**Numbers Commentary**

**Numbers Chapter 1**

Num 1:1

**“wilderness.”** The Hebrew word can also be translated as “desert,” which is why some versions read that way.

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** The “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” because it was the place where people met with God. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד) which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting” (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

**“first day of the second month in the second year.”** Israel came out of Egypt on the 15th day of the first month (Nisan) in the first year of their wilderness wanderings. So by the time of Numbers 1:1 they had been wandering for just over a year: a year and half a month (the Jewish year is a lunar year of 354 days, so that plus half a month is a little more than our Western solar year of 365 days).

Num 1:2

**“Take a census.”** This census was taken just over a year after Israel left Egypt (Num. 1:1). Moses took a second census in the 40th year of the wilderness wanderings (Num. 26:1-51). The Levites (which included the priests) were not counted in either census. The census only counted the number of Israelite males over 20 years old (Num. 1:3; 26:2). Women and children under 20 years old were not counted, which was because the “census” was actually a tabulation of the military strength of Israel, as was stated in Numbers 1:3 and 26:2, “all who are able to go out to war.” Israel was directed to conquer the “Promised Land,” the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see commentary on Gen. 12:7). The number of fighting men in Israel stayed amazingly consistent over the 40 years of wilderness wandering. There were 603,550 men in the first census (Num. 1:46) and 601,730 men in the second census (Num. 26:51).

Num 1:10

**“Of Ephraim...Of Manasseh.”** Ephraim and Manasseh were the two sons of Joseph, and each became a separate tribe and each got land area when Joshua divided the land. Here they are both listed in the list of those counted for war, and the tribe of Levi is not included, so there were 12 tribes of Israel that got land and 12 tribes that went to war, and Levi was excluded.

Num 1:18

**“on the first day of the second month.”** Israel left Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month (“Nisan;” “Abib”) of the year, and this is now the first day of the second month (“Iyyar”), so Israel had now been walking in the wilderness for a year and half a month, or roughly a year and 14 or 15 days. However, a standard biblical year was a lunar year of 354 days, not a solar year of 365 days, and lunar months differed, some being 29 days and some being 30 days, so a year and half a month was likely 368 or 369 days, or just a few days longer than our regular solar year. Figuring out the exact time periods in the Bible according to our Western calendar cannot be done because the new month started when the first crescent of the new moon could be physically seen by the people, so sometimes the start of the month was delayed by cloud cover. Also, every few years a thirteenth month had to be added to the calendar so the crops would correctly correspond to the feast calendar, but that extra month could be sooner or later than regularly expected because cooler than normal weather could delay the crops while warmer than expected weather could ripen them unusually early.

Num 1:51

**“The unauthorized person.”** The Hebrew word is *zar* (#02114) and although it usually is used in the context of someone being a non-Israelite, a foreigner, in this context the “stranger” is the person who has not been authorized by Yahweh to be around the Tent of Meeting. The English translations handle it in different ways: “anyone else” (CJB, NIV, RSV); “unauthorized person” (HCSB, NAB, NET, NJB); “outsider” (ESV, NRSV); “common man” (JPS); “layman” (NASB). People who were not Levites were not allowed to approach God without a sacrifice or offering, but the offering allowed the person to enter close to the presence of God (cf. Lev. 1:1ff).

**Numbers Chapter 2**

Num 2:2

**“the Tent of Meeting.”** The “Tabernacle” (“Dwelling Place”) is also referred to as the “Tent of Meeting” because it was the place where people met with God. The Hebrew phrase is *'ohel mo'ed*, in which *'ohel* (#0168 אֹהֶל) means “tent,” and is followed by *mo'ed* (#04150 מוֹעֵד or מֹעֵד) which means a “meeting” or a “place for a meeting.” Thus the *'ohel mo'ed* is the “Tent of Meeting” (see commentary on Exod. 27:21).

**Numbers Chapter 3**

Num 3:4

**“unauthorized fire.”** See commentary on Leviticus 10:1.

Num 3:7

**“before the Tent of Meeting.”** This could be translated and understood as “in the presence of the Tent of Meeting,” that is, inside the curtain wall that surrounded the Tent of Meeting. The Levites were to minister inside the curtain wall, doing all the tasks necessary to keep the whole Tabernacle system going. There was incense to burn, bread to bake and change out, firewood to bring in and stack, water to draw, and many more such tasks.

Num 3:8

**“service.”** Or “work.”

Num 3:10

**“The stranger who comes near must be put to death.”** The priests, the descendants of Aaron, were authorized to do the work inside the Tent of Meeting itself. God’s holiness was to be protected, and so any unauthorized person was to be put to death.

Num 3:39

**“all the males from a month old and older.”** The Israelites from the other tribes were counted from 20 years old and older because those were the men who were considered able to go to war. The Levites did not go to war, so they could be counted from a month old and older. Many babies died in the first month of life, so counting them after they were a month old made sense.

**“were 22,000.”** This is a round number. The actual number is 22,300. The number of Levites increased, but not by much, while Israel was in the wilderness. At the end of the 40 years of wilderness wanderings there were 23,000 Levites in Israel (Num. 26:62).

Num 3:47

**“shekels.”** Five shekels is roughly 2 ounces (56.5 grams). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

Num 3:50

**“1,365 shekels.”** 1,365 shekels is roughly 34 pounds (15.4 kg). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

**Numbers Chapter 4**

Num 4:4

**“*concerning* the most holy things.”** The Hebrew text uses language that usually refers to the Holy of Holies, the innermost room of the Tabernacle. However, the context seems more to refer to all the holy objects in both rooms of the Tabernacle; in the Holy of Holies and in the Holy Place. Numbers 4 is confusing because it uses the word “holy” to refer to both the Tabernacle itself (the “sanctuary”) and to the things in the Tabernacle, the holy objects (see commentary on Num. 4:15). Scholars and English versions differ as to what the “holy” refers to in any given verse or phrase.

Num 4:5

**“his sons.”** Aaron’s “sons” eventually were his descendants, who were the priests. Hebrew has no word for “grandson” or “grandfather.” There were just fathers and sons; ancestors and descendants.

**“the veil that is the screen.”** The veil that was the screen between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies was used to cover the ark of the covenant when it was time to move the Tabernacle.

[For more on the veil, see Exod. 26:31-35.]

Num 4:6

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

Num 4:7

**“the regular bread.”** The Bread of the Presence was put on the table regularly, every week, so here it is called the regular bread. The Bread of the Presence was large cakes of bread that were in the Tabernacle and Temple (see commentary on Exod. 25:30).

Num 4:8

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

Num 4:9

**“snuffers.”** The oil lamps on the menorah were to be put out at daylight.

Num 4:10

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

Num 4:11

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

Num 4:12

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

Num 4:14

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

Num 4:15

**“the sanctuary and all the holy things.”** The English versions are divided as to how to translate Numbers 4:15, and with good reason. The meaning of the Hebrew phrase that the REV translates as “the sanctuary and all the holy things,” and the exact way to translate the Hebrew phrase, is unclear, so the meaning and the way to translate the verse into English is debated. The first part of the verse has been understood in two primary ways: the text is referring to the sanctuary itself (the Tabernacle) and the holy objects inside the sanctuary” (cf. ASV, CEB, ESV, KJV, NET, NLT, NRSV, REV, RSV, YLT); or the text is referring to different holy objects inside the sanctuary (the Tabernacle), and means something like “the holy furnishings and the holy objects” inside the sanctuary (cf. CJB, CSB, JPS, NASB, NIV, NJB, TNK).

**“so that they do not touch the holy *things* and die.”** The Hebrew text can be translated as “touch the sanctuary” (cf. ASV, CEB, RV); that is, the Tabernacle itself, or as “touch the holy objects” (cf. CSB, DRA, ESV, KJV, NAB, NASB, NIV, TNK).” There are also translations that are worded such that “the holy things” can refer to any holy thing, including the sanctuary or its objects (cf. BBE, CJB, ESV, JPS, NET, NRSV, RSV), and that could well be the best understanding of the verse.

The Levites who were Kohathites were in the most danger in their work because they carried the objects that were inside the Tabernacle and out of sight of all the Israelites but the priests, the descendants of Aaron. That is why the warnings to the Kohathites were so strict in comparison to what the other Levites were told. Touching or seeing the holy objects could mean death.

Num 4:16

**“the lamp.”** That is, the menorah.

Num 4:18

**“Do not cut off the tribe of the families of the Kohathites.”** The meaning of this is that Aaron and his sons are to do a very thorough job of covering the sanctuary and its furnishings so that the Kohathites, the Levites who carry the articles of the Tabernacle, will not die seeing or touching them.

