

³¹The man shall be free from *punishment*, but the woman shall bear her *punishment*.

Should the woman be shown to be innocent, the suspicious husband is not to suffer any punishment. Should she be shown to be guilty, the full weight of the law must bear down upon her: divorce, shame and the fulfilment of the curse.

V. The Special Consecration of the Nazirites

The subject is still holiness, and the legislation included here is new. Though Amos mentions nazirites (Amos 2:12), and though according to the Deuteronomic 'History', Samson is described as a nazirite (Judges 13), and in the Septuagint Version also Samuel, LXX 1Samuel 1:11), and though they are described in the same terms as we find here, this is the only place in the Torah where we find legislation concerning these lay people, men or women, who are consecrated in this special way to YHWH.

The nazirite vow has three elements. The first is total abstinence from wine or any intoxicating drink (6:3-4). The same requirement applies to priests, but only when they are carrying out their ministry (see Leviticus 10:9). The second is the distinctive sign of not cutting their hair, which is dedicated to God (6:5). The practice of leaving dedicated hair uncut is not restricted to ancient Israel. The third is the total avoidance of any contact with a corpse, even of a close family member (6:6-7; see Numbers 19). This is stricter than the rules governing priests (see Leviticus 21:1), but the same as is required of the high priest (see Leviticus 21:11).

Verses nine to twelve legislate for what is to happen when a nazirite accidentally contacts a corpse. Sacrifices required for restoration to purity took place only on the eighth day (Leviticus 14:10, 15:29). The offering of turtledoves is described in Leviticus 5:7-10, and the lamb in Leviticus 14:13ff. A reparation offering (*'āšām*) is required because of the premature termination of a vow.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When either men or women make a special vow, the vow of a nazirite, to separate themselves to YHWH, ³they shall separate themselves from wine and strong drink; they shall drink no wine vinegar or other vinegar, and shall not drink any grape juice or eat grapes, fresh or dried. ⁴All their days as nazirites they shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins. ⁵All the days of their nazirite vow no razor shall come upon the head; until the time is completed for which they separate themselves to YHWH, they shall be holy; they shall let the locks of the head grow long. ⁶All the days that they separate themselves to YHWH they shall not go near a corpse. ⁷Even if their father or mother, brother or sister, should die, they may not defile themselves; because their consecration to God is upon the head. ⁸All their days as nazirites they are holy to YHWH.

⁹If someone dies very suddenly nearby, defiling the consecrated head, then they shall shave the head on the day of their cleansing; on the seventh day they shall shave it. ¹⁰On the eighth day they shall bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, ¹¹and the priest shall offer one as a *purification* offering and the other as a burnt offering, and make atonement for them, because they incurred guilt by reason of the corpse. They shall sanctify the head that same day, ¹²and separate themselves to YHWH for their days as nazirites, and bring a male lamb a year old as a *reparation* offering. The former time shall be void, because the consecrated head was defiled.

At the completion of the nazirite vow

¹³This is the law for the nazirites when the time of their consecration has been completed: they shall be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, ¹⁴and they shall offer their gift to YHWH, one male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering, one ewe lamb a year old without blemish as a *purification* offering, one ram without blemish as a *communion sacrifice*, ¹⁵and a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of choice flour mixed with oil and unleavened wafers spread with oil, with their grain offering and their drink offerings. ¹⁶The priest shall present them before YHWH and offer their *purification* offering and burnt offering, ¹⁷and shall offer the ram as a *communion sacrifice* to YHWH, with the basket of unleavened bread; the priest also shall make the accompanying *cereal* offering and drink offering.

¹⁸Then the nazirites shall shave the consecrated head at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall take the hair from the consecrated head and put it on the fire under the *communion sacrifice*.

