

**PART TWO**  
**FROM SINAI TO KADESH**  
**NUMBERS 10:29 – 20:21**

### Introducing Numbers 10-20

According to the story, the Israelites who escaped from Egypt under Moses' leadership entered Canaan, not from the south, but from across the Jordan, and only after the death of Moses. It took a whole generation (forty years) to complete the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. On one level this is to be expected: they were not strong enough to overcome the resistance put up by the inhabitants of southern Canaan. From a perspective of faith, however, the people believed that if YHWH wanted them to enter directly they would have, so they must have done something wrong and had to suffer the consequences. Numbers 10-20 is a story of complaint and rebellion against YHWH and Moses, which reaches a climax at Kadesh when God decrees that the Exodus generation will not see the Promised Land. This is the sin that YHWH is punishing. Let the reader beware.

Up to this point we have been reading material composed by the priests, and much of chapters 10-20 continues to incorporate cultic legislation. However, in the narrative sections, as has been noted in the Introduction, it is clear that they are incorporating older traditional material. A comparison with Deuteronomy indicates that the traditional story has the Israelites arrive at the oasis of Kadesh (Qādeš) early in their trek to Canaan. Kadesh (see map page 374) is an oasis on the southern border of the Negev district of Canaan in the wilderness of Zin (see Numbers 20:1, 33:36, 34:3-4). Kadesh is mentioned in the Abraham stories (see Genesis 14:7, 16:14 and 20:1). It is here that their rebellion comes to a head. After a failed attempt to fight their way into Canaan from the south and the refusal of the king of Edom to let them pass through his country, they are forced to head towards the eastern arm of the Red Sea and then head north. The long years of wandering in the wilderness are imagined as being spent in the deserts to the south and east of Moab. In Deuteronomy we read:

The length of time we had travelled from Kadesh-barnea until we crossed the Wadi Zered was thirty-eight years, until the entire generation of warriors had perished from the camp, as YHWH had sworn concerning them.

– Deuteronomy 2:15

The priest authors of Numbers imagine things differently. For them the long years of wandering take place in the Sinai before the Israelites reach Kadesh (see 20:1). This enables them to introduce the legislation in chapters 15, 18 and 19 while the people are still in the Sinai, thus maintaining a close link with the Sinai revelations.

Language, style and content all indicate that the material from Numbers 1:1 to 10:28 is composed by priest authors. Since Exodus 35 to 40 and the whole of Leviticus are also attributed to priests, this present text marks the first incorporation of an older tradition since Exodus 34. It coincides with the departure from Mount Sinai and the beginning of the journey to the Promised Land.

It is a story from the tradition about Moses' relationship with his father-in-law. There was obviously a number of traditions, each of which gives the father-in-law a different name. Here he is called Hobab. In Exodus 2:18 he is called Reuel (named here as Hobab's father), and in Exodus 3:1, 4:18 and again in chapter 18, he is called 'Jethro'. All the traditions associate him with Midian (probably a geographic rather than an ethnic term) in north-west Arabia. It would appear from the First Book of the Kings 11:17-18 that Midian stretched north of the Gulf of Aqabah, for Hadad passed through Midian on his way from Edom to Paran and then on to Egypt. Since Midian lay between Sinai and Canaan, Moses asks his father-in-law to come with him as a guide, promising a place for him in the Promised Land. From Judges 1:16 it would appear that Hobab acceded to Moses' request. In Judges 1:16 and 4:11 Hobab and his descendants are described as Kenites.

In the First Book of Samuel chapter four there is a story of the ark leading the army of Israel in its fight against the Philistines. Here, as they begin their journey from the mountain of YHWH, the presence of the 'ark of the covenant of YHWH going before them' and 'the cloud of YHWH being over them' reassure them that YHWH is leading them. The assumption is that the enemies of Israel are YHWH's enemies (see Introduction page 32). More importantly, they believe that their strength lies in YHWH as they pray for victory and the safe return of Israel's forces from battle.

**<sup>29</sup>Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which YHWH said, 'I will give it to you'; come with us, and we will treat you well; for YHWH has promised good to Israel."**

**<sup>30</sup>But he said to him, "I will not go, but I will go back to my own land and to my kindred."**

**<sup>31</sup>He said, "Do not leave us, for you know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you will serve as eyes for us.**

**<sup>32</sup>Moreover, if you go with us, whatever good YHWH does for us, the same we will do for you."**

**<sup>33</sup>So they set out from the mount of YHWH three days' journey with the ark of the covenant of YHWH going before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them, <sup>34</sup>the cloud of YHWH being over them by day when they set out from the camp.**

**<sup>35</sup>Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, "Arise, YHWH, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you." <sup>36</sup>And whenever it came to rest, he would say, "Bring back, YHWH, the ten thousand thousands of Israel."**

**<sup>1</sup>Now when the people complained in the hearing of YHWH about their misfortunes, YHWH heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of YHWH burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. <sup>2</sup>But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to YHWH, and the fire abated. <sup>3</sup>So that place was called Taberah, because the fire of YHWH burned against them.**

This scene comes as a surprise. To this point in the Book of Numbers everything has been perfect. YHWH has reassured his people of his presence among them and commitment to them, and each of YHWH's instructions has been obeyed perfectly. Now, in the very first stage of the journey there are complaints and YHWH's anger is kindled. The contrast could not be more striking, and it introduces a major theme in the Book of Numbers (see the Introduction, page 290).

It is not possible to over-emphasise the trauma caused by the destruction of Jerusalem, and even more significantly, the destruction of the temple in 586BC. Everyone lived with an unquestioned assumption that God controls whatever happens in the world (see the Introduction, pages 32-34). Within such a frame of reference, they had to conclude that this destruction, and the subsequent exile, was God's will. Since they could not think of God being unfaithful, the only way they could try to make sense of what happened was to see it as a consequence of Israel's infidelity. The 'miracle' of the return from exile was a powerful sign of YHWH's fidelity, but everyone, including the authors of Numbers, was determined to learn the lessons of the past and not repeat the sins of their ancestors.

The fire of divine love must burn away impurity. No reason is offered for the complaining nor why the harm affects only the outlying parts of the camp. The authors of Numbers are using this scene to introduce the theme of the people's lack of faith, and also to highlight Moses' intercessory role. 'Taberah (see also Deuteronomy 9:22) derives from tā'ār, to burn.

Their complaining arouses YHWH's anger ('ap). The expression 'anger of YHWH' is never used in Genesis and only once in Exodus, when God is said to have been angry with Moses for continuing to resist his vocation (Exodus 4:14). However, because YHWH's anger is mentioned in this and the following scene, and because the following story will go on to describe a dreadful plague as a punishment which YHWH inflicts on the people for their failure to trust him, it is important to delay here to examine the notion of 'the anger of YHWH' and divine punishment as we find these themes in the writings of the Older Testament.

## The 'anger of YHWH' in the Older Testament

The psalms frequently refer to YHWH's anger. As many as eight different words are used to bring out different nuances, but the most general image is that used here in Numbers 11:10. The word 'ap means 'nostrils', and '□nap means to 'snort with anger'. The image is of someone who is breathing fire. Sometimes God's anger is portrayed as being directed against those who would oppose God's chosen people, but mostly, as here, it is portrayed as being directed against the people of Israel for being unfaithful to the covenant.

It is essential to examine the religious context in which this talk of divine anger occurs. As noted in the Introduction it is within the context of an assumption that God controls what happens on earth. If a person dies, they considered that it must be as a result of God's decision. Earthquakes, storms, famine, destruction, sickness, winning or losing battles, in fact any and every event was a matter of divine decision. It is a logical step from such a view that negative experiences happen because God is punishing, angry at some human infidelity, personal, familial or tribal. Past horrors are used to warn that they will be repeated (by God) if the people do not repent.

The story told here in Numbers is of people 'struck down with a very great plague'(11:33). The authors and those reading the story automatically considered this a punishment from God, who must have been 'very angry' with their behaviour. The appropriate human response to divine anger is fear, and it is precisely this fear that the authors of Numbers wish to arouse in the readers of this story. The people of the covenant should fear and not sin, for sin will not go unpunished. God's anger was recognised as problematic, and questions were asked: 'O God, shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?'(Numbers 16:22), but the reality was obvious to all.

In the Hebrew Scriptures God is a God of love, and it is divine compassion and mercy that transcends everything else. YHWH is essentially one who is 'slow to anger'(Exodus 34:6). This expression belongs to Israel's 'creed' (see Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). In Psalm 89 we read: 'I will punish their sins ... but I will never withdraw my love from them or fail in my faithfulness'(Psalm 89:93). The authors of the Older Testament did not doubt God's justice and fidelity to his promises. YHWH retains a special place in his heart for his chosen people and is always ready to forgive:

Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, YHWH will be a light to me. I must bear the indignation of YHWH, because I have sinned against him, until he takes my side and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall see his vindication. Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, 'Where is YHWH your God?' My eyes will see her downfall; now she will be trodden down like the mire of the streets. ... The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might ... Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

– Micah 7:8-10, 16, 18-19

## The anger of YHWH

Isaiah portrays God as reluctant to express anger: 'I do not want to be forever accusing, nor always angry, or the spirit would fail under my onslaught, the souls that I myself have made'(Isaiah 57:16). While speaking of God's anger, Jeremiah recognises that punishment is essentially something which we bring upon ourselves: 'Your own wickedness is punishing you, your own apostasies are rebuking you. Consider carefully how evil and bitter it is for you to abandon YHWH'(Jeremiah 2:19). This insight needs to be kept in mind when we read stories of divine anger and punishment in the Older Testament.