Num 4:19

**“when they approach the Holy of Holies.”** The Hebrew is the common phrase for “Holy of Holies,” and note that this verse did not mention “touching” the Holy of Holies, but approaching it. The Kohathites would have to go into the Holy of Holies to get the cherubim and ark, but they could do so without dying when they went in to move them. The holy objects had to be covered before the Kohathites could go in where they were.

Num 4:20

**“holy *things*.”** The Hebrew text simply says “holy,” and leaves some ambiguity as to whether it refers to the holy sanctuary itself (cf. Num. 4:15) or whether it refers to the sanctuary (the Tabernacle) as a whole. The English translations are divided.

**“a moment.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, more literally, “a swallow.” It refers to a very brief time, the time it takes to swallow, and the Levites were not to even briefly glance at the holy things. Job was bothered by the constant attack of his supposed friends and said, “Will you not leave me alone long enough to swallow my spit?” (Job 7:19). In his commentary on Job 7:19, John Hartley references the Arabic expression “let me swallow my spittle” which means “wait a minute.”[[1]](#footnote-11702)

Another way to take the Hebrew word “swallow” is the way the NET translation and JPS Torah Commentary take it, that the Kohathites were not to see the holy things being “swallowed,” that is covered up. However, the majority of the commentators support the reading, “for a moment,” which was the reading of the Septuagint as well.

Num 4:25

**“dugong.”** A mammal quite like a manatee that lives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba. See commentary on Exodus 25:5.

**Numbers Chapter 5**

Num 5:2

**“a dead person.”** The Hebrew text just reads “soul” is *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ) which often means a person, an individual, but here is clearly refers to a corpse. This is a good example of a place where context determines the meaning of a word.

[For more information on *nephesh*, see Appendix 16: “Usages of ‘Soul.’”]

Num 5:6

**“and that soul is guilty.”** The Hebrew can also be understood to say something such as, “and that soul realizes their guilt,” and some versions translate the verse that way.

**“unfaithfully, yes, unfaithfully.”** The Hebrew text contains the figure of speech polyptoton, doubling “unfaithfully” for emphasis.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

[See Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

**“unfaithfully against Yahweh.”** In this case, as we can see from the context, one person has sinned against another, but that sin is said to be “against Yahweh” because such sin is rebellion against God.

Num 5:10

**“are to be his.”** That is, is to be the priest’s.

Num 5:12

**“unfaithful, yes, unfaithful.”** The Hebrew text contains the figure of speech polyptoton, doubling “unfaithful” for emphasis (cf. Num. 5:6). The woman’s sin is considered very serious in the sight of God in part because of the importance of keeping the lineages in Israel known.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

Num 5:14

**“the spirit of jealousy.”** The word “spirit” in this context can mean a demon, or a revelation from God, or just a “feeling” the husband has. The word *ruach* (“spirit”) has a very wide range of meanings.

[For more on the meanings of *ruach*, see Appendix 15: “Usages of ‘Spirit.’”]

Num 5:15

**“no oil.”** This approach offering was not to have oil or frankincense because it was a bitter occasion when a man suspected his wife of adultery. There was not to be anything mixed with the offering that made it have a sweet smell.

Num 5:16

**“and have her stand before Yahweh.”** In this context, the woman would “stand before Yahweh” by standing in the Tabernacle courtyard before the priest, who represented Yahweh in this matter.

Num 5:18

**“water of bitterness.”** So called because the whole process was bitter and if the woman was guilty her judgment was bitter.

Num 5:21

**“cause-for-oath.”** The Hebrew is “oath,” but in this context, the woman does not become an oath, but the reason that the oath exists; to root out evil.[[2]](#footnote-14450)

**“your thigh fall away and your body swell.”** The meaning of this Hebrew phrase is not understood, and there have been many suppositions set forward as to what it means. It is fairly clear that “thigh” is used here as a euphemism for the woman’s genital organs. The “thigh” was used euphemistically for the genital organs, (see commentary on Gen. 24:2).

[For more information on sexual euphemisms, see commentary on Isa. 47:2.]

Num 5:23

**“wash them off into.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “blot *them* into.” Exactly how that was done is not known, but the point is clear: the curses were somehow washed into the water of bitterness, and then the woman drank the water which had the curses.

Num 5:24

**“for bitterness.”** The exact meaning of this phrase is unknown, and the English versions render it differently, trying to bring out its meaning. The point is clear, however, that if the woman is guilty the water will cause bitter things to happen to her.

Num 5:26

**“burn...into smoke.”** See commentary on Exodus 29:13.

Num 5:28

**“children.”** Literally, “seed.”

**Numbers Chapter 6**

Num 6:2

The term “Nazirite” is derived from the Hebrew word *nazir*, which means “separated” (“Nazirite” should not be confused with “Nazarene,” which refers to a person who comes from the town of Nazareth).

Ordinarily, a person makes the Nazirite vow for themselves and sets the duration of the vow, and during that time the person commits to being “separated,” or especially holy to God (Num. 6:8). Although there are incidences when a parent makes the vow for the child such as Hannah apparently did with Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11), those would be rare. The phrase “all the days of his separation” (Num. 6:4; cf. Num. 6:4-6) indicates the limited time of the vow.

According to the book of Numbers, the Nazirite vow required the man or woman who made the vow to observe the following:

* Abstain from wine, beer, wine vinegar, grapes (of things from grapes such as seeds), grape juice, or raisins (Num. 6:3).
* Do not cut your hair but allow it to grow (Num. 6:5).
* Do not touch a dead body (Num. 6:6).

If the Nazirite breaks the vow, he or she must shave their head and do sacrifices (Num. 6:9-11). When the period of the vow is over, there is a lot to be done, including bringing a year-old male lamb as a burnt offering; a year-old female lamb as a sin offering; and a ram as a fellowship offering; and unleavened bread and a drink offering (Num. 6:12-21).

In spite of the fact that the Nazirite is supposed to be separated from sin and holy to God, at the end of the time of the vow the person is to bring a sin offering. This had led to serious discussion among the rabbis—is the person holy or a sinner—but it likely simply points to the fact that Ecclesiastes is correct when it says, “Surely there is not a righteous person on earth who does good and does not sin” (Eccl. 7:20). Despite our best human efforts to be holy, we often sin.

Num 6:3

**“vinegar made from wine.”** This refers to any drink made from wine that has been allowed to sour or ferment.

**“fermented drink.”** This would include beer, which was a common drink.

**“nor eat fresh or dried grapes.”** In the hot climate of the biblical world (and the grape harvest was usually in July), grapes would begin to ferment and produce alcohol very quickly, so no grapes could be eaten.

Num 6:9

**“his dedicated head of hair.”** Literally, “the head of his separation.”

Num 6:11

**“the *dead* person.”** The Hebrew just has “the *nephesh*,” that is, the “soul” or the “person,” but the context makes it clear it was the dead person. In Hebrew just as in English, a dead “person” is still referred to as a “person” even after they are dead. They will be raised from the dead and judged at one of the resurrections.

Num 6:12

**“his days as a Nazirite.”** Or, perhaps, “the days of his separation” [as a Nazirite].

Num 6:14

**“a peace offering.”** The Hebrew form of the word is always plural (thus some English translations, “peace offerings”), but it was a single sacrifice and should be understood as “a peace offering.”

Num 6:15

**“loaves.”** In the biblical world, a “loaf” of bread was like a pancake, not like a modern loaf of bread.

Num 6:16

**“approach *with them*.”** The verb is the same as “approach” in the approach offering (Num. 6:14; Lev. 1:2). The priest would offer the sacrifices on the altar in front of the Tent of Meeting (the “Tabernacle”). However, he was to “approach” (or “come near to”) God with the approach offering that gave him entre to Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel. We now approach God boldly and freely due to the “approach offering” of Jesus Christ.

Num 6:20

**“may drink wine.”** This is a permission, not a command. The Nazirite may drink if he or she wants to.

Num 6:21

**“he can provide.”** The Hebrew is more idiomatic: “whatever else his hand can reach.”

Num 6:24

**“keep you.”** The blessing is for divine protection and that Yahweh would protect, guard, watch over, and care for Israel.

Num 6:26

**“peace.”** The Hebrew word “*shalom*” means much more than just “peace.” It refers to being healthy, prosperous, and whole.

**Numbers Chapter 7**

Num 7:13

**“shekels.”** 130 shekels is roughly 3.25 pounds (1.5 kg), and 70 shekels is roughly 28 ounces (794 grams). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

Num 7:85

**“2,400 shekels.”** 2,400 shekels is roughly 60 pounds (27 kg). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

Num 7:86

**“120 shekels.”** 120 shekels is roughly three pounds (1.36 kg). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

Num 7:89

**“he heard Yahweh’s voice speaking to him.”** Moses heard Yahweh’s voice speaking to him. This is one of the verses that shows that Yahweh spoke directly to Moses. Yahweh can speak to us in many ways, one of them being in an audible voice, and that is how Yahweh spoke to Moses in the Tent of Meeting.