¹⁹The priest shall take the shoulder of the ram, when it is boiled, and one unleavened cake out of the basket, and one unleavened wafer, and shall put them in the palms of the nazirites, after they have shaved the consecrated head. ²⁰Then the priest shall elevate them as an elevation offering before YHWH; they are a holy portion for the priest, together with the breast that is elevated and the thigh that is offered. After that the nazirites may drink wine.

²¹This is the law for the nazirites who take a vow. Their offering to YHWH must be in accordance with the nazirite vow, apart from what else they can afford. In accordance with whatever vow they take, so they shall do, following the law for their consecration.

The conclusion of the vow is celebrated with a number of sacrificial offerings. The nazirite has been living in intimate contact with the holy. His return to ordinary lay life has to be managed with great care.

For the offering of a lamb as a burnt offering see Leviticus 9:3, 12:6 and 13:12. The offering of a lamb as a purification offering is found only in this text (Leviticus 9:3 speaks of a goat). For the offering of a ram as a communion sacrifice see Leviticus 9:4 and 9:18. For the offering of unleavened bread in the consecration of priests see Exodus 29:3 and Leviticus 8:2. For the procedures governing cereal offering see Leviticus 2 and 6:7-11. For drink offering see Leviticus 23:13.

Once the nazirite has shaved off the dedicated hair that was the distinctive sign of his consecration, he is to cast it on the sacrificial fire (6:18).

Verses nineteen to twenty specify the portion of the sacrifice that is for the priest. Similar instructions are given in more detail in Leviticus 7:28-34.

VI. Concluding Priestly Blessing

If we compare Numbers 1:1 and 10:11, we see that the revelations that make up the first six chapters of Numbers are placed in the first 20 days of the second month. (Numbers 7:1 to 10:10 refer back to the first month.) This priestly blessing concludes the revelations in readiness for the departure from Sinai. Without giving the words of blessing, Leviticus records the following:

Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he came down after sacrificing the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being. Moses and Aaron entered the tent of meeting, and then came out and blessed the people; and the glory of YHWH appeared to all the people. Fire came out from YHWH and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar; and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

– Leviticus 9:22-24

The blessing is in three parts. Verse twenty-four has three words in Hebrew: YHWH/ bless you/ and keep you; verse twenty-five has five words: YHWH/ make to shine/ his face/ upon you/ and be gracious to you; verse twenty-six has seven words: YHWH/ lift up/ his countenance/ upon you/ and give/ you/ peace. The flow of grace pours out in increasing abundance.

To bless (*bērēk*) is to pray that the people experience God's *b'rākā* (gifts), especially all that YHWH has promised. To keep (*šāmar*) is to guard and protect them on their journey.

To make his face shine is to not be angry but to look upon them with love. To be gracious (*hānan*) is to continue to show his love in the events of their life.

To lift up his countenance is to keep his eyes fixed on them in love. To give peace (*šālôm*) is to cause them to experience fullness of life in every way, a fullness of life that is possible only through intimate communion with God.

YHWH promised: 'in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you' (Exodus 20:24).

²²YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²³Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

²⁴YHWH bless you and keep you;

²⁵YHWH make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

²⁶YHWH lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

²⁷So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

Offerings of Tribal Leaders

B. Further Matters concerning the Tabernacle (7:1 - 10:10)

I. Offerings by Tribal Leaders

Offerings of wagons and oxen for the transport of the tabernacle

¹On the day when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle, and had anointed and consecrated it with all its furnishings, and had anointed and consecrated the altar with all its utensils, ²the leaders of Israel, heads of their ancestral houses, the leaders of the tribes, who were *in charge of the musters*, made offerings.

The authors of Numbers take us back to the day when the tabernacle was consecrated, which was, as Exodus tells us: 'In the *first* month in the second year, on the first day of the month' (Exodus 40:17), a month before the revelations of Numbers 1-6, which began 'on the first day of the *second* month, in the second year' (Numbers 1:1). This and the following two chapters offer the reader background, supplementary, material. The leaders mentioned in verse two have been introduced in 1:5-16.