The revelation, so clear in Jesus, that God loves and does not control the world brings about a radical shift in our thinking about God. God is the creator and so the ultimate cause of everything that is. God, however, has chosen to give us freedom (limited but real), and to respect it. This means accepting the consequences of our use of freedom, for good and ill. Knowing this, we look for scientific explanations of natural disasters and we look for human action or inaction to explain many of the awful things that occur.

When we think of God we are not looking for the proximate cause of these negative experiences. We no longer think of God as the one who decides the victor in war, and when cities are devastated, when large populations die of hunger, when natural disasters wreak havoc, we no longer think that God is arranging this to punish sinners. When people are described in a story as dying from eating quails, as they are in this story in Numbers, our mind rightly thinks of the likelihood of food poisoning. We do not leap to the conclusion that God is punishing them or angry with them.

Jesus reveals God as love. If we wish to see where God is active in the often random accidents as well as in the brutal violence that afflict our world, we look for the presence of love in the midst of human tragedy. Where we find love, there we find God. Jesus is clear in his judgment of what sin is and what its effects are. He is clear, too, in his warnings of the effects of our refusal of the grace of repentance. This shows in Jesus' just anger and passionate concern to break through the apathy and hypocrisy that surrounded him. But he insists that God's initiative, God's will, is always loving. It is not God whom we must fear. Rather, we must fear our capacity to ruin our lives and the lives of others by hardening our hearts against grace (see Luke 12:4-7). Everything that God does expresses God's love, and divine love is offered to all unconditionally.

When we read of divine anger, we are not to read it in the context of divine punishment. Rather we are to think of what we do to ourselves and to others when we reject God's grace. We are to think of God as opposing evil, as determined to bring about justice. If we are going to speak of punishment as 'divine' we are highlighting the relationship of the 'punishment' to God. We are not saying that God punishes. Rather we are acknowledging two important truths: that God is the author of the order which sin violates; and that God uses even the evil effects brought about by sin to draw us to repentance.

The language of divine anger reminds us that what we do really matters and that to receive divine pardon a change in human behaviour is required: 'If pity is shown to the wicked without their learning what saving justice is, they will continue to act wrongly in the land and they will not see the majesty of YHWH'(Isaiah 26:10).

To speak of divine anger is to speak of God's passionate concern for justice. God's initiative is always to put things right. To speak of divine anger is to speak of the terrible things that we bring upon ourselves and others when we reject God's inspiration and act against the truth. This terrible situation (this 'anger') is 'of God' in the sense that it is related to God and is the result of our failure to welcome God's grace and live in God's love. Talk of divine anger reminds us that God hates sin, and that we should hate sin as that which cuts us off from God, the source of life and of all that is good.

Through sin, as Jesus reminds us in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), we leave our Father's home and find ourselves feeding the pigs. None of this is God's choice. The Father awaits us with tremendous love. The God of Jesus utterly respects human freedom even when we choose to abuse it. God, however, is not a victim of our wrong choices, nor is God a bystander. God constantly pours into our hearts the love that will bring about reconciliation, justice and peace, provided we welcome God's grace and have the courage to follow God's inspiration.

The authors of Numbers did not have the privilege of seeing God as God is revealed by Jesus. They did not realise how faulty (and, in the final analysis, dangerous) their concept of God was. Their aim was a noble one: to warn their readers to be attentive to God's will, and not to repeat the sins of the past.

**<sup>4</sup>The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! <sup>5</sup>We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; <sup>6</sup>but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."**

**<sup>7</sup>Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its colour was like the colour of gum resin. <sup>8</sup>The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. <sup>9</sup>When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it. <sup>10</sup>Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then YHWH became very angry, and Moses was displeased.**

Though the word translated 'rabble' does not occur elsewhere, the contrast with 'the Israelites' points to it referring to the 'mixed crowd' that left Egypt with the Israelites (see Exodus 12:38; see Deuteronomy 29:11).

A person looking for historical accuracy in the stories should have problems with the craving mentioned here, and recalled in Psalm 106:14. The same text that mentions the 'mixed crowd' reads: 'A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds'(Exodus 12:38). Surely enough for some meat in the diet!

The word translated 'strength' in verse six is the Hebrew *nepeš*. It is their spirit as well that is dried up. The difficulties of the journey quickly dried up whatever longings and hopes they had experienced. The nourishment provided by YHWH did not satisfy them.

The story of the giving of the manna is recounted in Exodus 16, where we are told that the Israelites ate manna for the whole of the forty years of their journey through the wilderness (Exodus 16:35).

The authors of Numbers tell us that they were quickly sick of it, and looked back to their time in Egypt with nostalgia, forgetting that the price paid for the food was slavery; it was not 'for nothing'(11:6). As in the previous scene, YHWH is 'angry'.



Before recounting the angry reaction of YHWH to the people's lack of trust, the story gives a moving account of the way their complaining affects Moses (compare Deuteronomy 1:12). The 'I' in verse fourteen is emphatic ('ānōkî), as is the 'you' in verse fifteen ('at). The people belong to YHWH, not Moses. YHWH is asking too much of him. Our thoughts go back to Moses' initial reluctance to take on the commission given him by YHWH at the burning bush (see Exodus 3-4). It is good to be reminded of Moses' humanity after the magnificent chapters that have focused on his exalted position as the chosen mediator between YHWH and the people.

There are echoes here of the advice given Moses by his father-in-law, Jethro, to share the burden of leadership: 'You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone' (Exodus 18:18). Jethro tells him to appoint others who can share with him the burden of administration of justice: 'So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you' (Exodus 18:22).

Here YHWH promises to share with the seventy elders the spirit that he has given to Moses. These are the seventy elders whom YHWH invited to ascend Mount Sinai (see Exodus 24:1-2, 9-11).

**<sup>11</sup>So Moses said to YHWH, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? <sup>12</sup>Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a mother carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? <sup>13</sup>Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' <sup>14</sup>I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. <sup>15</sup>If this is the way *you* are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favour in your sight—and do not let me see my misery."**

**<sup>16</sup>So YHWH said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. <sup>17</sup>I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself."**

<sup>18</sup>And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of YHWH, saying, 'If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt.' Therefore YHWH will give you meat, and you shall eat. <sup>19</sup>You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, <sup>20</sup>but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected YHWH who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'"

<sup>21</sup>But Moses said, "The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot; and you say, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month!' <sup>22</sup>Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?" <sup>23</sup>YHWH said to Moses, "Is YHWH's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not."

<sup>24</sup>So Moses went out and told the people the words of YHWH.

YHWH's anger is apparent. They can have what they are craving for, but it will be loathsome to them. Their lives will be blessed only through the presence of 'YHWH who is among you' (11:20), and it is this that they have rejected. Nothing else can satisfy them.

The number of foot soldiers given by Moses is taken from Exodus 12:37. As noted in the commentary on Numbers 1:46, the number is impossibly large if we are looking for accurate statistics. In a story it is impressive.

Moses obeys YHWH's instructions, and God's spirit, the spirit experienced by Moses, is shared with the elders. It is not a permanent gift, for the gift of God's Spirit cannot be institutionalised. Like the prophets, they have this gift only when YHWH chooses to bestow it upon them.

It would appear that these two men whose names appear only in this scene were selected by Moses but, though they did not go to the tent, the spirit still rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. In the words of Jesus, 'the spirit moves where it wills'(John 3:8).

This is the first appearance of Joshua in Numbers. He appeared three times in Exodus, where he led the successful battle against the forces of Amalek (Exodus 17:8-14), where he was with Moses on one of Moses' ascents of Sinai (Exodus 24:13 and 32:17), and where we are told that 'Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent'(Exodus 33:11).

There is a reassuring largeness of heart about Moses as described in this scene. It gives no support to institutional arrogance or to anyone who would attempt to control the spirit of YHWH. There is a parallel scene in the New Testament:

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."  
But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.

– Mark 9:38-40

**<sup>24</sup>Moses gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. <sup>25</sup>Then YHWH came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.**

**<sup>26</sup>Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp.**

**<sup>27</sup>And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." <sup>28</sup>And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" <sup>29</sup>But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all YHWH's people were prophets, and that YHWH would put his spirit on them!" <sup>30</sup>And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.**

## The plague

**<sup>31</sup>Then a wind went out from YHWH, and it brought quails from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, all around the camp, about two cubits deep on the ground. <sup>32</sup>So the people worked all that day and night and all the next day, gathering the quails; the least anyone gathered was ten homers; and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. <sup>33</sup>But while the meat was still between their teeth, before *the supply had been exhausted*, the anger of YHWH was kindled against the people, and YHWH struck the people with a very great plague. <sup>34</sup>So that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving. <sup>35</sup>From Kibroth-hattaavah the people journeyed to Hazeroth.**

The spirit (rûah) of YHWH that descended on the seventy elders (11:25), here causes the quails to blow in from the sea (see the brief mention of quails in Exodus 16:13). YHWH carries out the threat he made in verse twenty. From ancient times it has been known that people could be poisoned by eating quails that had eaten fresh seeds of toxic plants.