**“from above the atonement cover...from between the two cherubim”** The “atonement cover” is traditionally called the “mercy seat” (but see commentary on Exod. 25:17). God spoke to Moses from “above” the Atonement Cover and “between” the cherubim. Both the Hebrew words “above” and “between” are in the Hebrew text of Numbers 7:89, thus giving the reader a very clear picture of how God was communicating to Moses and Israel. Exodus 25:22 says, “I [Yahweh] will meet with you there, from above the atonement cover—from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony.” Numbers 7:89 then says that Yahweh spoke, and Moses, “heard Yahweh’s voice speaking to him from above the atonement cover that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim.” A number of English versions say, in various places, that God met with Moses “above” or “over” the cherubim, but the text says that God was “between” the two cherubim.

In Leviticus 16:2, God said, “I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover,” which would also be “between” the cherubim (cf. Exod. 30:36).

**Numbers Chapter 8**

Num 8:2

**“the seven lamps are to give light in front of the menorah.”** The “menorah” was a lampstand in the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple (Exod. 25:31-40). The text says “the seven lamps are to give light in front of the menorah” because the menorah was close to the south wall of the Holy Place in the Tabernacle (the left side of the large outer room as you walk into the Tabernacle), so the main space that was lighted by the menorah was “in front of” the menorah, not behind it.

Num 8:10

**“The children of Israel are to lay their hands on the Levites.”** Obviously, all of the Israelites could not lay their hands on the Levites; that would be done by representative leadership.

Num 8:13

**“wave them as a wave offering.”** It is unclear how the Levites are going to be waved as a wave offering, but it likely involved some kind of ceremony that included motion. A regular wave offering was waved back and forth in the Tabernacle courtyard, and there was likely some kind of back-and-forth motion among the Levites that was symbolic of them being offered to Yahweh.

Num 8:16

**“Instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the children of Israel, I have taken them.”** God had claimed the firstborn of Israel from the time of the Exodus (Exod. 13:2). But in Exodus 22:29 and also in Exodus 34:19-20, God clarifies the command of Exodus 13:2 and says it applies to just the males, not the females. However, He changed this command and decided to take the Levites instead of all the firstborn males (Num. 8:16).

Num 8:19

**“the Holy Place.”** The “Holy Place” is the Tabernacle.

**Numbers Chapter 9**

Num 9:1

**“in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt.”** Israel left Egypt in the first months of the first year. It is now the first month of the second year, so Israel had been out of Egypt for one year at this point. When we calculate the chronology, the Book of Numbers takes about 38 ½ years of the 40 years of wilderness wanderings.

Num 9:2

**“The children of Israel are to keep the Passover.”** It would be appropriate for God to tell Moses this at this time because Passover was to be celebrated (the lamb or goat killed) on the 14th day of the first month of the year, and it was now the first month. Furthermore, this was only the second time Passover was celebrated and it was the first “regular” Passover celebration. The first one had been in Egypt just before the Israelites packed up and left Egypt.

Num 9:14

**“a resident alien lives among you.”** A resident alien who is not genealogically a part of Israel but has chosen to live among the Israelites may eat the Passover. The “resident alien” must be carefully distinguished from the “foreigner,” the “sojourner,” and the “hired servant” who are not allowed to eat the Passover (Exod. 12:43, 45). Also, a slave who had agreed to be circumcised could eat the Passover (Exod. 12:44).

[For more information on who could eat the Passover, see commentary on Exod. 12:45.]

**Numbers Chapter 10**

Num 10:10

**“at the new moon.”** Some versions read “at the beginning of your months,” that is, at the new moon. There was an established New Moon feast, just as there were other feasts and special days.

Num 10:11

**“in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month.”** Israel left Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month, so at this point, they had been traveling for one year and one month and five days.

Num 10:29

**“Hobab, the son of Moses’ father-in-law, Reuel the Midianite.”** “Reuel” (also called “Jethro”) is the father-in-law of Moses, and Hobab is Moses’ brother-in-law (see commentary on Judg. 4:11).

**Numbers Chapter 11**

Num 11:3

**“Taberah.”** “Taberah” means “burning” in Hebrew.

Num 11:4

**“mixed multitude.”** When Israel left Egypt, referred to as “the Exodus,” so many Egyptians and people of other nationalities had been impressed by Israel and Israel’s God, Yahweh, that they left Egypt too and went with the Israelites (Exod. 12:37-38). These non-Israelite people were referred to as the “mixed multitude.”

**“a lust, yes, a lust.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton, where a word is repeated for emphasis. It means a great lust.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“wept again.”** The Israelites had murmured and wept several times since leaving Egypt.

Num 11:6

**“appetite.”** The Hebrew word is *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ), often translated “soul.” Here it is being used for a working of the soul inside mankind, our “appetite.”

[For more on nephesh, see Appendix 16: “Usages of ‘Soul.’”]

Num 11:17

**“I will take some of the spirit that is on you and will put it on them.”** This verse is not saying that God would take some holy spirit away from Moses so that he would end up with less of it. It is saying that God would take “some of” the kind of spirit that was on Moses and give it to the other elders. Similarly, for example, let’s say you had a house that was painted yellow and white with accents of blue, and you also had an old shed. Then one day you said, “I am going to take some of the colors on the house and paint the shed.” You would not be saying that you would somehow strip the colors off the house and put them on the shed, you would be saying that the kinds of colors that were on the house, such as yellow and white, would be used to paint the shed. Similarly, Moses had the kind of holy spirit God gave to people before the Day of Pentecost, and He was going to give that to some of the elders of Israel as well.

God gave His gift of holy spirit to some people in the Old Testament to empower them. Then God gave a different gift of holy spirit to the Christian Church.

[For more on the difference between the gift of holy spirit God gave in the Old Testament and the gift of holy spirit that Christians have today, see commentary on Eph. 1:13. For more on the difference between holy spirit and “the Holy Spirit,” see Appendix 7: “What is the Holy Spirit.”]

Num 11:18

**“make yourselves holy.”** The people were to do what it took to make themselves holy in the sight of God (cf. Lev. 11:44).

[For more on “make yourselves holy,” see commentary on Josh. 3:5.]

Num 11:29

**“I wish that all Yahweh’s people were prophets, that Yahweh would put his spirit on them!”** This wish was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, when every believer in Christ got born again of God’s spirit (cf. Acts 2:38)

**Numbers Chapter 12**

**Numbers Chapter 13**

Num 13:2

**“You are to send a man from every tribe.”** The number of men sent was 12, each man representing a tribe. However, although at this point the Bible speaks of 12 tribes of Israel, de facto there were 13. At this time and in the future the “tribe” of Joseph had been developed into two tribes: Ephraim and Manasseh (note Num. 13:4-15). The tribe of Levi was not counted among the other 12 tribes, it was given the care of the Tabernacle and the things of God, and was not to go and fight like the men of the other 12 tribes.

**“every one among them is to be a leader.”** The men who Moses sent to spy out the Promised Land were to be leaders, godly and valiant men. That would be necessary because the mission was dangerous. The tribes inhabiting the Promised Land were not necessarily friendly.

Num 13:3

**“from the wilderness of Paran.”** Specifically, from the town of Kadesh-barnea (Num. 32:8).

Num 13:8

**“Hoshea.”** Moses changed Hoshea’s name to Joshua (Num. 13:16).

Num 13:16

**“Moses renamed Hoshea the son of Nun, ‘Joshua.’”** Moses added the “Je” prefix to Hoshea indicating the presence of God in the person and relationship.

Num 13:20

**“the time of the first-ripe grapes.”** This would be mid to late July, depending on the weather that year. At this point, the Israelites had been traveling in the desert for about a year and four months. They left Egypt on the fourteenth day of the first month, Nisan (Nisan is usually our April). They built the Tabernacle and set it up almost one year later on the first day of Nisan (Exod. 40:17). Then God gave them the instructions in Leviticus, and then on the first day of the second month of the second year of their wanderings He told them to take a census of the people (Num. 1:1-2; that was likely May of that second year, so they had been traveling 1 year and 1 month at that time). Then, on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year of their wanderings (so still in May of that second year) God started moving and they went from place to place until they came to the Desert of Paran (Num. 10:12), more specifically the town of Kadesh-barnea (Num. 13:26). It was from Kadesh that Moses sent out the 12 spies, and they were gone for 40 days (Num. 13:25). Numbers 13:20 tells us the spies were in Caanan at the time of first-ripe grapes, which is mid to late July, so the spies left the camp of Israel in June and came back in July, likely late July. So when the spies got back to the camp of Israel, Israel had left Egypt about one year and four months earlier.