³They brought their offerings before YHWH, six covered wagons and twelve oxen, a wagon for every two of the leaders, and for each one an ox; they presented them before the tabernacle.

⁴Then YHWH said to Moses: ⁵Accept these from them, that they may be used in doing the service of the tent of meeting, and give them to the Levites, to each according to his service.

⁶So Moses took the wagons and the oxen, and gave them to the Levites. ⁷Two wagons and four oxen he gave to the Gershonites, according to their service; ⁸and four wagons and eight oxen he gave to the Merarites, according to their service, under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest. ⁹But to the Kohathites he gave none, because they were charged with the care of the holy things that had to be carried on the shoulders.

Offerings towards the cult

¹⁰The leaders also presented offerings for the dedication of the altar at the time when it was anointed; the leaders presented their offering before the altar. ¹¹YHWH said to Moses: They shall present their offerings, one leader each day, for the dedication of the altar.

Each tribe in turn makes its offerings and the offerings are identical. The style reminds us of records that have been discovered in the temples of Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt. The repetition highlights the point that all the tribes are equally committed to the tabernacle cult – a point the priests want to highlight.

1. Judah

Judah leads the tribes. Nashon was introduced in 1:7. Plates (q^e‘ārâ) are mentioned in Exodus in relation to the cult, but were for carrying incense, not flour (see Exodus 25:29; 37:16; also Numbers 4:7). The basins (mizrāq) are mentioned in Exodus 27:3, 38:3 and Numbers 4:14. The cupped utensils (kap – the same word is used for the palm of the hand) for the incense are mentioned in Exodus 25:29, 37:16 and Numbers 4:7.

For details on the cereal offering (minhâ) see Leviticus 2:1-16 and 6:14-18. For details on the burnt offering (‘olâ) see Leviticus 1:3-17 and 6:9-13. For details on the purification offering (ḥattā’t) see Leviticus 4:1 - 5:13 and 6:24-30. For details on the communion sacrifice (zēbah š‘lāmîm) see Leviticus 3:1-17 and 7:11-136. The reparation offering is private and is to atone for offences. It is not appropriate on this occasion.

¹²The one who presented his offering the first day was Nahshon son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah;

¹³his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal offering*; ¹⁴one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense;

¹⁵one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering;

¹⁶one male goat for a *purification offering*; ¹⁷and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five

male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Nahshon son of Amminadab.

2. Issachar

¹⁸On the second day Nethanel son of Zuar, the leader of Issachar, presented an offering; ¹⁹he presented for his offering one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal offering*; ²⁰one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ²¹one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, as a burnt offering; ²²one male goat as a *purification offering*; ²³and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Nethanel son of Zuar.

3. Zebulun

²⁴On the third day Eliab son of Helon, the leader of the Zebulunites: ²⁵his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal offering*; ²⁶one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ²⁷one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ²⁸one male goat for a *purification offering*; ²⁹and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Eliab son of Helon.

4. Reuben

³⁰On the fourth day Elizur son of Shedeur, the leader of the Reubenites: ³¹his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal* offering; ³²one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ³³one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ³⁴one male goat for a *purification* offering; ³⁵and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Elizur son of Shedeur.

5. Simeon

³⁶On the fifth day Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai, the leader of the Simeonites: ³⁷his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal* offering; ³⁸one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ³⁹one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ⁴⁰one male goat for a *purification* offering; ⁴¹and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai.

6. Gad

⁴²On the sixth day Eliasaph son of Deuel, the leader of the Gadites: ⁴³his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal* offering; ⁴⁴one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ⁴⁵one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ⁴⁶one male goat for a *purification* offering; ⁴⁷and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Eliasaph son of Deuel.

7. Ephraim

⁴⁸On the seventh day Elishama son of Ammihud, the leader of the Ephraimites: ⁴⁹his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal* offering; ⁵⁰one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ⁵¹one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ⁵²one male goat for a *purification* offering; ⁵³and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Elishama son of Ammihud.