'Kibroth-hattaavah' means 'graves of the craving'. Hazeroth is somewhere between Mount Sinai and the wilderness of Paran (see Numbers 12:16).

Isaiah offers a beautiful expression of the lesson taught in this story. Only God can satisfy our longings.

Why do you labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

– Isaiah 55:2-3

Cush (kûš) is used in the Bible to refer to nomadic peoples in a number of different areas. This is the only reference to Moses having a Cushite wife. Exodus speaks only of his wife Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, a priest from Midian (see Exodus 2:21, 25; 18:2).

Aaron, the high priest, has been mentioned numerous times in Numbers, Exodus and Leviticus. The only time we have heard of Miriam is in Exodus 15:20-21, where she is called a prophetess. Miriam and Aaron are challenging Moses' authority. This gives rise to a magnificent statement of Moses' unique charisma.

The authors break into the story to assure us that 'Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth' (12:3). The word translated here as 'humble' ('ānāw) occurs only here in the Torah. It is used by the prophets and frequently in the psalms to speak of those who have been brought low through the experience of affliction. Psalm 25 assures us that it is to the humble that YHWH teaches his way (Psalm 25:9), and Psalm 147 assures us that YHWH lifts up the humble (Psalm 147:6). The prophet Zephaniah proclaims: 'Seek YHWH, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility' (Zephaniah 2:3).

Then YHWH himself speaks of the uniquely intimate relationship that his 'servant Moses' (12:7) has with him. Moses referred to himself earlier as YHWH's 'servant' (11:11, see also Exodus 4:10). He is referred to as 'the servant of YHWH' in two other texts of the Torah (see Exodus 14:31 and Deuteronomy 34:5). It is the Bible's favourite way of speaking of him (thirty-six times). The title highlights his obedience and faithfulness.

In the New Testament the Letter to the Hebrews has an interesting reflection on Numbers 12:7, in which the author compares Moses to Jesus (see Hebrews 3:1-6).

**<sup>1</sup>While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman);**

**<sup>2</sup>and they said, "Has YHWH spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And YHWH heard it.**

**<sup>3</sup>Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. <sup>4</sup>Suddenly YHWH said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting." So the three of them came out. <sup>5</sup>Then YHWH came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward.**

**<sup>6</sup>And he said, "Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I YHWH make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams.**

**<sup>7</sup>Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. <sup>8</sup>With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of YHWH.**

**Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"**

**<sup>9</sup>And the anger of YHWH was kindled against them, and he departed.**

## Moses' unique charism

[Numbers 12:6-7 repeated  
from the previous page]

**When there are prophets among you, I YHWH make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. <sup>7</sup>Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. <sup>8</sup>With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of YHWH.**

Moses, already described as the humblest person on the face of the earth'(12:3), earlier expressed the wish that 'all YHWH's people were prophets, and that YHWH would put his spirit on them'(11:29). Here, however, YHWH describes Moses' unique charism. YHWH makes himself known to the prophets in 'visions'(mar'â), 'dreams'(ḥalôm), and 'riddles'(ḥîdâ), but to Moses 'face to face'. Moses 'beholds the form (t<sup>e</sup>mûnâ) of YHWH.'

Speaking of the encounter which the people had with YHWH on Mount Sinai, Moses reminds them: 'YHWH spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form'(Deuteronomy 4:12). When Moses prayed to see God's glory, he was told:

I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The Lord"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.

– Exodus 33:19-20

No one, not even Moses, can have direct experience of the transcendent God, but to express the unique intimacy attributed to Moses the authors of Numbers have YHWH himself declare that Moses sees God's 'form', something that is beyond even the prophets.

The psalmist keeps alive the hope that we all share that somehow, one day, we shall see God's form:

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your form (t<sup>e</sup>mûnâ).

– Psalm 17:15

Jesus claimed: 'I have seen the Father'(John 6:46), and he promised: 'Blessed are the pure in heart; they shall see God'(Matthew 5:8).

As a result of her presumption in challenging Moses' authority (12:1-2), Miriam is stricken with the scaly skin condition (*ṣāra'at*) that was mentioned earlier (5:2-3). As noted in the commentary on that passage it was the *appearance* of death that made it such a powerful symbol of the forces that were able to pollute the sanctuary and whatever was holy. Leviticus demanded that people in this condition must live 'outside the camp' (Leviticus 13:46), and that is the judgment passed on Miriam. No reason is given why Aaron did not share her fate.

Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Hagar grew up in the wilderness of Paran (see Genesis 21:21). At the beginning of the journey from Mount Sinai we read: 'The Israelites set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai, and the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran' (Numbers 10:12). It is here that they camp at the end of the first stage of their journey north. They are still in the Sinai peninsula.

<sup>10</sup>When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had *scaly skin disease*, her skin was as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was *scaly*.  
<sup>11</sup>Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed.  
<sup>12</sup>Do not let her be like one stillborn, whose flesh is half consumed when it comes out of its mother's womb."  
<sup>13</sup>And Moses cried to YHWH, "O God, please heal her." <sup>14</sup>But YHWH said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again." <sup>15</sup>So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days; and the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again.

<sup>16</sup>After that the people set out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

Introducing Numbers 13-14

As noted in the Introduction (see page 288) the narrative sections incorporate older traditional material. It is of special interest to notice this here in chapters 13-14 when rebellion reaches a climax with the consequence that instead of entering directly into the Promised Land, the Israelites spend a whole generation (forty years) in the wilderness. As also noted in the Introduction, the traditional story locates the years of wandering *after* the sojourn in Kadesh, whereas the priests locate them before they arrival at Kadesh.

I am following Baruch A. Levine's commentary in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1993). He acknowledges (page 347) that he is largely following the classical commentary on Numbers by G. B. Gray in the International Critical Commentary Series (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1903). To facilitate matters I will indicate the priestly material in these two chapters by using italics.



YHWH instructs Moses to send a leader from each tribe to spy out Canaan (P)

<sup>1</sup>YHWH said to Moses, <sup>2</sup>“Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites;

There are echoes here of YHWH’s promise to Abraham when Abraham was camping at the oaks of Mamre near Hebron:

YHWH made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land’.

– Genesis 15:18

*from each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, every one a leader among them.”* <sup>3</sup>So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of YHWH, all of them leading men among the Israelites.

The wilderness of Paran was given earlier as the designated goal of the first stage of the wilderness journey (see 10:12). They camped there is 12:16.

<sup>4</sup>*These were their names: From the tribe of Reuben, Shammua son of Zaccur;*

<sup>5</sup>*from the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat son of Hori;*

<sup>6</sup>*from the tribe of Judah, Caleb son of Jephunneh;*

<sup>7</sup>*from the tribe of Issachar, Igal son of Joseph;*

<sup>8</sup>*from the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea son of Nun;*

<sup>9</sup>*from the tribe of Benjamin, Palti son of Raphu;*

<sup>10</sup>*from the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel son of Sodi;*

<sup>11</sup>*from the tribe of Joseph (that is, from the tribe of Manasseh), Gaddi son of Susi;*

<sup>12</sup>*from the tribe of Dan, Ammiel son of Gemalli;*

<sup>13</sup>*from the tribe of Asher, Sethur son of Michael;*

<sup>14</sup>*from the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi son of Vophsi;*

<sup>15</sup>*from the tribe of Gad, Geuel son of Machi.*

<sup>16</sup>*These were the names of the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land.*

*And Moses changed the name of Hoshea son of Nun to Joshua.*

<sup>17</sup>*Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan*

These are not the same leaders who were chosen from the congregation to help Moses organise the census (see 1:5-15). The only two who are mentioned by name again are Caleb of Judah (13:6), and Hoshea of Ephraim (13:8), the two most powerful tribes. We are told that Moses changed Hoshea’s name to Joshua (see also Deuteronomy 32:44). *hōšēa*‘ means ‘he saved’; *yehōšua*‘ adds an abbreviated prefix of the name YHWH, so replacing ‘he’ with ‘YHWH’.

Deuteronomy 1:19-24 places this scene, not in the wilderness of Paran but at Kadesh, and the idea of sending the spies comes not from YHWH but from the people:

Just as YHWH our God had ordered us, we set out from Horeb and went through all that great and terrible wilderness that you saw, on the way to the hill country of the Amorites, until we reached Kadesh-barnea. I said to you, “You have reached the hill country of the Amorites, which YHWH our God is giving us. See, YHWH your God has given the land to you; go up, take possession, as YHWH, the God of your ancestors, has promised you; do not fear or be dismayed.”

## Reconnaissance in Canaan

All of you came to me and said, "Let us send men ahead of us to explore the land for us and bring back a report to us regarding the route by which we should go up and the cities we will come to." The plan seemed good to me, and I selected twelve of you, one from each tribe. They set out and went up into the hill country

**<sup>17</sup>Moses said to them, "Go up there into the Negeb, and go up into the hill country, <sup>18</sup>and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, <sup>19</sup>and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are unwalled or fortified, <sup>20</sup>and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land." Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes.**

**<sup>21</sup>So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, near Lebo-hamath.**

**<sup>22</sup>They went up into the Negeb, and came to Hebron; and Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the Anakites, were there. (Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) <sup>23</sup>And they came to the Wadi Eshcol, and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them. They also brought some pomegranates and figs. <sup>24</sup>That place was called the Wadi Eshcol, because of the cluster that the Israelites cut down from there.**

The priests insert verse twenty-one into the story to include the whole of Canaan from 'the wilderness of Zin' in the south to Rehob in the far north (see 34:3, 8). As noted on page 348, italics indicate priestly material incorporated into a traditional story.