Num 13:22

**“the sons of Anak.”** Anak was one of the Nephilim, the “Fallen Ones,” just as Numbers 13:33 says. Anak, was one of the sons of Arba, who was either the founder of Hebron or a very important person there (Josh. 15:13-14).

[For more on the Nephilim, see commentary on Gen. 6:4.]

Num 13:23

**“the Valley of Eshcol.”** The location of the Valley of Eshcol is unknown. The word “Eshcol” means “cluster,” and the Israelites named it after the cluster of grapes they took from there. But there are many valleys and lots of vineyards in the area, so the exact valley is unknown. Scholars assume it was somewhere around Hebron, perhaps north of Hebron.

Num 13:24

**“the Valley of Eshcol.”** The word “Eshcol” means “cluster” and “cluster of grapes” is implied.

Num 13:26

**“Kadesh.”** This is Kadesh-barnea, just south of the Negev in the northern Sinai Peninsula (for more on Kadesh, see commentary on Gen. 14:7).

Num 13:28

**“the children of Anak.”** Anak was one of the Nephilim, the “Fallen Ones,” just as Numbers 13:33 says.

[For more on the Nephilim, see commentary on Gen. 6:4.]

Num 13:29

**“The Amalekites.”** The Hebrew text reads “Amalek”; the man Amalek is being put by metonymy for the nation he founded, the “Amalekites.”

Num 13:33

**“the sons of Anak.”** Anak was one of the Nephilim, the “Fallen Ones,” just as Numbers 13:33 says.

[For more on the Nephilim, see commentary on Gen. 6:4.]

**Numbers Chapter 14**

Num 14:9

**“they are bread for us; their protection has departed from over them.”** This is more literally, “they are bread for us, their shade has turned aside [or “departed”] from over them.” It is possible that Joshua and Caleb were making an allusion to the bread that Israel ate every day, manna, because when the sun came up and the shade was gone, it melted away (Exod. 16:21).

Num 14:10

**“the glory of Yahweh appeared.”** In this context, “the glory of Yahweh” was the glorious light that surrounded Yahweh. The people saw the glory and knew Yahweh Himself was present and obviously supported Moses.

[For more on the glory of God, see commentary on Ezek. 1:28.]

Num 14:11

**“Yahweh said to Moses.”** Sometimes when Yahweh spoke to Moses the people could hear (Exod. 19:9), but this was not one of those times. On this occasion, Moses had to tell the people what Yahweh told him (Num. 14:39).

Num 14:14

**“right before their eyes.”** The Hebrew text is literally “eye in eye,” which is an idiom for “right before your eyes.” The only other occurrence of “eye to eye” in the Bible is Isaiah 52:8, which speaks of how the watchmen in Jerusalem will shout for joy when Yahweh returns to Zion, which He does by sending the Messiah, His Son.

[For more on the idiom, “eye in eye,” see commentary on Isa. 52:8]

Num 14:18

**“visiting the iniquity of the fathers.”** See commentary on Exodus 20:5.

Num 14:21

**“all the earth will be filled with the glory of Yahweh.”** There will be a time in the future when God Himself will be with all His people and the glorious light of God will be everywhere present (Rev. 21:3, 23).

[For more on the glory of God, see commentary on Ezek. 1:28.]

Num 14:25

**“by the road to the Red Sea.”** The Hebrew could also be translated as something like, “by the route to the Red [“Reed”] Sea,” or even “by the Red Sea Road.” There was a major travel route going south southeast from Kadesh Barnea where the Israelites were to the Gulf of Aqaba connecting to the Red Sea.[[3]](#footnote-31956)

Num 14:29

**“all who were numbered of you according to your whole number, from 20 years old and upward who have murmured against me.”** This verse says things that differ from what is preserved in the Christian tradition. Numbers 14:29 makes it clear that not all the Israelites except for Joshua and Caleb died in the wilderness, as is often taught.

The people who died in the wilderness are specified by three clauses: all who were numbered; all who were 20 years old and older; and all those who murmured. The Bible is clear that the “whole congregation” murmured (cf. Exod. 15:24; 16:2, 41; 17:3; Num. 14:2). However, there were many people who left Egypt who were not yet 20 years old, and lastly, not every Israelite was numbered in Moses’ census.

It is very clear from reading the book of Numbers that the Levites were not numbered with the other men (cf. Num. 1:47-54). That explains why God specifically spoke to Aaron and Moses about their dying in the wilderness, and why Moses thought he should be allowed in. Note that it was because God was angry with Moses that he was not allowed into the Promised Land, not because he was older than 20 when Israel left Egypt (Num. 20:12; 27:12-14; Deut. 1:37; 3:23-27).

It is also possible that the women of the generation that left Egypt were allowed into the Promised Land, because the only ones numbered were the men. However, the Bible is silent about that and does not say one way or the other.

Num 14:40

**“the ridge of the hill country.”** Kadesh-barnea is in the lower lands of the Sinai Peninsula, and north of it the topography begins to rise sharply into the hill country of Judah where God originally wanted the Israelites to go but they refused. Now, in a second disobedience to God, they wanted to go there as if they could force God to help them. He did not, and they were defeated by the Canaanites who lived there.

**Numbers Chapter 15**

Num 15:4

**“a tenth part of an ephah of fine flour mixed with the fourth part of a hin of oil.”** The exact amounts are difficult to determine, but it is likely that it amounted to about two quarts of fine flour mixed with about one quart of oil.

Num 15:30

**“does *anything*.”** The context is sin. The person who sins any sin.

**“defiantly.”** The Hebrew uses an idiom: “with a high hand,” meaning defiantly, deliberately, “a conscious and willed transgression of the law.”[[4]](#footnote-31875) There were sin offerings for unintentional sin (Lev. 4:2, 13-14, 22, 27; Num. 15:22-29), but if a person knew the commands of God and simply defied them and showed contempt for them, there was no sin offering for them (Num. 15:30-31). That fact is then emphasized in the text by the example of a man who gathers wood on the Sabbath rather than keeping it holy and not working on the Sabbath, and that man was cut off from the congregation and killed (Num. 15:32-36).

The limitations of the sin offering in the Mosaic Law serve to point out that Jesus Christ was a much more complete sin offering than the sin offerings described in the Law. When Jesus came it became clear that his death would atone for both intentional and unintentional sin. The person who humbly confesses sin is forgiven of all sin and unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Christ was the sin offering who died in place of sinners and because of his sacrifice believers are declared righteous in the sight of God (Rom. 5:6-11).

**“soul.”** In this context, “soul” means an individual person.

[See Appendix 16: “Usages of ‘Soul.’”]

Num 15:31

**“cut off; cut off.”** The Hebrew text doubles “cut off” for emphasis and effect.

Num 15:35

**“stone him with stones outside the camp.”** The standard method of killing a criminal was to stone them with stones (cf. Lev. 20:2; 24:23; Num. 15:35; Deut. 13:10; 21:21). Some people have asserted that the Jews just dropped one huge stone on the person, but there is no evidence for that in the Bible. Also, stoning with stones was how Achan and his family were killed (Josh. 7:25), and how the Jews killed Stephen (Acts 7:58-60). It was important for the ceremonial cleanliness of Israel that the criminal be stoned to death outside the camp, and when Israel was settled in the Promised Land, outside the city or village. Touching a dead body made a person unclean, so executions were carried out outside the camp or city, and graves were dug outside the city (cf. Lev. 22:4, 6; Num. 19:11-16, 22).

[For more on stoning people to death, see commentary on Lev. 20:2.]

Num 15:38

**“tassels.”** Today these tassels with a blue strand are put on the ends of the prayer shawls used by the orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jews, but that was not the command in the Law. The Law of Moses commanded that the tassels be on the outer garments of the Jews so they could be seen. The tassels were put on the prayer shawl and worn underneath the outer clothing during the Roman period, when the Jews outwardly displaying their faith was outlawed. Sadly, when the Jews could once again openly display their faith, the fringes were not put back on the outer garments. However, there is a small movement today to do that for both men and women.

**“A cord of blue.”** It is from verses like this that we learn that blue is the color of the Law and reminds us to do the Law, whereas red is the color of love and sacrifice, purple is the color of royalty and leadership, and white is the color of righteousness and purity.