8. Manasseh

⁵⁴On the eighth day Gamaliel son of Pedahzur, the leader of the Manassites: ⁵⁵his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal* offering; ⁵⁶one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ⁵⁷one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ⁵⁸one male goat for a *purification* offering; ⁵⁹and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Gamaliel son of Pedahzur.

9. Benjamin

⁶⁰On the ninth day Abidan son of Gideoni, the leader of the Benjaminites: ⁶¹his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal* offering; ⁶²one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ⁶³one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ⁶⁴one male goat for a *purification* offering; ⁶⁵and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Abidan son of Gideoni.

10. Dan

⁶⁶On the tenth day Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai, the leader of the Danites: ⁶⁷his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal* offering; ⁶⁸one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ⁶⁹one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ⁷⁰one male goat for a *purification* offering; ⁷¹and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai.

11. Asher

⁷²On the eleventh day Pagiel son of Ochran, the leader of the Asherites: ⁷³his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal* offering; ⁷⁴one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ⁷⁵one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ⁷⁶one male goat for a *purification* offering; ⁷⁷and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Pagiel son of Ochran.

12. Naphtali

⁷⁸On the twelfth day Ahira son of Enan, the leader of the Naphtalites: ⁷⁹his offering was one silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels, one silver basin weighing seventy shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of choice flour mixed with oil for a *cereal* offering; ⁸⁰one golden *cupped utensil* weighing ten shekels, full of incense; ⁸¹one young bull, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ⁸²one male goat for a *purification* offering; ⁸³and for the *communion sacrifice*, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Ahira son of Enan.

Concluding Summary

⁸⁴This was the dedication offering for the altar, at the time when it was anointed, from the leaders of Israel: twelve silver plates, twelve silver basins, twelve golden *cupped utensils*, ⁸⁵each silver plate weighing one hundred thirty shekels and each basin seventy, all the silver of the vessels two thousand four hundred shekels according to the shekel of the sanctuary, ⁸⁶the twelve golden cupped utensils, full of incense, weighing ten shekels apiece according to the shekel of the sanctuary, all the gold of the utensils being one hundred twenty shekels; ⁸⁷all the livestock for the burnt offering twelve bulls, twelve rams, twelve male lambs a year old, with their *cereal* offering; and twelve male goats for a *purification* offering; ⁸⁸and all the livestock for the *communion sacrifice* twenty-four bulls, the rams sixty, the male goats sixty, the male lambs a year old sixty. This was the dedication offering for the altar, after it was anointed.

YHWH speaking to Moses

⁸⁹When Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with YHWH, he would hear the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the *testimony* from between the two cherubim; thus he spoke to him.

Exodus records YHWH's promise:

The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings. They shall face one to another; the faces of the cherubim shall be turned toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.

– Exodus 25:20-23

The association of the tent with oracles seems to belong to the oldest tradition (see Exodus 33:6-11). The priest writers were responsible for describing its function in line with the cultic use of the shrines/temples of the period of settlement.

Chapter seven offers us an idyllic picture in which all the tribes are equally committed to the covenant and in complete communion with Moses, obeying all YHWH's instructions received through him.

II. The lampstand and the lamps

It is already clear in Exodus 30:8 and Leviticus 24:3-4 that it is the priest's duty to set up the lamps.

It is already clear from Exodus 25:37 that the lamps are to be so arranged as to 'give light on the space in front of the lampstand.'

Verse four summarises Exodus 25:31-40, where it is mentioned that the stand is to be made of hammered gold and where we also find the instruction: 'see that you make them according to the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain' (Exodus 25:40). We already know, also, that Moses carried out these instructions (Exodus 37:17-24).