The rest of the story locates the reconnaissance in the Negeb and the southern hill country of Judah, with the focus on Hebron where Abraham purchased land to bury his wife, Sarah (Genesis 23). The names in verse twenty-two appear to be from an epic tale from the Hebron region.

The reference to Zoan (13:22, 'Tanis' in the Greek Version) is obscure. It was a small provincial town in the east delta of the Nile till after the Ramesside period. The Hebrews became familiar with Zoan during the period of the monarchy, when it was the Egyptian capital (see Isaiah 19:11, 13; 30:4; Ezekiel 30:14). One tradition locates the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh in the "Field of Zoan" (Psalm 78:12, 43).

The name 'Eshcol' (13:24) is associated with Mamre (and therefore Hebron) in Genesis 14:13 and 24. It is mentioned in the account of this escapade given in Deuteronomy (1:24).

The priest authors retain the reference to Kadesh that they found in their source, but they introduce the connection to the 'wilderness of Paran' in north Sinai (see page 346).

YHWH described the Promised Land as 'flowing with milk and honey' (food of the gods; not bee's honey, but sweet syrup from grapes or dates) during his first revelation to Moses, where it is described as 'the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites' (Exodus 3:8; see page 44).

The Amalekites play a big role in this story. Legend pictures them as giants. In verse thirty-three they are linked with the mythical Nephilim of Genesis 6:4. Joshua won a skirmish with Amalekites during the journey to Sinai (see Exodus 17:8-16).

The Hittites are immigrants from central Anatolia (today's Turkey). The Jebusites are the inhabitants of Jerusalem and environs. The Amorites appear to have been scattered in various parts of Canaan and Transjordan. They may have migrated from northern Syria as a result of the collapse of the kingdom of Amurru. The Canaanites is the usual word for the pre-Israel inhabitants. All these groups were present in the southern areas of Canaan (see the comment on 13:21).

Caleb, the leader representing the Judah tribe (13:6), entreats the people to trust YHWH's promise (see Exodus 8:17), but the others declare: 'we are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we' (13:31).

<sup>25</sup>*At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land.*

<sup>26</sup>*And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh.*

<sup>26</sup>*They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land.*

<sup>27</sup>*And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. <sup>28</sup>Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. <sup>29</sup>The Amalekites live in the land of the Negeb; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea, and along the Jordan."*

<sup>30</sup>*But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it."*

<sup>31</sup>*Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we." <sup>32</sup>So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants;*

*and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. <sup>33</sup>There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."*

*<sup>1</sup>Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. <sup>2</sup>And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! <sup>3</sup>Why is YHWH bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" <sup>4</sup>So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt."*

*<sup>5</sup>Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the Israelites.*

*<sup>6</sup>And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes <sup>7</sup>and said to all the congregation of the Israelites,*

*"The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. <sup>8</sup>If YHWH is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. <sup>9</sup>Only, do not rebel against YHWH; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and YHWH is with us; do not fear them."*

*<sup>10</sup>But the whole congregation threatened to stone them.*

The people 'wept' (bākâ) earlier when they were dissatisfied with the manna (11:4), saying: 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?' (11:20). Exodus records their 'complaining' (lûn) on the journey to Sinai (Exodus 15:24, 16:2, 17:3).

In this scene the weeping and complaining explode into rebellion. Having stressed the fact that 'the whole congregation' (14:1, 2, 10) is involved, the authors portray them in their rejection of YHWH as ironically sealing their own fate. They wish they had 'died in the wilderness' (14:2). As the story unfolds we will see that they will get their wish (14:29). They do not trust YHWH, but accuse him of bringing them all this way 'to fall by the sword' (14:3). Because they are rejecting YHWH's will, this is exactly what will happen (14:43). They fear that YHWH is preparing their children to become war booty, but it is their own rebellion that will bring suffering on their children (14:33). They should be concerned for themselves, not their children, for it is these very children who will enjoy the promise YHWH had intended for them (14:31).

The people decide to choose their own leader 'and go back to Egypt' (14:4). Faced with this rebellion, Moses and Aaron, in the sight of the whole congregation, prostrate themselves before YHWH. Joshua and Caleb, alone among the spies, plead with the people to put their trust in YHWH. Only thus can YHWH be pleased (hâpēs) with them. YHWH has promised them the land. The people of Canaan have been abandoned. They have lost God's protective shade (šēl). YHWH is with Israel. They have nothing to fear.

The issue is not addressed here, but the justification given in Leviticus for the removal of protection from the Canaanites is because 'the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves' (Leviticus 18:24). YHWH will be forced to withdraw his protection from Israel, too, if their behaviour is no better.

When speaking of the glory of YHWH appearing ‘to all the people’ at the tent of meeting, Leviticus goes on to say: ‘Fire came out from YHWH ... and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces’ (Leviticus 9:23-24). There are echoes here of Mount Sinai where ‘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’ (Exodus 24:17). The present scene is one of judgment.

YHWH’s threat to annihilate the Israelites and begin again through Moses is modelled on the scene in Exodus where he makes the same threat (see Exodus 32:10), and where, as here, Moses succeeds in changing YHWH’s mind by reminding him that the Egyptians know that he has promised to lead Israel into the Promised Land. If he wipes out the people now, the Egyptians will spread the idea around that he was not able to carry out his promise. What will that do to his reputation in Canaan?

He reminds YHWH of the declaration he made at Sinai when he said that he was:

YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

– Exodus 34:6-7

This is the nearest we have in the Hebrew Bible to a statement of YHWH’s essential characteristics. It is echoed throughout the Bible (see page 159). The effects of sin cannot be pretended away, but Moses reminds YHWH of the many times he has already ‘pardoned this people, from Egypt even till now’ (14:19).

<sup>10</sup>Then the glory of YHWH appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. <sup>11</sup>And YHWH said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? <sup>12</sup>I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

<sup>13</sup>But Moses said to YHWH, “Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, <sup>14</sup>and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, YHWH, are in the midst of this people; for you, YHWH, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. <sup>15</sup>Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, <sup>16</sup>‘It is because YHWH was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.’ <sup>17</sup>And now, therefore, let the power of YHWH be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, <sup>18</sup>‘YHWH is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.’ <sup>19</sup>Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now.”

**<sup>20</sup>Then YHWH said, "I do forgive, just as you have asked; <sup>21</sup>nevertheless – as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of YHWH – <sup>22</sup>none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, <sup>23</sup>shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it. <sup>24</sup>But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. <sup>25</sup>Now, since the Amalekites and the Canaanites live in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea."**

As noted in the Introduction (pages 32-34), there was an assumption in the culture in which the Older Testament emerged that when bad things happened it was because God was punishing sin. They searched for reasons for the destruction of the temple and the end of the Davidic dynasty and blamed the failure of their ancestors to listen to YHWH and heed his will. They read these same lessons back into the story of their beginnings. The long period of wandering in the wilderness, and the failure of the generation of those who were liberated from Egypt in order to enjoy the Promised Land to actually reach it, is described in ways that will bring home to the people the necessity of obedience. The adult Israelites who were liberated from Egypt failed to reach the Promised Land because they refused to trust YHWH and rebelled against his will. That is the lesson to be learned.

The punishment of a whole generation has already been justified by stressing that they were all involved in the sin (see 14:1-4). The text speaks of 'ten times' (14:22) when they tested YHWH. The Babylonian Talmud (*Arakin* 15b) lists the Red Sea (Exodus 14:11-12), at Marah (Exodus 15:23), in the wilderness of Sin (Exodus 16:2), twice in regard to the manna (Exodus 16:20 and 27), at Rephidim (Exodus 17:2ff), at Sinai (Exodus 32), at Taberah (Numbers 11:1), at Kibroth-hattaavah (Numbers 11:4ff) and the situation described in this present scene.

Caleb is exempted for he was innocent of the sin, having 'followed me wholeheartedly' (14:24).

YHWH tells them to avoid a confrontation with the Amalekites and the Canaanites, and to head off east into the wilderness 'by the way of the Red Sea' (14:25). This is the well-known caravan route that crossed the northern part of the Sinai peninsula. It passed through Kadesh and went on to the east arm of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aqabah.

As noted in the commentary on 14:1-4, there is a direct connection between the people's complaint in those verses and the situation which is described here as a punishment inflicted on them by YHWH but which is something that they have brought upon themselves by their rejection of YHWH. They have made a choice and cannot wish away its effects.

The whole congregation sinned, the whole congregation must suffer. Reference is made to the census of 1:3 (14:29). In rejecting YHWH, they have rejected the Promised Land (14:31). Exemption is made for Caleb and Joshua (14:30). The other ten spies 'died by a plague' (14:37).

However, as Moses knew, YHWH is a faithful and forgiving God. The adults will not see the Promised Land, but their children (those under twenty at the time of the Exodus) will (14:31). YHWH will keep his promise to take Israel home.