**Numbers Chapter 16**

Num 16:1

**“Now.”** In Numbers 10:11 the Israelites had been traveling for just over one year and one month. The spies were sent to see the Promised Land in the season of first-ripe grapes (Num. 13:20) so that would have been late July or early August, when Israel had been out of Egypt for about one year and five months. This event was after that, but how long after is not known. However, the nature of the event is such that this rebellion likely happened quite early on in the wilderness wanderings.

**“Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi.”** Korah was a Levite, but not a priest, and it is possible that he felt slighted when Moses’ brother Aaron, also a Levite, and Aaron’s sons, got to be priests.

**“Dathan and Abiram...On.”** These men were descendants of Reuben. The Bible does not say why they joined Korah’s rebellion, but it is possible that because they were descendants of Reuben, who was Jacob’s firstborn son, they felt that the Reubenites should have had special treatment of some kind; first sons usually do.

Num 16:3

**“since all the congregation are holy.”** Korah wanted more power and authority in the congregation, but he needed support to do it. Many, even perhaps all, of the 250 leaders that Korah had gathered as supporters were not Levites and certainly not priests, so Korah’s declaration that “all the congregation” was holy—holy enough to approach God—was an obvious attempt to garner the support of non-Levites.

**“Why then do you lift yourselves up.”** This is a total denial of history. God chose Moses and commissioned him to go to Egypt and deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh. Moses commanded the plagues and led the Israelites out of Egypt. It was Moses who lifted his staff and split the Reed Sea (aka “Red Sea”) so that the Israelites could cross over (Exod. 14:21), and then stretched it out again so the waters of the sea flowed over the Egyptians and drowned them (Exod. 14:26). Evil and prideful people conveniently forget history when it does not support what they want.

Num 16:4

**“When Moses heard this, he fell on his face.”** Moses was the most humble person on the face of the earth (Num. 12:3) and his first reaction to this rebellion was to pray. God’s response was to give Moses revelation as to what to do next, as we see from Numbers 16:5.

Num 16:5

**“In the morning Yahweh will show who are his.”** When confronted with a rebellion, Moses prayed (Num. 16:4) and God gave him a revelation about what was going to happen next, so Moses knew that God would somehow act the next morning.

**“he will cause him to come near to him.”** The ones who were to come near to God were the priests, so this was a way of saying that in the morning Yahweh will show who are the real priests.

Num 16:7

**“the man whom Yahweh chooses, he will be holy.”** In this case, this man who is “holy” is qualified to stand in the presence of Yahweh and thus be a priest.

**“you sons of Levi!”** Although all the rebels were not from the tribe of Levi, this statement by Moses makes it clear that the Levites were behind the rebellion.

Num 16:10

**“And would you seek the priesthood as well?”** Actually, the priesthood is exactly what the rebels wanted: the power and prestige of the priesthood. Power-hungry people, prideful and arrogant, only think of the power and prestige they will have as leaders. They do not recognize, nor do they want to be, genuine servants to the people they lead.

Korah and those who were with him did not see the great privilege of being a Levite, they were blinded by their avarice and only could see that there seemed to be a more important office that they would like to attain.

Num 16:11

**“And Aaron, who is he that you murmur against him?”** Korah and the Levites would have murmured against Aaron and his sons because Aaron and his descendants were the priests and they had duties that were different and could well have been considered more privileged than the duties of the Levites. This could well have made Korah envious, because Korah was a Levite, one of the descendants of Kohath (Num. 16:1), and Aaron and his descendants were descendants of Kohath as well, but they were chosen to be the priests. But the statement, “who is he” makes the point that even Aaron did not choose himself to be the High Priest, the whole priestly system was by revelation from God. So don’t murmur against Aaron, murmur against God.

The genealogy was Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kohath. Then, both Aaron the priest and Korah the Levite were grandsons of Kohath, but from different sons of Kohath and thus different fathers. Kohath’s sons were: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel (Exod. 6:18; Num. 3:19; 1 Chron. 6:2). Amram fathered Aaron, Miriam, and Moses (Num. 26:59), while Izhar fathered Korah, Nepheg, and Zichri (Exod. 6:21; cf. Num. 16:1).

Num 16:12

**“Dathan and Abiram.”** They were descendants of Reuben, the first son of Jacob, and may have thought that because of that they should have some kind of say in the leadership of Israel.

**“We will not come up.”** The idea of going “up” can be up in elevation or up to a higher authority. Since they were complaining against Moses who to them seemed to be setting himself above the people, the thought in the text is almost certainly “up” to a higher authority. Dathan and Abiram were not going to go “up” to Moses as if in acknowledgment of his higher authority.

Num 16:13

**“you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey.”** Once again we see the blindness and convenient memory loss about the Israelite slavery in Egypt. They were in hard labor, and there is never any mention of milk and honey in Egypt.

**“make yourself the ruler over us.”** The Hebrew is intense and therefore sarcastic, perhaps even bringing up the accusation that Moses was trying to be the ruler like he had been in Egypt when he was a member of Pharaoh’s household. But the whole line of reasoning is a lie. God chose Moses, Moses did not choose himself. If it had not been for God’s intervention and commissioning of Moses, he would have died of old age as a shepherd in Midian. There is no indication during Moses’ 40 years as a shepherd, husband, and father in Midian that he considered going back to Egypt to lead Israel, and when God called him to do it, he made excuse after excuse not to go, finally saying to God, “Pardon, O my Lord. Please send someone else” (Exod. 4:13).

Num 16:14

**“you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey.”** Again, we see the convenient loss of memory about what happened only a little while before this. Moses told the people to go and conquer the Promised Land (Deut. 1:21). But the people wanted to send spies to search out the land first (Deut. 1:22). Moses agreed and the spies were sent (Num. 13:1-2; Deut. 1:24). But the spies brought back a bad report and so the Israelites did not want to go into the Promised Land (Num. 13:26-33; Deut. 1:26). The Israelites actually wanted to go back to Egypt (Num. 14:4).

So when the facts are examined, Moses wanted the people to go into the Promised Land, but the people did not want to go. Evil and satanic people will always bend the facts and distort what really happened.

**“Will you gouge out the eyes of these men?”** These leaders are accusing Moses of blinding people with promises that never come to pass.

Num 16:15

**“Do not respect their offering.”** The Hebrew is an idiom: “Do not turn your face to their offering.”

**“I have not taken one donkey from them.”** In the ancient world, it was common for leaders to take tribute from the people they led. Moses is saying that even as a leader he had not exercised that privilege (cf. 1 Sam. 8:11-17).

Num 16:16

**“You and all your company.”** This company would include the 250 men who supported Korah.

Num 16:19

**“Korah assembled all the congregation against them.”** The slander and lies about Moses and Aaron had penetrated through the whole congregation, and Korah gathered them against Moses and Aaron, likely believing that by just the strength of numbers he could overpower Moses and Aaron. But Yahweh is the Most High God, and since He was the one who appointed Moses, He would back Moses up.

**“the glory of Yahweh appeared.”** In this context, “the glory of Yahweh” was the glorious light that surrounded Yahweh. The people saw the glory and knew Yahweh Himself was present and obviously supported Moses.

[For more on the glory of God, see commentary on Ezek. 1:28.]

Num 16:21

**“Separate yourselves from among this congregation, so that I may put an end to them in a moment!”** God had had quite enough of the Israelites, and was ready to put an end to them and start over with Moses and Aaron, but because of his love for the people, Moses interceded for Israel.

Num 16:22

**“the God of the spirits of all flesh.”** Although the meaning of the phrase “the God of the spirits of all flesh” is not explained, it likely is using “spirits” in the same way “soul” is often used, of the life force empowering the flesh. So acknowledging that God is the God of the life of all flesh is acknowledging God’s power to give or take away life. Moses acknowledges that God could indeed kill the whole congregation, but is petitioning Him not to do that.

This shows the amazing love and compassion that Moses had for the people. Moses and Aaron could well have been on the point of death if the congregation had swarmed them and beaten them or stoned them. In that situation we could hardly blame Moses for approving of God killing the congregation, but that was not Moses’ heart, which was one of the reasons he was so well qualified to lead Israel; he loved the people even though they were fickle and often ungodly.

Num 16:25

**“and the elders of Israel followed him.”** The text is not clear who these elders are. They may have been some elders who did not agree with Korah, or they could have been elders who followed Korah but went with Moses to see what would happen.

Num 16:26

**“these wicked men.”** Despite what unbelievers and ungodly people say, God is the One who defines what is good and what is bad. When a person goes against one of God’s chosen leaders, that is wicked behavior and the people who wholeheartedly participate in it are wicked.

**“touch nothing of theirs.”** It is tempting to take material things from condemned people, but that is never a good idea. God can supply what we need without taking things from the wicked.