The only statement that is new here is 'Aaron did so' (8:3). It is perhaps this that accounts for this summary passage being included. Exact obedience has been a common theme throughout these early chapters of Numbers. Later in the Book, when disobedience is highlighted, it will become apparent why.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

²Speak to Aaron and say to him:

When you set up the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light in front of the lampstand.

³Aaron did so; he set up its lamps to give light in front of the lampstand, as YHWH had commanded Moses.

⁴Now this was how the lampstand was made, out of hammered work of gold. From its base to its flowers, it was hammered work; according to the pattern that YHWH had shown Moses, so he made the lampstand.

III. Dedication of the Levites

⁵YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:
⁶Take the Levites from among the Israelites and cleanse them. ⁷Thus you shall do to them, to cleanse them: sprinkle the water of purification on them, have them shave their whole body with a razor and wash their clothes, and so cleanse themselves. ⁸Then let them take a young bull and its grain offering of choice flour mixed with oil, and you shall take another young bull for a *purification* offering.

⁹You shall bring the Levites before the tent of meeting, and assemble the whole congregation of the Israelites. ¹⁰When you bring the Levites before YHWH, the Israelites shall lay their hands on the Levites,

¹¹and Aaron shall present the Levites before YHWH as an elevation offering from the Israelites, that they may do the service of YHWH.

¹²The Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the bulls, and he shall offer the one for a *purification* offering and the other for a burnt offering to YHWH, to make atonement for the Levites. ¹³Then you shall have the Levites stand before Aaron and his sons, and you shall present them as an elevation offering to YHWH.

There are connections between this ceremony and the dedication of priests in Leviticus chapter eight. The key difference is that whereas the priests are consecrated (*qiddeš*, Leviticus 8:12) so that they may actually handle the holy objects, the Levites are purified (*tihar*, Numbers 8:7), as is required for anything that is to be presented to God as an offering so that it will not contaminate the sanctuary and so endanger the community.

Chapters three and four have provided details of the assignments of the levitical clans and where they are to camp. The purpose of this chapter is to set out the ritual of the dedication ceremony.

The laying on of hands is a ritual symbol of the fact that the Levites are carrying out their ministry for the congregation and on their behalf.

The purification offering is necessary to avoid the possibility of causing any contamination to the tabernacle. This and the burnt offering make atonement for any sin so that the Levites will be a pure offering to YHWH.

Verses fourteen to eighteen stress, once again (see 3:13), that ‘the Levites shall be mine’ (8:19), ‘unreservedly given to me ... I have taken them for myself’ (8:16). They are set aside from among the people and authorised to enter the tabernacle to assist in the cult (8:15,19).

As already noted in 3:12-13, YHWH has accepted them as substitutes (ransom) for the firstborn (8:16-18).

And as already noted in 3:5-9, they are given to the priest as assistants (8:19).

To contaminate the sanctuary could necessitate YHWH’s withdrawal, which would have disastrous consequences for Israel – consequences described here as a ‘plague’ (8:19, compare Exodus 30:12; 32:35 and Leviticus 26:17).

Verses twenty to twenty-two stress, as always in this first section of Numbers, the complete obedience of Moses, Aaron and the people of Israel to God’s commands.

¹⁴Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the other Israelites, and the Levites shall be mine. ¹⁵Thereafter the Levites may go in to do service at the tent of meeting, once you have cleansed them and presented them as an elevation offering. ¹⁶For they are unreservedly given to me from among the Israelites; I have taken them for myself, in place of all that open the womb, the firstborn of all the Israelites. ¹⁷For all the firstborn among the Israelites are mine, both human and animal. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself, ¹⁸but I have taken the Levites in place of all the firstborn among the Israelites.

¹⁹Moreover, I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the Israelites, to do the service for the Israelites at the tent of meeting, and to make atonement for the Israelites, in order that there may be no plague among the Israelites for coming too close to the sanctuary.