The word translated 'faithlessness' in verse thirty-three is *zenût*. Literally it refers to sexual sin. Here, as elsewhere (Hosea 6:10, Jeremiah 3:2,9, 13:27; Ezekiel 43:7,9) it is used metaphorically of breaking faith with God. Similarly with the cognate verb *zânâ* (Hosea 2:7, Ezekiel 16:15 and Isaiah 57:3).

A connection is made between the forty years (a generation) and the forty days the spies spent in the reconnaissance of Canaan (13:25; 14:34).

*<sup>26</sup>And YHWH spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: <sup>27</sup>How long shall this wicked congregation complain against me? I have heard the complaints of the Israelites, which they complain against me. <sup>28</sup>Say to them, "As I live," says YHWH, "I will do to you the very things I heard you say: <sup>29</sup>your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and of all your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upward, who have complained against me, <sup>30</sup>not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. <sup>31</sup>But your little ones, who you said would become booty, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have despised. <sup>32</sup>But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. <sup>33</sup>And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. <sup>34</sup>According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure." <sup>35</sup>I YHWH have spoken; surely I will do thus to all this wicked congregation gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.*

*<sup>36</sup>And the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation complain against him by bringing a bad report about the land – <sup>37</sup>the men who brought an unfavorable report about the land died by a plague before YHWH. <sup>38</sup>But Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh alone remained alive, of those men who went to spy out the land.*

**<sup>39</sup>When Moses told these words to all the Israelites, the people mourned greatly. <sup>40</sup>They rose early in the morning and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, “Here we are. We will go up to the place that YHWH has promised, for we have sinned.”**

**<sup>41</sup>But Moses said, “Why do you continue to transgress the command of YHWH? That will not succeed. <sup>42</sup>Do not go up, for YHWH is not with you; do not let yourselves be struck down before your enemies. <sup>43</sup>For the Amalekites and the Canaanites will confront you there, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned back from following YHWH, YHWH will not be with you.”**

**<sup>44</sup>But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, even though the ark of the covenant of YHWH, and Moses, had not left the camp. <sup>45</sup>Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them, pursuing them as far as Hormah.**

The people see that they have sinned and think that by doing now what they refused to do before they can set things right.

Moses tries to warn them. Things are not the same now. YHWH has given them another command ‘to set out for the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea’(14:25). They cannot conquer their enemies and enter and possess the land by their own might, but only by the power of YHWH. If they go now ‘YHWH is not with you’(14:42). Earlier they chose to reject YHWH. If they go ahead with their plan, they will be disobeying YHWH, and ‘YHWH will not be with you’(14:43).

They ignore Moses and go into battle without YHWH’s presence (symbolised in ‘the ark of the covenant’) and without the leadership of Moses, and they are defeated.

Hormah (14:45) is in the Negeb, east of Beer-sheba, near Arad. Here, early in the wilderness period, it is linked with defeat at the hands of the Canaanites. The priest authors will present another version which places this battle towards the end of the wilderness period (21:1-2), and where it records an Israelite victory.

\* \* \* \* \*

The traditional story goes on to recount the journey from Kadesh to Transjordan (see Part Three). The priests insert more cultic legislation and a story of a revolt by the Levite, Korah, before the people reach Kadesh (20:1). They picture the long years of wandering as taking place in the Sinai.



## Supplementary legislation governing offerings

Detailed legislation covering the various sacrifices mentioned here can be found in Leviticus: for the ‘burnt offering’ (‘ōlâ), see especially Leviticus 1 and 6:8-13; for the ‘sacrifice’, that is, the communion sacrifice (zebaḥ šelāmîm), see especially Leviticus 3, 7:11-21 and 22:21-25; for the ‘grain offering’(minhâ), see especially Leviticus 2. The ‘drink offering’(nesek) is mentioned in Leviticus 23:13, 18, 37. Leviticus 22:17-25 legislates for offerings made in fulfillment of a vow or as a freewill offering; Leviticus 23 speaks of offerings on appointed festivals.

What is new here is legislation requiring the offering of fine flour, oil and wine whenever animals are sacrificed, as well as the amounts, which vary according to the size of the animal. It is interesting to note the different amounts in the legislation given in Ezekiel 46:5,14 where the legislation is introduced with the words ‘Thus says the Lord YHWH’(Ezekiel 46:1). This is just one more example of the way in which changes in legislation are readily attributed to YHWH.

**<sup>1</sup>YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup>Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you, <sup>3</sup>and you make an offering by fire to YHWH from the herd or from the flock—whether a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or as a free-will offering or at your appointed festivals—to make a pleasing odour for YHWH,**

For each lamb

**<sup>4</sup>then whoever presents such an offering to YHWH shall present also a grain offering, one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour, mixed with one-fourth of a hin of oil. <sup>5</sup>Moreover, you shall offer one-fourth of a hin of wine as a drink offering with the burnt offering or the sacrifice, for each lamb.**

For each ram

**<sup>6</sup>For a ram, you shall offer a grain offering, two-tenths of an ephah of choice flour mixed with one-third of a hin of oil; <sup>7</sup>and as a drink offering you shall offer one-third of a hin of wine, a pleasing odour to YHWH.**

For each bull

**<sup>8</sup>When you offer a bull as a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or as a *communion sacrifice* to YHWH, <sup>9</sup>then you shall present with the bull a grain offering, three-tenths of an ephah of choice flour, mixed with half a hin of oil, <sup>10</sup>and you shall present as a drink offering half a hin of wine, as an offering by fire, a pleasing odour to YHWH.**

**<sup>11</sup>Thus it shall be done for each ox or ram, or for each of the male lambs or the kids. <sup>12</sup>According to the number that you offer, so you shall do with each and every one.**

The legislation applies also to foreigners living in the land

**<sup>13</sup>Every native Israelite shall do these things in this way, in presenting an offering by fire, a pleasing odour to YHWH. <sup>14</sup>An alien who lives with you, or who takes up permanent residence among you, and wishes to offer an offering by fire, a pleasing odour to YHWH, shall do as you do. <sup>15</sup>As for the assembly, there shall be for both you and the resident alien a single statute, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; you and the alien shall be alike before YHWH. <sup>16</sup>You and the alien who resides with you shall have the same law and the same *edict*.**

Offering the first batch of dough

This legislation, too, marks a development in the cult. Earlier legislation covered grain and flour. Dough represents a later stage when the cereal has already been processed.

**<sup>17</sup>YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>18</sup>Speak to the Israelites and say to them: After you come into the land to which I am bringing you, <sup>19</sup>whenever you eat of the bread of the land, you shall present a donation to YHWH. <sup>20</sup>From your first batch of dough you shall present a loaf as a donation; you shall present it just as you present a donation from the threshing floor. <sup>21</sup>Throughout your generations you shall give to YHWH a donation from the first of your batch of dough.**

Expiatory sacrifices

**<sup>22</sup>But if you unintentionally fail to observe all these commandments that YHWH has spoken to Moses – <sup>23</sup>everything that YHWH has commanded you by Moses, from the day YHWH gave commandment and thereafter, throughout your generations – <sup>24</sup>then if it was done unintentionally without the knowledge of the congregation, the whole congregation shall offer one young bull for a burnt offering, a pleasing odour to YHWH, together with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the *edict*, and one male goat for a *purification* offering.**

The legislation in Leviticus 4:13-21 speaks of a bull being offered as a purification offering. Here the bull is wholly consumed and a male goat is offered as a purification offering. The requirement of also making a cereal offering and a libation, spelt out in verses one to sixteen, is extended here to expiatory sacrifices as well.

**<sup>25</sup>The priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the Israelites, and they shall be forgiven; it was unintentional, and they have brought their offering, an offering by fire to YHWH, and their sin offering before YHWH, for their error. <sup>26</sup>All the congregation of the Israelites shall be forgiven, as well as the aliens residing among them, because the whole people was involved in the error. <sup>27</sup>An individual who sins unintentionally shall present a female goat a year old for a *purification* offering. <sup>28</sup>And the priest shall make atonement before YHWH for the one who commits an error, when it is unintentional, to make atonement for the person, who then shall be forgiven. <sup>29</sup>For both the native among the Israelites and the alien residing among them—you shall have the same law for anyone who acts in error.**

## Intentional disobedience

Verses twenty-two to twenty-nine have been legislating for the purification sacrifices that are appropriate for unintentional failure to observe God's commands. The sacrificial system cannot make up for deliberate, intentional flaunting of God's will..

**<sup>30</sup>But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts YHWH, and shall be cut off from among the people. <sup>31</sup>Because of having despised the word of YHWH and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt.**

As we noted in commenting on Numbers 9:13, to be 'cut off from the people' is a punishment that can be carried out only by God. It means that the offender's line will be terminated, and that he will not join his ancestors when he dies.

## Breaking Sabbath regulations

**<sup>32</sup>When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the sabbath day. <sup>33</sup>Those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses, Aaron, and to the whole congregation. <sup>34</sup>They put him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. <sup>35</sup>Then YHWH said to Moses, "The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him outside the camp." <sup>36</sup>The whole congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death, just as YHWH had commanded Moses.**

The offender is presumably gathering sticks to make a fire – something forbidden on the Sabbath (see Exodus 35:3). He is to be put in custody till God declares what his punishment is to be. Custody in Israel was not, as it is today, used as a punishment. It was simply a way of detaining a person prior to judgment.