Num 16:27

**“with their wives and their sons and their little ones.”** When a leader sins and his family is consumed, it seems unnecessary to us, and even cruel. But in the collective society of the ancient world, families were considered, and considered themselves, unified and followed the leader, the head of the household. Thus we often see in the ancient literature and the Bible that the family followed the head of the house no matter where he led, and often followed him to destruction.

Num 16:30

**“then you will know that these men have had contempt for Yahweh.”** The congregation seems not to have known who to believe at this time, Korah or Moses, and they did not seem to know who really followed Yahweh, Korah or Moses. That the ground would swallow up Korah and his companions would show Israel once and for all who followed Yahweh and who was misrepresenting Yahweh and held Yahweh in contempt.

It is also telling that Moses did not end his sentence with, “then you will know that I, Moses, am the proper leader.” To Moses, this argument was never about Moses, it was always about Yahweh’s will and honor, and saving the people of Israel.

Num 16:32

**“the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up.”** This is a beautiful example of the figure of speech personification. It is as if the earth itself is an angry person, angry at Korah and his lies and rebellion, and defends the honor of God by simply opening its mouth and swallowing God’s enemies whole.

[For more on the figure of speech personification, see commentary on Prov. 1:20.]

Num 16:35

**“Then fire came out from Yahweh.”** The Bible does not say where exactly the fire came from. It may have come from the altar in front of the Tabernacle, or it may have come from the censors the men were holding.

**“and consumed the 250 men.”** See the commentary on Leviticus 10:2, “consumed.”

Num 16:40

**“burn.”** See commentary on Exodus 29:13.

**“as Yahweh spoke to him.”** Moses spoke with his mouth, but the words were Yahweh’s.

**“by Moses.”** The Hebrew text is literally, “by the hand of Moses,” an idiom referring to Moses’ power and authority.

Num 16:41

**“You have killed.”** The people completely missed the truth of the situation. Yahweh killed the rebellious leaders, as is clear in the text. It is because the congregation is often wrong that God needs strong, godly leaders to lead His people.

**“the people of Yahweh!”** The congregation is wrong again. The leaders who died from the fire were not “the people of Yahweh,” they were against Yahweh and were “the people of Korah.”

Num 16:42

**“the glory of Yahweh appeared.”** In this context, “the glory of Yahweh” was the glorious light that surrounded Yahweh. The people saw the glory and knew Yahweh Himself was present and obviously supported Moses.

[For more on the glory of God, see commentary on Ezek. 1:28.]

Num 16:46

**“for wrath has gone out from Yahweh!”** This is worded as if “wrath’’ is an independent force or person, and indeed, it is possible that this “wrath” could be an angel of wrath like the angel who killed the firstborn of Egypt on Passover night.

**Numbers Chapter 17**

Num 17:10

**“the Testimony.”** Short for “the ark of the testimony” (cf. Num. 4:5).

Num 17:12

**“die.”** The Hebrew verb *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע) refers to dying and is fundamentally synonymous with the verb “die,” *muth* (#04191 מָוֹת), although *gava* can imply a violent death (see commentary on Gen. 25:8, “breathed his last”).

Num 17:13

**“perish.”** The Hebrew verb *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע) refers to dying and is fundamentally synonymous with the verb “die,” *muth* (#04191 מָוֹת), although *gava* can imply a violent death (see commentary on Gen. 25:8, “breathed his last”).

**Numbers Chapter 18**

Num 18:5

**“and the duty of the altar.”** The job of offering offerings upon the bronze altar of sacrifice was given to the priests, not the Levites.

Num 18:7

**“inside the veil.”** The “veil” is the veil of fine linen that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies (Exod. 26:31-35). Behind the veil was the Ark of the Covenant and the Atonement Cover that had the cherubim on it. Yahweh came to Israel between the cherubim that were on the Atonement Cover, which was the cover over the Ark of the Covenant (Exod. 25:22; Lev. 16:2; see commentary on Num. 7:89).

Num 18:15

**“Everything that opens the womb of all flesh that they offer to Yahweh, both of man and animal.”** The opening of the womb, the firstborn, refers to males only, not females. this is more clearly presented in Exodus 13 (cf. Exod. 13:2, 12). The clean animals were sacrificed and the unclean animals were redeemed or killed, and the baby boys were redeemed.

**“redeem, yes, redeem.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton, where the word “redeem” is repeated twice in the Hebrew text, but the two occurrences are inflected differently. The double use of “redeem” is for emphasis, which some translations express by saying something such as, “You shall surely redeem.”

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

Num 18:16

**“five shekels.”** Five shekels is roughly 2 ounces (56.5 grams). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

Num 18:17

**“burn...into smoke.”** See commentary on Exodus 29:13.

Num 18:19

**“covenant of salt.”** Like the blood covenant, the covenant of salt was an ancient custom that was recognized all over the Middle East and even in other countries. The offerings of the Lord were to be offered with salt as a symbol of the covenant and a reminder of the commitment people made to keep the covenant (Lev. 2:13).

[For more on the salt covenant, see commentary on 2 Chron. 13:5.]

**Numbers Chapter 19**

Num 19:2

**“red heifer.”** As we see here in Numbers 19:1-22, the Red Heifer was a sin offering (Num. 19:9), and it was completely burned (Num. 19:5) and its ashes were used to cleanse people from sin. The Red Heifer was a type of Christ, who died outside the camp and whose sacrifice was necessary for people to be cleansed from sin. Although it is not stated, the red color of the heifer suggests blood, and the fact that the heifer was of red color all over seems clearly to point to Jesus Christ and the fact that by the time he was crucified, he was covered with blood.

The reason that this special sin offering was a heifer is also not mentioned, but it is very possible that it portrayed Christ in the fact that while most sin offerings were bulls (cf. Lev. 4), a heifer would never be thought of as a symbol of strength and power. Jesus was “like a lamb before his shearers,” but there are no red lambs. But a red heifer would also portray the gentle nature of Christ as he obeyed his Father’s word all the way to his death on the cross. The Red Heifer is also specifically mentioned in Hebrews 9:13.

[For more on the Red Heifer, see commentary on Heb. 13:10.]

Num 19:3

**“​she is to be brought.”** The “red heifer” is a heifer, a female cow.

**“in his presence.”** Literally, “before his face,” i.e., while he watches.

Num 19:4

**“toward the front of the Tent of Meeting.”** Numbers 19:1-10 describes some about the sacrifice of the Red Heifer, and Numbers 19:4 says, “and Eleazar the priest is to take some of her blood with his finger and sprinkle her blood toward the front of the Tent of Meeting seven times.” The fact that the priest sprinkles the blood “toward the front of the Tent of Meeting” shows that the Red Heifer was sacrificed on the east side of the Tabernacle/Temple. Jacob Milgrom writes about the phrase “toward the front of the Tent of Meeting” in the JPS Torah Commentary, and says, “**toward the front.** According to the rabbis, the front, that is, the entrance of the Tent [the Tabernacle], must be seen. Hence if the wind blows the Tent flap shut, the sprinkling is invalid. During Second Temple times, the High Priest performed the ceremony atop the Mount of Olives, which afforded a view of the entrance to the Temple building.”[[5]](#footnote-25595)

The slaughtering of the red heifer east of the Tabernacle/Temple prefigured the death of Christ east of the Temple, on top of the Mount of Olives (see commentaries on Heb. 13:10 and Matt. 27:33).

Num 19:5

**“before his eyes.”** That is, while he watches.

Num 19:6

**“cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet *material*.”** Although the reason that these three things are added to the burning of the Red Heifer is not stated, we can assume that the scarlet somehow portrays the blood of Christ. The adjective “scarlet” does not have an object in the Hebrew text, but the word obviously referred to some kind of material, yarn, or thread that was dyed scarlet. The missing object puts the emphasis on the color, scarlet, and thus topologically emphasizes the role of the blood of Christ on the cross. Also, it is possible that the cedar wood foreshadowed the wooden cross on which Jesus was crucified.

Num 19:9

**“A man who is *ritually* clean.”** This is the third person that it takes to do the Red Heifer sacrifice. The priest, who becomes unclean by touching the blood of the dead animal, the man who burns the animal who becomes unclean by touching the dead body of the animal, and this third person who becomes unclean, apparently by touching the ash pile and gathering the ashes. This seems to be quite a paradox: the clean priest and two clean people are made unclean by the sacrifice, but others are cleansed by the ashes of the sacrifice mixed with water and sprinkled on them.