²⁰Moses and Aaron and the whole congregation of the Israelites did with the Levites accordingly; the Israelites did with the Levites just as YHWH had commanded Moses concerning them. ²¹The Levites purified themselves from sin and washed their clothes; then Aaron presented them as an elevation offering before YHWH, and Aaron made atonement for them to cleanse them. ²²Thereafter the Levites went in to do their service in the tent of meeting in attendance on Aaron and his sons. As YHWH had commanded Moses concerning the Levites, so they did with them.

²³YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²⁴This applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall begin to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting; ²⁵and from the age of fifty years they shall retire from the duty of the service and serve no more. ²⁶They may assist their brothers in the tent of meeting in carrying out their duties, but they shall perform no service. Thus you shall do with the Levites in assigning their duties.

As one would expect, changing circumstances required a change in organisational legislation. Leviticus 4:3 applied when the lower age for working in the tabernacle for Levites was thirty. Here it is twenty-five. In 1Chronicles 23:24, 27, 2Chronicles 31:17 and Ezra 3:8 it is twenty.

This is a good example of the ease with which the various writers were able to attribute the changes in legislation to YHWH. This was because they trusted that YHWH was actively present among them and that the changes that were necessary were consistent with the essence of the revelation that formed them into a people, and to which they were attempting to be faithful in whatever changes they deemed were inspired by the living God.

They had no trouble in seeing these changes as consistent with the revelation given to Moses; hence 'YHWH spoke to Moses' (8:23). Furthermore, they saw no need to harmonise the texts. In fact they were careful not to do so, for they considered the insights handed down to them as sacred vehicles of the divine will that remained, and that could one day, once again, help them discern the will of YHWH for them.

IV. Celebration of the Pasch

The origins of the pasch (pesah, from the verb ‘to spare’) seem to go back to an ancient pastoral rite, celebrated in autumn when the flocks were moving from their summer pasture to the edges of the wilderness for winter, and again in spring, when they were returning. Israel gave this ancient rite a new meaning by linking it to the ‘new spring’, their beginnings as a people, celebrated in ‘the first month of the year’ (12:2; see 13:4). In post-exilic Judah this feast was a public one, celebrated in connection with the temple. In Exodus and here in Numbers a simpler form of a family celebration in the home is described, fitting for the context of the wilderness period.

Between sunset and darkness on the night of the full moon in the first month, the Israelites celebrated the first pasch since their redemption from Egypt (see Exodus 12:2,6). This is the last of the supplementary legislation included here by the authors of Numbers in the weeks prior to the revelations of Numbers 1-6.

They are carrying out the command of YHWH, the details of which can be found in Exodus 12 and Leviticus 23:5-8. Once again, the focus here is on exact obedience.

The following verses deal with a particular situation which is not legislated for elsewhere in the Torah. It is this that explains the inclusion of this material on the pasch here.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: ²Let the Israelites keep the *pasch* at its appointed time. ³On the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, you shall keep it at its appointed time; according to all its statutes and all its *edicts* you shall keep it. ⁴So Moses told the Israelites that they should keep the *pasch*. ⁵They kept the *pasch* in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, in the wilderness of Sinai. Just as YHWH had commanded Moses, so the Israelites did.

⁶Now there were certain people who were unclean through touching a corpse, so that they could not keep the passover on that day. They came before Moses and Aaron on that day,⁷ and said to him, "Although we are unclean through touching a corpse, why must we be kept from presenting YHWH'S offering at its appointed time among the Israelites?" ⁸Moses spoke to them, "Wait, so that I may hear what YHWH will command concerning you."

⁹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

¹⁰Speak to the Israelites, saying: Anyone of you or your descendants who is unclean through touching a corpse, or is away on a journey, shall still keep the passover to YHWH. ¹¹In the second month on the fourteenth day, at twilight, they shall keep it; they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ¹²They shall leave none of it until morning, nor break a bone of it; according to all the statute for the passover they shall keep it.