## A way of remembering the covenant

**<sup>37</sup>YHWH said to Moses: <sup>38</sup>Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. <sup>39</sup>You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of YHWH and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. <sup>40</sup>So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. <sup>41</sup>I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am YHWH your God.**

It is significant that the cord was blue (t'hēlet). This is the celebrated Tyrian 'purple', a dye from sea snails from along the Phoenician coast. It was very expensive because it took something in the vicinity of 8,000 crushed snails to produce 1 gram of dye. It featured in the tabernacle curtains and in the vestments of the high priest (Exodus 39). The presence of one small thread in the fringe of a lay person's garment was a powerful symbol of the priesthood in which every Israelite shared as part of God's 'priestly kingdom' (Exodus 19:6).

## Another story of rebellion (Numbers 16)

The story of the journey of the Israelites from Mount Sinai as recounted in Numbers has been a constant series of rebellions. The first is located at Taberah, on the first leg of the journey (11:1-3). This is followed immediately by the rebellion at Kibroth-hattaavah over the manna (11:4-35). Straight on top of that is the rebellion at Hazeroth against Moses' leadership (12:1-16). Then, when the spies report back from their sortie into southern Canaan, the people rebel against YHWH and Moses and decide to look for a new leader who will take them back to Egypt (13:25 - 14:38). After that they disobey God and try to force their way into Canaan without either YHWH or Moses (14:39-45).

Now comes another story of rebellion. This story has a special interest, for the priest writers decide to use it to reinforce a theme that has already played a big part in Numbers: the insistence that it is only the Levites who are of the clan of Amram, son of Kohath, and are therefore descended from Aaron (see Exodus 6:20) who are authorised by YHWH to minister as priests. All other Levites have a secondary service role in the cult. They are absolutely forbidden to take on priestly ministry. To reinforce this point they introduce into the story a rebellion by Korah, Aaron's first cousin. His father Izhar is Aaron's uncle (see Exodus 6:18, 21). He rebels against the system and demands the right to minister as a priest. We reflected on the history of the priest-Levite division on page 189. In reflecting on Numbers 13 to 14 we found it helpful to identify the material from the priest authors by using italics. We will follow the same process here in chapter 16:1-36, for the priests insert the story of Korah into a traditional story of a rebellion associated with the tribe of Reuben.

***<sup>1</sup>Now Korah son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben—took <sup>2</sup>two hundred fifty Israelite men, leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men, and they confronted Moses.***

***<sup>3</sup>They assembled against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, everyone of them, and YHWH is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of YHWH?"***

The story starts out as a rebellion of between two hundred fifty leading Israelites, led by men of the tribe of Reuben against Moses' leadership. However, the priestly agenda immediately takes over with the inclusion of Korah, such that we never find out what the demands of the Reuben led confrontation were (see 16:12-15). Since Reuben was Jacob's first born, were they objecting to the leading role being given to the tribe of Judah (see 2:3)? We find out later that the Reuben tribe settle in Transjordan, and not Canaan. Could this have been the original setting for the story?

As it stands, the argument, as noted above, is about leadership, especially Aaron's position as having exclusive rights to the exercise of the priesthood. Their argument is a strong one, recalling YHWH's words to the whole people: 'You shall be my treasured possession ... a priestly kingdom and a holy nation'(Exodus 19:5-6).

While Korah's point is a strong one, it misses the essential consideration. Priesthood, as with everything else in Israel, is a gift from YHWH. It is YHWH who chooses who will and will not be priests, and the post-exilic priest writers, who belong to the Amramite clan, are in no doubt that it is they, and they alone, whom God has chosen for this ministry.

Moses sets up a test that will reveal God's will in the matter. It is the perfect test, based on the following story from Leviticus:

Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before YHWH, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of YHWH and consumed them, and they died before YHWH.

– Leviticus 10:1-2

Since YHWH showed his will so clearly when Aaron's sons failed to follow his instructions in regard to the use of incense, Moses is confident that YHWH will reveal his will as to who he authorises and who he does not authorise to carry out priestly ministry.

He reminds Korah of the privileged place that YHWH has given to the Levites (see 8:13-22). They have accused Moses of going too far (16:3). He reverses the charge (16:7), accusing them of not being content with the position given them by God in demanding 'the priesthood as well' (16:10).

Verses twelve to fifteen take us back to the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram (see 16:1). Their complaint echoes that of Numbers 14:2-3. Note the irony of speaking of Egypt as 'a land flowing with milk and honey' (16:13). They are not going to be hoodwinked (have their 'eyes put out') by Moses' talk about the Promised Land.

*<sup>4</sup>When Moses heard it, he fell on his face. <sup>5</sup>Then he said to Korah and all his company, "In the morning YHWH will make known who is his, and who is holy, and who will be allowed to approach him; the one whom he will choose he will allow to approach him. <sup>6</sup>Do this: take censers, Korah and all your company, <sup>7</sup>and tomorrow put fire in them, and lay incense on them before YHWH; and the man whom YHWH chooses shall be the holy one. You Levites have gone too far!" <sup>8</sup>Then Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you Levites! <sup>9</sup>Is it too little for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to allow you to approach him in order to perform the duties of YHWH'S tabernacle, and to stand before the congregation and serve them? <sup>10</sup>He has allowed you to approach him, and all your brother Levites with you; yet you seek the priesthood as well! <sup>11</sup>Therefore you and all your company have gathered together against YHWH. What is Aaron that you rail against him?"*

*<sup>12</sup>Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab; but they said, "We will not come! <sup>13</sup>Is it too little that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also lord it over us? <sup>14</sup>It is clear you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come!"*

*<sup>15</sup>Moses was very angry and said to YHWH, "Pay no attention to their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, and I have not harmed any one of them."*

*<sup>16</sup>And Moses said to Korah, "As for you and all your company, be present tomorrow before YHWH, you and they and Aaron; <sup>17</sup>and let each one of you take his censer, and put incense on it, and each one of you present his censer before YHWH, two hundred fifty censers; you also, and Aaron, each his censer."*

*<sup>18</sup>So each man took his censer, and they put fire in the censers and laid incense on them, and they stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron. <sup>19</sup>Then Korah assembled the whole congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting.*

*And the glory of YHWH appeared to the whole congregation. <sup>20</sup>Then YHWH spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: <sup>21</sup>Separate yourselves from this congregation, so that I may consume them in a moment.*

*<sup>22</sup>They fell on their faces, and said, "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?"*

*<sup>23</sup>And YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>24</sup>Say to the congregation: Get away from the dwellings of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.*

The priestly agenda continues. Apart from the two hundred fifty (16:17; see 16:2), and the mention of Dathan and Abiram (16:24; see 16:1), the focus is on Korah and the attempt by him and his Levite followers to minister as priests in the 'tent of meeting' (16:19).

YHWH appears and threatens to consume the whole congregation. As in earlier rebellion scenes (see 14:10-19) Moses intercedes and YHWH yields. The expression 'the God of the spirits of all flesh' (16:22) appears in the Bible only here and later in Numbers 27:16. It is common in postbiblical literature (see 2Maccabees 3:24; 14:46; and Jubilees 10:3). It occurs over a hundred times in the Book of Henoch. This may be an indication of the lateness of this strand of priestly writing.

Psalm 106:16-18 recalls YHWH's punishment of Dathan and Abiram for their rebellion:

They were jealous of Moses in the camp, and of Aaron, the holy one of YHWH. The earth opened and swallowed up Dathan, and covered the faction of Abiram. Fire also broke out in their company; the flame burned up the wicked.

Once again the priest writers include Korah (16:27), and the final verse (16:35) includes the Levites in the punishment.

On the subject of God's anger and punishment, we refer the reader, once again, to the reflections on pages 336-339.

**<sup>25</sup>So Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram; the elders of Israel followed him. <sup>26</sup>He said to the congregation, "Turn away from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, or you will be swept away for all their sins."**

**<sup>27</sup>So they got away from the dwellings of *Korah*, Dathan, and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the entrance of their tents, together with their wives, their children, and their little ones.**

**<sup>28</sup>And Moses said, "This is how you shall know that YHWH has sent me to do all these works; it has not been of my own accord: <sup>29</sup>If these people die a natural death, or if a natural fate comes on them, then YHWH has not sent me. <sup>30</sup>But if YHWH creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised YHWH."**

**<sup>31</sup>As soon as he finished speaking all these words, the ground under them was split apart. <sup>32</sup>The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, along with their households—everyone who belonged to *Korah* and all their goods. <sup>33</sup>So they with all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol; the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. <sup>34</sup>All Israel around them fled at their outcry, for they said, "The earth will swallow us too!"**

**<sup>35</sup>And fire came out from YHWH and consumed the two hundred fifty men offering the incense.**

The Aftermath of the Korah Rebellion

This and the following passage are from the priest authors. The numbering of the verses in the English follows the Latin, and differs from the Hebrew and the Greek Version. which begin here with verse one of chapter seventeen.

**<sup>36</sup>Then YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>37</sup>Tell Eleazar son of Aaron the priest to take the censers out of the blaze; then scatter the fire far and wide.**

Eleazar's responsibilities were detailed earlier (see 4:16).