Num 19:11

**“Whoever touches the dead body of any person will be unclean for seven days.”** When it comes to understanding being Levitically unclean because of the dead, it is important to understand the difference between what Numbers 19 and Leviticus 22 are saying. When Leviticus 22 says, “Whoever touches anything that is unclean by the dead...the person that touches any such will be unclean until the evening” (Lev. 22:4, 6; Num. 19:22), it is speaking of touching anything that is now unclean because it touched the dead body. Touching something that has touched a dead body makes a person unclean until sunset, i.e. the rest of the day. However, if a person directly touches a dead body, then they are unclean for seven days (Num. 19:11-16).

Num 19:12

**“purify himself with water on the third day, and on the seventh day he will be clean.”** The water was sprinkled on the third and seventh day (cf. Num. 19:19).

Num 19:17

**“they are to take.”** That is, the priests are to take some of the ashes of the Red Heifer.

**“the burning of the sin offering.”** The Red Heifer is the sin offering meant here in Numbers 19 (see Num. 19:9).

**“living water.”** “Living water” is a term used in the Bible for water that was from heaven or had been flowing. For example, rainwater was living water, as was water from a well, spring, creek, or river. Water that had been standing in a pot or had been collected and had been standing in a cistern was not considered “living water” and could not be used for cleansing from sin. That “living water” was to be used for cleansing from sin and impurity is clear from the verses in Leviticus and Numbers (cf. Lev. 14:5-9, 48-53; 15:13; Num. 19:17). However, Jesus understood the symbolism of cleansing from sin much more deeply, and knew that the reason for cleansing from sin was to be able to be “right” before God and be able to receive everlasting life. Thus, Jesus spoke of “living water” springing up to everlasting life (John 4:10-14, esp. v. 14).

As we see here in Numbers 19:17, living water could be put in a vessel or a cleansing mikvah and it would still be considered “living water” (a “mikvah” is a special cistern that people were “dunked” or baptized in to get ritually clean). The Law of Moses was not clear about how long the living water could remain in the vessel or mikvah before it was considered to no longer be “living water.” Eventually, the Jews taught that some living water could be added to the water in a mikvah or vessel and then all the water was considered “living water,” a convenient regulation that saved people a lot of work but may or may not have been godly since God had not given any regulations about it.

Some English translations read “living water” (cf. Jer. 17:13 CEB, CJB, CSB, ESV, NASB, NIV, NLT), while other translations say “living waters” (ASV, JPS, KJV, NAB, YLT). The reason for the difference is that in Hebrew the word “water,” *mayim* (#04325 מַיִם), is always plural, there is no singular form of the noun (this is true of a number of Hebrew nouns, Elohim and “heavens” being two examples). But although the Hebrew word is plural, Hebrew people did not think of it that way. They literally say, “Please give me a glass of waters,” but they mean a glass of water. When it comes to translation into English, some versions prefer to retain the plural form “waters,” while others go with the more standard meaning, “water.”

Also, although some English translations say “fresh water,” that is not completely accurate because some cistern water is quite “fresh,” whereas some rainwater might not be considered “fresh” today. Similarly, the translation “running water” is not quite accurate either, because water from a well was living water but it would not normally be considered “running water.” This is a case where learning the Jewish custom in the Bible and learning the meaning of “living water” seems to be the best course of action for the Bible student.

**“is to be added *to them* in a vessel.”** To make the water of cleansing from sin, the ashes of the Red Heifer were added to living water that had been put in a vessel and then the ashes and water were mixed together and used to sprinkle the unclean person. The Red Heifer was a type of Christ, who died outside the camp and whose sacrifice was necessary for people to be cleansed from sin (see commentary on Heb. 13:10).

Num 19:18

**“the slain, or the dead.”** The slain are those who had been killed, while the dead refers to those who died of natural causes.

**Numbers Chapter 20**

Num 20:1

**“in the first month.”** That is, the first month of the fortieth year of wandering.

Num 20:3

**“died.”** The Hebrew verb *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע) refers to dying and is fundamentally synonymous with the verb “die,” *muth* (#04191 מָוֹת), although *gava* can imply a violent death (see commentary on Gen. 25:8, “breathed his last”).

Num 20:6

**“the glory of Yahweh appeared.”** In this context, “the glory of Yahweh” was the glorious light that surrounded Yahweh. When the glory of Yahweh appeared, then Yahweh Himself was there.

[For more on the glory of God, see commentary on Ezek. 1:28.]

Num 20:8

**“while they watch.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “before their eyes,” but the phrase means while they watch.

Num 20:11

**“Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff.”** In hitting the rock, Moses disobeyed God and at the same time broke a “type” of the Messiah that God had been developing for years. That explains why the consequences of Moses’ actions led to God telling him that he could not go into the Promised Land (Num. 20:12).

Moses disobeyed God because God had said, “speak to the rock while they watch, and it will pour out its water” (Num. 20:8), but instead Moses struck the rock twice. The type of Christ that God had been trying to develop was that the rock was a metaphor for Christ, as 1 Corinthians 10:4 says, “the rock was Christ.” Two times during Israel’s wilderness wanderings, God brought water out of a rock. The living water from the rock symbolized the living water that would come to people from Christ. Christ told the people to come to him and drink (John 7:37). He also included drinking when he said he was the bread of life. He said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never ever hunger, and whoever believes in me will never ever thirst” (John 6:35). To have the fullness of the blessings that come from Christ he had to come two times. The first time Christ came he was beaten (and crucified) like the first rock that gave water to the people (Exod. 17:6).

Num 20:29

**“breathed his last.”** The Hebrew verb translated “breathed his last” is *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע), and it refers to dying (see commentary on Gen. 25:8, “breathed his last”).

**“Israel wept for Aaron for 30 days.”** In biblical Israel, it was customary that people were allowed to weep and mourn for 30 days when someone died (cf. Deut. 34:8).

**Numbers Chapter 21**

Num 21:1

**“Atharim road.”** The Hebrew reads, “road of atharim” (often translated “way of atharim” where “way” refers to a path or road). The meaning of atharim is debated, but it most likely means “spies.” It was likely a caravan route to and from Egypt.

Num 21:5

**“this miserable bread.”** That is, the manna. By now they had been eating manna for almost 40 years.

Num 21:6

**“So Yahweh sent fiery serpents.”** This is the idiom of permission (see commentary on Exod. 4:21). God had told Israel that He would protect them if they obeyed Him, but they did not obey, so He could not protect them from the snakes in the territory, which may have also been induced to be more aggressive due to demonic influence. But since God had said that bad things would happen to the people if they were disobedient, the idiom is worded as if God sent the snakes.

Num 21:13

**“the other side of the Arnon *River.*”** Israel was traveling from south to north, so the “other side” of the Arnon was the north side.

Num 21:23

**“came to Jahaz.”** The location is not known.

Num 21:24

**“the mouth of the sword.”** Used to show great destruction, as if the sword was eating its victims (see commentary on Josh. 6:21).

**“from the Arnon to the Jabbok.”** Israel conquered the Amorite kingdom of Sihon, king of the Amorites (Num. 21:21-31). From the Arnon Valley on the south (which was the northern border of Moab; Num. 21:13) to the Jabbok River Valley on the north, which was the southern border of the territory of Og of Bashan.

Num 21:28

**“for a fire has gone out of Heshbon.”** Numbers 21:28-29 is very similar to Jeremiah 48:45-46, which was written many hundreds of years later (see commentary on Jer. 48:5).

**“Ar of Moab.”** “Ar” means “city,” and Ar was apparently a notable city in Moab, but its location is unknown. Although usually an enemy of Israel, when Israel was passing by the area in its journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, Ar sold food and water to the Israelites (Deut. 2:29).

**“the lords of the high places of the Arnon.”** This Hebrew phrase has been interpreted in various ways. The Hebrew word translated as “lords” is *baal*, meaning “lord, master, owner, or husband, and is the same as the name of the god Baal, but that is not its meaning here. If the Hebrew word *bamot* here in Numbers 21:28 refers to pagan shrines, as it sometimes does (see commentary on Num. 33:52), then this could refer to the priests or influential people at the pagan shrines in Moab. It would be normal for a large city like Ar to have shrines to pagan gods.

Or, because of its association with Ar, an important city in Moab, *bamot* may simply refer to the towns and villages on the high places, of which there were many around the Arnon Gorge. In that case, the phrase could simply refer to the rulers, the “lords,” of those high places. Or it is very possible that *bamot* could be used in a general way that incorporated all its meanings, and thus it could refer to God’s vengeance on Moab, including its pagan shrines, its high cities, and its proud heights overlooking Israel.

Num 21:33

**“They turned and went up by the road to Bashan.”** The Israelites moved north from the Amorite kingdom of Sihon to the Amorite kingdom of Og, which included the territory of Bashan.