¹³But anyone who is clean and is not on a journey, and yet refrains from keeping the passover, shall be cut off from the people for not presenting YHWH'S offering at its appointed time; such a one shall bear the consequences for the sin.

¹⁴Any alien residing among you who wishes to keep the passover to YHWH shall do so according to the statute of the passover and according to its *edict*; you shall have one statute for both the resident alien and the native.

This legislation seems to assume that the pasch is celebrated in the shrine, rather than in the home. It also assumes the Deuteronomic reform that centralised the cult in the Jerusalem temple, such that travelling made it impossible to celebrate the feast in a nearby sanctuary. It is clear from other legislation that those who are ritually unclean cannot enter the tabernacle (Leviticus 7:19-21 and 11:1 - 15:32). The authors of Numbers include these supplementary regulations to cover these situations. They follow a pattern found already in Exodus and in Leviticus 10 and 24:10-23, of introducing regulation through a story. The conclusion is that those who are ritually unclean may celebrate the pasch in the second instead of the first month, following all the required regulations. Likewise for travellers.

The rubric against breaking a bone (9:12) is a ritual demonstration of the truth expressed in Psalm 34:19-20.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but YHWH rescues them from them all. He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken.

The people experience suffering, but their 'bones' will not be broken. Just as bones survive death, so the nation will continue on.

If anyone is in a position to celebrate the pasch but neglects to do so, he is to be 'cut off from the people' (9:13). This is a punishment executed only by God. The threat is that the offender's line will be terminated, and that he will not join his ancestors when he dies (see Exodus 12:15,19; 30:33; 31:14; Leviticus 7:20, 21, 25, 27).

Aliens living in the holy land are permitted to share in the pasch. It is assumed that they first be circumcised (see Exodus 12:48). Welcoming resident aliens into what is essentially a family feast is a reminder to the Israelites that 'you were sojourners in the land of Egypt' (Deuteronomy 23:7).

Conclusion: They moved camp only in obedience to YHWH's direction

¹⁵On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant; and from evening until morning it was over the tabernacle, having the appearance of fire. ¹⁶It was always so: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. ¹⁷Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp. ¹⁸At the command of YHWH the Israelites would set out, and at the command of YHWH they would camp. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they would remain in camp. ¹⁹Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the Israelites would keep the charge of YHWH, and would not set out. ²⁰Sometimes the cloud would remain a few days over the tabernacle, and according to the command of YHWH they would remain in camp; then according to the command of YHWH they would set out. ²¹Sometimes the cloud would remain from evening until morning; and when the cloud lifted in the morning, they would set out, or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted they would set out. ²²Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, resting upon it, the Israelites would remain in camp and would not set out; but when it lifted they would set out. ²³At the command of YHWH they would camp, and at the command of YHWH they would set out. They kept the charge of YHWH, at the command of YHWH by Moses.

Preparations for the journey are now complete. This conclusion enlarges on the concluding verses of the Book of Exodus, in this way framing the whole of Leviticus and the supplementary legislation of Numbers 1:1 to 9:14. Exodus 40:34 -38 reads:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle. Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of YHWH was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

God's presence on Sinai was described in these terms:

The appearance of the glory of YHWH was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain.

– Exodus 24:17-18

God's design in having Moses set up the 'tent of meeting' was as a sign to the people of his continued presence among them as they journeyed from Sinai to the Promised Land. The 'cloud' and the 'glory' that were over Sinai are now over the tent. We are left with a wonderful sense, not only of God's presence among his people, but of their constantly looking to God for guidance. They set out only when YHWH's presence sets out. They stay when YHWH's presence stays. All eyes are on the luminous mystery that is among them, the luminous mystery that is their reason for being a people. And so it was 'at each stage of their journey' (Exodus 40:38).