**<sup>38</sup>For the censers of these sinners have become holy at the cost of their lives. Make them into hammered plates as a covering for the altar, for they presented them before YHWH and they became holy. Thus they shall be a sign to the Israelites. <sup>39</sup>So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers that had been presented by those who were burned; and they were hammered out as a covering for the altar – <sup>40</sup>a reminder to the Israelites that no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, shall approach to offer incense before YHWH, so as not to become like Korah and his company—just as YHWH had said to him through Moses.**

Further rebellion, punishment and Aaron's priestly mediation

**<sup>41</sup>On the next day, however, the whole congregation of the Israelites rebelled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, "You have killed the people of YHWH." <sup>42</sup>And when the congregation had assembled against them, Moses and Aaron turned toward the tent of meeting; the cloud had covered it and the glory of YHWH appeared. <sup>43</sup>Then Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, <sup>44</sup>and YHWH spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>45</sup>"Get away from this congregation, so that I may consume them in a moment." And they fell on their faces.**

**<sup>46</sup>Moses said to Aaron, "Take your censer, put fire on it from the altar and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them. For wrath has gone out from YHWH; the plague has begun." <sup>47</sup>So Aaron took it as Moses had ordered, and ran into the middle of the assembly, where the plague had already begun among the people. He put on the incense, and made atonement for the people. <sup>48</sup>He stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stopped. <sup>49</sup>Those who died by the plague were fourteen thousand seven hundred, besides those who died in the affair of Korah. <sup>50</sup>When the plague was stopped, Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting.**

Stressed here is the necessity of priestly mediation, as well as reinforcement of the claims of the Aaronide priests that they, and they alone, are authorised to minister in this essential role.



Further proof of the legitimacy of the Aaronide priesthood

<sup>1</sup>YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup>Speak to the Israelites, and get twelve staffs from them, one for each ancestral house, from all the leaders of their ancestral houses. Write each man's name on his staff, <sup>3</sup>and write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. For there shall be one staff for the head of each ancestral house. <sup>4</sup>Place them in the tent of meeting before the covenant, where I meet with you. <sup>5</sup>And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout; thus I will put a stop to the complaints of the Israelites that they continually make against you.

<sup>6</sup>Moses spoke to the Israelites; and all their leaders gave him staffs, one for each leader, according to their ancestral houses, twelve staffs; and the staff of Aaron was among theirs. <sup>7</sup>So Moses placed the staffs before YHWH in the tent of the covenant.

<sup>8</sup>When Moses went into the tent of the covenant on the next day, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted. It put forth buds, produced blossoms, and bore ripe almonds. <sup>9</sup>Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before YHWH to all the Israelites; and they looked, and each man took his staff.

<sup>10</sup>And YHWH said to Moses, "Put back the staff of Aaron before the covenant, to be kept as a warning to rebels, so that you may make an end of their complaints against me, or else they will die." <sup>11</sup>Moses did so; just as YHWH commanded him, so he did.

<sup>12</sup>The Israelites said to Moses, "We are perishing; we are lost, all of us are lost! <sup>13</sup>Everyone who approaches the tabernacle of YHWH will die. Are we all to perish?"

This and the following section are the only texts apart from Leviticus 10:8 where YHWH's instructions are directed to Aaron on his own.

This section has two functions: it summarises the different responsibilities of the priests and the Levites, and it assures the people that punishment for unauthorised contact with the sanctuary will not fall on them as they fear (see 17:12-13), but on the priests and Levites. Offences relating to the sanctuary are the concern of the priests ('you and your sons') and the Kohathite Levites ('your ancestral house'). For the special duties of the Kohathites see 4:4. Offences relating to the priesthood itself are the concern only of the priests.

The Levites are brothers 'joined' (lāwâ - from which 'Levi' derives) to the priests but in a subordinate role (18:2). The Levites carry out their ministry in the sanctuary 'in front of the tent of the covenant' (18:2), not behind it (18:7), where only the high priest can minister. The Kohathites are to see to the transport of the holiest objects, but they cannot touch them or look upon them (see 4:1-20).

Verse six repeats what has already been said about the special choice YHWH has made of the Levites (see 3:5-10), and the special ministry they have in the sanctuary (see 8:5-22).

Verse seven refers to the special work of the priests in preparing the most holy objects for transport (4:5-14).

**<sup>1</sup>YHWH said to Aaron: You and your sons and your ancestral house with you shall bear responsibility for offences connected with the sanctuary, while you and your sons alone shall bear responsibility for offences connected with the priesthood.**

**<sup>2</sup>So bring with you also your brothers of the tribe of Levi, your ancestral tribe, in order that they may be joined to you, and serve you while you and your sons with you are in front of the tent of the covenant.**

**<sup>3</sup>They shall perform duties for you and for the whole tent. But they must not approach either the utensils of the sanctuary or the altar, otherwise both they and you will die.**

**<sup>4</sup>They are attached to you in order to perform the duties of the tent of meeting, for all the service of the tent; no outsider shall approach you. <sup>5</sup>You yourselves shall perform the duties of the sanctuary and the duties of the altar, so that wrath may never again come upon the Israelites.**

**<sup>6</sup>It is I who now take your brother Levites from among the Israelites; they are *given to you*, dedicated to YHWH, to perform the service of the tent of meeting. <sup>7</sup>But you and your sons with you shall diligently perform your priestly duties in all that concerns the altar and the area behind the curtain.**

**I give your priesthood as a gift; any outsider who approaches shall be put to death.**

For the support of priests

**<sup>8</sup>YHWH spoke to Aaron: I have given you charge of the offerings made to me, all the holy gifts of the Israelites; I have given them to you and your sons as a priestly portion due you in perpetuity.**

1. Parts of offerings that are not burnt (reserved for priests themselves)

**<sup>9</sup>This shall be yours from the most holy things, reserved from the fire: every offering of theirs that they render to me as a most holy thing, whether *cereal* offering, *purification* offering, or *reparation* offering, shall belong to you and your sons. <sup>10</sup>As a most holy thing you shall eat it; every male may eat it; it shall be holy to you.**

2. Specified portions of well-being offering (for priest's family)

**<sup>11</sup>This also is yours: I have given to you, together with your sons and daughters, as a perpetual due, whatever is set aside from the gifts of all the elevation offerings of the Israelites; everyone who is clean in your house may eat them.**

3. Firstfruits and their equivalents (for priest's family)

**<sup>12</sup>All the best of the oil and all the best of the wine and of the grain, the choice produce that they give to YHWH, I have given to you. <sup>13</sup>The first fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to YHWH, shall be yours; everyone who is clean in your house may eat of it.**

4. Whatever is put under the ban (ḥerem)

**<sup>14</sup>Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours.**

5. Firstborn or money equivalents if ransomed

**<sup>15</sup>The first issue of the womb of all creatures, human and animal, which is offered to YHWH, shall be yours; but the firstborn of human beings you shall *ransom*, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall *ransom*. <sup>16</sup>Their *ransom* price, reckoned from one month of age, you shall fix at five shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary (that is, twenty gerahs). <sup>17</sup>But the firstborn of a cow, or the firstborn of a sheep, or the firstborn of a goat, you shall not *ransom*; they are holy. You shall dash their blood on the altar, and shall turn their fat into smoke as an offering by fire for a pleasing odour to YHWH; <sup>18</sup>but their flesh shall be yours, just as the breast that is elevated and as the right thigh are yours.**

Summary

Whatever is legislated to be for YHWH is for the priests, for they belong to him.

**<sup>19</sup>All the holy offerings that the Israelites present to YHWH I have given to you, together with your sons and daughters, as a perpetual due; it is a covenant of salt forever before YHWH for you and your descendants as well.**

**<sup>20</sup>Then YHWH said to Aaron: You shall have no allotment in their land, nor shall you have any share among them; I am your share and your possession among the Israelites.**

For the support of Levites

For the first time in Numbers we hear of tithes. The oldest mention in the biblical record seems to be that in 1Samuel 8:15-17 where giving a tenth of one's produce is set aside as a royal tax. At the time of Josiah (late seventh century BC) this tax is for the Levites (including priests). This is recorded in Deuteronomy 12:17-19; 14:22-29. Tithes are mentioned in Leviticus 27:30-32, but it is only here in Numbers that they are clearly designated for Levites (as distinct from priests).

**<sup>21</sup>To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for a possession in return for the service that they perform, the service in the tent of meeting. <sup>22</sup>From now on the Israelites shall no longer approach the tent of meeting, or else they will incur guilt and die. <sup>23</sup>But the Levites shall perform the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear responsibility for their own offenses; it shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations. But among the Israelites they shall have no allotment, <sup>24</sup>because I have given to the Levites as their portion the tithe of the Israelites, which they set apart as an offering to YHWH. Therefore I have said of them that they shall have no allotment among the Israelites.**

Levites are to contribute to the support of the priests

This is new legislation. The Levites are to give a tenth of their tithe to the priests.