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

²Make two silver trumpets; you shall make them of hammered work; and you shall use them for summoning the congregation, and for breaking camp. ³When both are blown, the whole congregation shall assemble before you at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁴But if only one is blown, then the leaders, the heads of the tribes of Israel, shall assemble before you. ⁵When you blow an alarm, the camps on the east side shall set out; ⁶when you blow a second alarm, the camps on the south side shall set out. An alarm is to be blown whenever they are to set out. ⁷But when the assembly is to be gathered, you shall blow, but you shall not sound an alarm.

⁸The sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow the trumpets; this shall be a perpetual institution for you throughout your generations.

⁹When you go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you, you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, so that you may be remembered before YHWH your God and be saved from your enemies.

¹⁰Also on your days of rejoicing, at your appointed festivals, and at the beginnings of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over your *communion sacrifices*; they shall serve as a reminder on your behalf before YHWH your God: I am YHWH your God.

I. Final Instructions

The word translated ‘trumpet’ (ḥašōṣerâ) is found in the Torah only in Numbers. It is neither the yôbēl nor the šôpār. Josephus describes it as consisting of a narrow tube about twenty inches long and ending in a bell (*Antiquities* 3.12.6).

This is the only reference in the Torah to the use of trumpets in the cult. They are used to assemble the congregation and also to sound the alarm. The different notes for these different purposes is perhaps expressed by the sound of the Hebrew words in 10:7, where they are told that for an assembly they shall ‘blow’ (tāqa‘), but not ‘sound an alarm’ (terû‘â).

II. The departure from Mount Sinai

¹¹In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the covenant. ¹²Then the Israelites set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai, and the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran. ¹³They set out for the first time at the command of YHWH by Moses.

The tabernacle was completed and consecrated 'in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month' (Exodus 40:17), a year after the Israelites left Egypt (see Exodus 12:18). They had arrived at Sinai 'on the third new moon' after leaving Egypt (see Exodus 19:1). Now, one month and twenty days after the consecration of the tabernacle (the time that covers from Leviticus 1:1 to Numbers 9:23), YHWH indicates that they are to begin their journey. The wilderness of Paran is in the northern part of the Sinai.

¹⁴The standard of the camp of Judah set out first, company by company, and over the whole company was Nahshon son of Amminadab. ¹⁵Over the company of the tribe of Issachar was Nethanel son of Zuar; ¹⁶and over the company of the tribe of Zebulun was Eliab son of Helon. ¹⁷Then the tabernacle was taken down, and the Gershonites and the Merarites, who carried the tabernacle, set out.

The first regiment to set out is the Judah group from the front of the tabernacle (see 2:3-9), followed by the Gershonite and Merarite Levite groups, from the west (3:23) and north (3:35) sides respectively.

¹⁸Next the standard of the camp of Reuben set out, company by company; and over the whole company was Elizur son of Shedeur. ¹⁹Over the company of the tribe of Simeon was Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai, ²⁰and over the company of the tribe of Gad was Eliasaph son of Deuel. ²¹Then the Kohathites, who carried the holy things, set out; and the tabernacle was set up before their arrival.

The second regiment is the Reuben group from the south of the tabernacle (see 2:10-16), followed by the Kohathite Levite group, also from the south (3:29).

²²Next the standard of the Ephraimite camp set out, company by company, and over the whole company was Elishama son of Ammihud. ²³Over the company of the tribe of Manasseh was Gamaliel son of Pedahzur, ²⁴and over the company of the tribe of Benjamin was Abidan son of Gideoni. .

The third regiment is the Ephraim group camped to the west of the tabernacle (see 2:18-24).

²⁵Then the standard of the camp of Dan, acting as the rear guard of all the camps, set out, company by company, and over the whole company was Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai. ²⁶Over the company of the tribe of Asher was Pagiél son of Ocran, ²⁷and over the company of the tribe of Naphtali was Ahira son of Enan.

Bringing up the rear is the Dan group who were camped to the north of the tabernacle (2:25)

²⁸This was the order of march of the Israelites, company by company, when they set out.