**<sup>25</sup>Then YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>26</sup>You shall speak to the Levites, saying: When you receive from the Israelites the tithe that I have given you from them for your portion, you shall set apart an offering from it to YHWH, a tithe of the tithe. <sup>27</sup>It shall be reckoned to you as your gift, the same as the grain of the threshing floor and the fullness of the wine press. <sup>28</sup>Thus you also shall set apart an offering to YHWH from all the tithes that you receive from the Israelites; and from them you shall give YHWH'S offering to the priest Aaron. <sup>29</sup>Out of all the gifts to you, you shall set apart every offering due to YHWH; the best of all of them is the part to be consecrated. <sup>30</sup>Say also to them: When you have set apart the best of it, then the rest shall be reckoned to the Levites as produce of the threshing floor, and as produce of the wine press. <sup>31</sup>You may eat it in any place, you and your households; for it is your payment for your service in the tent of meeting. <sup>32</sup>You shall incur no guilt by reason of it, when you have offered the best of it. But you shall not profane the holy gifts of the Israelites, on pain of death.**

Purification is absolutely necessary after contact with the dead

In the symbolic world of ancient Israel there could be no contact between the holy and death. Numbers has already touched on this subject in 5:2 which stated that contact with a corpse made a person unclean, and required that the person who had made such contact had to be sent out of the camp, lest they defile it and contaminate the sanctuary (see the commentary page 310). A person who was consecrated to God as a nazirite could not even attend the funeral of a close family member (see Numbers 6:6-12). If they made accidental contact their consecration ceased and they had to be purified. In chapter nine special arrangements were made for those who had been in contact with a corpse as regards celebrating the pasch. Now in chapter nineteen the details for purification are spelt out. Part of the context is the constant attempt by prophets and priests to draw the people away from pagan cult of the dead (see Isaiah 8:19-20).

Regulations for preparing the purifying substances

**<sup>1</sup>YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: <sup>2</sup>This is a statute of the law that YHWH has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish and on which no yoke has been laid.**

Symbolism suggests that the cow had to be red because red is the colour of blood. It was important, too, that the cow had not been used for prior profane purposes.

**<sup>3</sup>You shall give it to the priest Eleazar, and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. <sup>4</sup>The priest Eleazar shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times towards the front of the tent of meeting. <sup>5</sup>Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight; its skin, its flesh, and its blood, with its dung, shall be burned. <sup>6</sup>The priest shall take cedarwood, hyssop, and crimson material, and throw them into the fire in which the heifer is burning.**

Cedar wood, hyssop (or more likely marjoram) and crimson material were part of the symbolic material for the purification of scaly skin disease (see Leviticus 14:4-6). One recalls the prayer: 'Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow' (Psalm 51:7); and God's promise: 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses' (Ezekiel 36:25). The priest's role is stated in verse six. Others (so long as they are ritually pure) can carry out the other procedures. All of them must bathe afterwards to rid themselves of any contagion.

**<sup>7</sup>Then the priest shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterwards he may come into the camp; but the priest shall remain unclean until evening. <sup>8</sup>The one who burns the heifer shall wash his clothes in water and bathe his body in water; he shall remain unclean until evening. <sup>9</sup>Then someone who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place; and they shall be kept for the congregation of the Israelites for the water for cleansing. It is a purification offering. <sup>10</sup>The one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening.**

Ritual required for those who contact a corpse

<sup>10</sup>This shall be a perpetual statute for the Israelites and for the alien residing among them. <sup>11</sup>Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days. <sup>12</sup>They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean; but if they do not purify themselves on the third day and on the seventh day, they will not become clean. <sup>13</sup>All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and do not purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of YHWH; such persons shall be cut off from Israel. Since water for cleansing was not dashed on them, they remain unclean; their uncleanness is still on them.

Those who do not go through this ritual defile the tabernacle. The punishment for this is to be 'cut off from Israel' (see 9:13 and 15:30-31).

Ways of being contaminated

<sup>14</sup>This is the law when someone dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent, and everyone who is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days. <sup>15</sup>And every open vessel with no cover fastened on it is unclean. <sup>16</sup>Whoever in the open field touches one who has been killed by a sword, or who has died naturally, or a human bone, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.

The rite of purification

<sup>17</sup>For the unclean they shall take some ashes of the burnt purification offering, and *spring* water shall be added in a vessel; <sup>18</sup>then a clean person shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent, on all the furnishings, on the persons who were there, and on whoever touched the bone, the slain, the corpse, or the grave. <sup>19</sup>The clean person shall sprinkle the unclean ones on the third day and on the seventh day, thus purifying them on the seventh day. Then they shall wash their clothes and bathe themselves in water, and at evening they shall be clean.

Punishment for failure to go through the rite

<sup>20</sup>Any who are unclean but do not purify themselves, those persons shall be cut off from the assembly, for they have defiled the sanctuary of YHWH. Since the water for cleansing has not been dashed on them, they are unclean.

Conclusion

<sup>21</sup>It shall be a perpetual statute for them. The one who sprinkles the water for cleansing shall wash his clothes, and whoever touches the water for cleansing shall be unclean until evening. <sup>22</sup>Whatever the unclean person touches shall be unclean, and anyone who touches it shall be unclean until evening.

We refer the reader to the commentary on page 348. In the story of the journey in the wilderness as received by the priest authors, the Israelites reached Kadesh early in their journeying (see Numbers 13:26). They left soon afterwards and headed east along the ‘way of the Red Sea’ (Numbers 14:25). The long years of being unable to enter Canaan were imagined as being spent in the wilderness east of Edom and south of Moab (compare Deuteronomy 2:14).

The priests, on the other hand, have the Israelites reach Kadesh here in this scene, after they have concluded their long stay in the Sinai. Kadesh is in the wilderness of Zin (20:1), a wilderness marking the southern border of Canaan (see Numbers 13:21; 34:4; Joshua 15:1-3).

It is ‘the first month’ (20:1), that is, the first month of the fortieth year (see Numbers 33:38). In Numbers chapter twenty we begin the final year of the wilderness journey, marked by the death of Miriam. The wilderness generation is dying out, as YHWH said it must (see Numbers 14:29-30).

In the Exodus story, just as the Israelites were about to enter Sinai, they complained about the lack of water at a place called Meribah (see Exodus 17:1-7). The priest authors replay that scene here just as they leave Sinai. The following quote highlights the parallels:

The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink ... The people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?

– Exodus 17:2-3

**<sup>1</sup>The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and was buried there.**

**<sup>2</sup>Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. <sup>3</sup>The people quarrelled with Moses and said, “Would that we had died when our kindred died before YHWH! <sup>4</sup>Why have you brought the assembly of YHWH into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? <sup>5</sup>Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink.”**

## Striking the Rock

The Exodus story reads:

So Moses cried out to YHWH, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." YHWH said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested YHWH, saying, "Is YHWH among us or not?"

– Exodus 17:4-7

As the priests retell the story we are in the vicinity of Kadesh, not Horeb, and YHWH tells Moses to 'command the rock', rather than strike it. This is important when we hear YHWH's reaction to Moses' action in striking the rock. Though Moses' death is not recorded in Numbers (see, however, 31:2), it is clear from the tradition that Moses, too, died before the Israelites entered Canaan. Priestly theology required a reason for this that was in keeping with YHWH's justice. It could only have been punishment for some sin, and they locate the sin here. Moses failed to trust YHWH (20:12). Instead of just 'commanding' the rock he struck it. Moreover, he struck it twice!

That the priests were reduced to this explanation is an indication that no better explanation had come down to them from the tradition. After all, 'the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth ... and he beholds the form of God' (Numbers 12:3,8).

<sup>6</sup>Then Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting; they fell on their faces, and the glory of YHWH appeared to them. <sup>7</sup>YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>8</sup>Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.

<sup>9</sup>So Moses took the staff from before YHWH, as he had commanded him. <sup>10</sup>Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?"

<sup>11</sup>Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank.

<sup>12</sup>But YHWH said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them."

<sup>13</sup>These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarrelled with YHWH, and by which he showed his holiness.



The priest authors locate this story at Kadesh, described here as a town on the edge of Edom's territory (20:16). This description is accurate only for a date many centuries after the time of the Exodus. Not till the eighth century BC did Edom stretch along Judah's southern border such that it could have been said to be near Kadesh. As is common in the biblical writings, geographical perspective reflects the situation at the time of writing.

Writing to Edom as 'your brother Israel' (20:14; compare Amos 1:10; Deuteronomy 2:4; 23:7) reflects the story of Jacob and Esau (see Genesis 25:19-34; 27:1-45; 32:1 - 33:20).

Mentioning the 'angel' (20:16) takes us back to YHWH's promise: 'I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared' (Exodus 23:20). It is a way of speaking of YHWH while preserving YHWH's transcendence (see also Exodus 14:19; 33:2).

The 'King's Highway' (20:17) ran from the Egyptian delta to Elath on the Gulf of Aqabah (the eastern arm of the Red Sea) and on to Damascus..

**<sup>14</sup>Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, "Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the adversity that has befallen us: <sup>15</sup>how our ancestors went down to Egypt, and we lived in Egypt a long time; and the Egyptians oppressed us and our ancestors; <sup>16</sup>and when we cried to YHWH, he heard our voice, and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt; and here we are in Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. <sup>17</sup>Now let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, or drink water from any well; we will go along the King's Highway, not turning aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory."**

**<sup>18</sup>But Edom said to him, "You shall not pass through, or we will come out with the sword against you."**

**<sup>19</sup>The Israelites said to him, "We will stay on the highway; and if we drink of your water, we and our livestock, then we will pay for it. It is only a small matter; just let us pass through on foot."**

**<sup>20</sup>But he said, "You shall not pass through." And Edom came out against them with a large force, heavily armed.**

**<sup>21</sup>Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through their territory; so Israel turned away from them.**