**Numbers Chapter 22**

Num 22:1

**“encamped in the plains of Moab.”** As per Numbers 21, the Israelites had just conquered the Transjordan almost as far north as Damascus, the kingdoms of Sihon and then Og. Now they turn south and camp in the plains of Moab right next to the Jordan River because the area was wide and was right across from Jericho, which was to be their first conquest in the Promised Land.

**“beyond the Jordan.”** In this context, this refers to the east side of the Jordan River.

Num 22:5

**“Pethor.”** Pethor was a town in Mesopotamia (Deut. 23:4).

**“*Euphrates* River.”** The Hebrew text simply reads, “the river,” but in the culture of the time, the Euphrates was such a dominant river that it was simply known as “the River.” Many modern versions do what the REV does and add “Euphrates” for clarity. In this case, we know “the river” is the Euphrates because Deuteronomy 23:4 says that Balaam came from Pethor in Mesopotamia, and “the river” in Mesopotamia was the Euphrates.

It is important to note that Baalam was from Mesopotamia, because he referred to God as “Most High,” and as “Shaddai,” a title of God that was used in Mesopotamia (cf. Num. 24:16 and see the REV commentary on Gen. 17:1).

**“the surface of the earth.”** The Hebrew uses the idiomatic phrase, they cover the “eye” of the earth. This phrase also occurs in verses such as Exodus 10:5, 15; and Numbers 22:11. This may be related to the fact that there were so many people covering the earth that it could not “see” because of all the people.

Num 22:6

**“curse this people for me.”** Historically there have always been people who are attracted to spiritual power and are good at tapping into it. That applies not only to God’s prophets and leaders but, in the black arts, to witches and warlocks. Job mentioned people who were effective at cursing things (Job 3:8) and the magicians of Egypt tapped into spirit power to do miracles (Exod. 7:11-12, 22; 8:7). Deuteronomy 18:10-11 has a list of black arts that are an abomination to God.

**“and that I can drive them out of the land.”** King Balak was scared of the people of Israel, but he had no need to be. They were not going to attack him. God had told Israel not to harass Moab (Deut. 2:9). That territory had been given to Moab the son of Lot the nephew of Abraham. If Balak had simply waited a month or so they would have crossed the Jordan and left Moab. Proverbs 28:1 says, “A wicked person flees when no one is pursuing, but the righteous are confident like a lion.” Balak was a wicked and frightened man.

**“for I know.”** Balaam’s reputation was well-known for hundreds of miles.

Num 22:7

**“fees for divination.”** The Hebrew text just reads “divinations” (plural), but it is a metonymy for the fee that the divination will cost.

Num 22:9

**“Who are these men with you?”** When God asks a person a question, it is not because He wants to know the answer. God knew who the men were. God asks because He wants the person to consider and honestly answer the question. In this case, Balaam did not honestly answer the question. It was true, as Balaam said in Numbers 22:10-11, that the men were from Balak. But what Balaam did not say was that he would be paid a lot of money for cursing Israel and he was greedy for that money.

It also seems that Balaam was trying to hide information from God. He told God that he was being hired to curse a “people that has come out of Egypt” (Num. 22:10-11). But it seems certain that Balaam knew who those “people” were. Forty years earlier the most powerful nation on earth at that time, Egypt, had been destroyed by these people and their God, Yahweh. Pharaoh, his army, and the land and people of Egypt had been decimated by Yahweh and the descendants of Jacob. Balaam had to know he was being hired to curse those people, and he would have known that Yahweh was their God. Rahab the Canaanite prostitute knew of Yahweh, and so did the Canaanites in the Promised Land (Josh. 2:9),

Balaam was in, what was to him, a difficult situation. If he went to Moab and cursed Israel, like he was hired to do, he would be enriched with silver and gold. However, to do that he would have to disobey Yahweh. This should not have been a difficult choice. Obeying Yahweh leads to everlasting life, while disobeying Him eventually leads to everlasting death. This choice was only difficult because Balaam was greedy. Nevertheless, it is amazing how many people choose having wealth, power, and fame in this life over having everlasting life. Cain chose Satan over Yahweh, and many people do. God’s challenge in this situation was to work with Balaam so that he would bless Israel instead of curse them, and winning over Balaam to bless Israel was the reason for the donkey incident.

[For more on everlasting death in the Lake of Fire, see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.”]

Num 22:11

**“the people that has come out of Egypt.”** It seems like Balaam is “playing dumb” here and trying to hide things from God, because it is almost certain that he would have known who “the people” were (see commentary on Num. 22:10).

**“the surface of the earth.”** The Hebrew text uses the idiomatic phrase, they cover the “eye” of the earth. This phrase also occurs in verses such as Exodus 10:5, 15; and Numbers 22:5.

Num 22:12

**“You are not to go with them. You are not to curse the people.”** This should have set the standard for what Balaam was to do: he was not to go to Moab and he was not to curse the Israelites. If Balaam had obeyed this simple directive from God, the whole Balaam incident would not have occurred. Balaam started out doing what was right, as we see in Numbers 22:13, but when Balak renewed his offer with more money and honor, Balaam gave in to his greed. With the greater offer, Balaam became determined to go (Num. 22:15-21), so God had to deal with Balaam’s free will choice and work with him so he would bless Israel instead of curse them. God worked with Balaam through the donkey and angel incident, which, when Balaam realized how close he was to being killed, resulted in him blessing Israel.

Num 22:15

**“Then Balak sent officials *back* again.”** We cannot expect that what we tell people will be respected the first time; people have to be prepared to keep their boundaries and stick to their decisions and what they know is right. Balaam said “No” to the emissaries from Moab, and that was the right and godly decision, but King Balak did not respect his decision and pressed harder for Balaam to come to Moab and Balaam, fueled by his greed, gave in.

**“the first.”** The Hebrew is more literally “these.”

Num 22:17

**“honor, yes, honor.”** The Hebrew verb “honor” is repeated twice for emphasis, literally, “honor honor,” but the first verb is an infinitive, the second is an imperfect verb. This is the figure of speech polyptoton and it is used for emphasis, the meaning being “greatly honor” (see commentary on Gen. 2:16). In this context, the great honor would be paid in the form of wealth; silver and gold and such as that.

Num 22:18

**“less or more.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “small (or “little”) or great.” This is the figure of speech polarmerismos, where two extremities are put for the whole (see commentary on Josh. 14:11). The meaning is, “I cannot go beyond the word of Yahweh to do anything at all.” Balaam makes this statement, which was true and sounded so godly, but then he followed up in the next sentence with “But.” Balaam should have stopped after what he said in Numbers 22:18 and sent the emissaries from Moab home, but he gave in to his greed.

Num 22:19

**“so that I can find out what else Yahweh will say.”** Balaam had no reason to think that Yahweh would change his mind about Israel, but he went back to God anyway. God, seeing that Balaam had his heart set on going to Moab, began to work with Balaam so that in going to Moab he would do what God wanted done, which was to bless Israel.

Num 22:20

**“If the men come to call you.”** That is a big “if,” because apparently the men did not come to call Balaam before he got up and joined them to go to Moab with them (see commentary on Num. 22:21).

Num 22:21

**“But.”** The Hebrew text begins with the letter “vav” (sometimes spelled “waw”) which can be translated as “but,” “and” (KJV) “so” (CEB), “when” (CSB), and other ways as well, or in many situations it may be omitted in the translation (NJB).

Unlike many pagan gods, which are fickle and unpredictable, God is righteous and loving, and is consistent in how He acts. Yahweh cannot tell Balaam to go with the men from Moab (Num. 22:20: “If the men come to call you, rise up, go with them”), and then in Numbers 22:22 be angry with Balaam for going with them (“So God’s anger was kindled because he went”). There has to be some mitigating circumstance that caused God to be angry when Balaam went with the men of Moab, and that circumstance seems to be that God said, “If the men come to call you,” and apparently for whatever reason they did not come but Balaam was so desirous for the wealth that he would get for going that he got up and left with the men without them first coming to get him.

**“Balaam rose up.”** There is no indication that the men of Moab had come to Balaam before he went to them. This shows that Balaam was likely so intent on personal enrichment that without the intervention of the angel, he would have ignored his own statement that he could not go beyond the word of Yahweh and would have said whatever it took to get Balak to give him the money and honor he wanted. He had no personal love for Israel, as we see in the record of his life. For example, Balaam played a part in the Moabite women leading the Israelites into sin (Num. 25:1-5; 31:8, 16).

**“saddled.”** The modern saddle will not be invented for over 1,000 years. At this time people tied a blanket over the donkey in order to ride it (see commentary on 1 Kings 13:13).

Num 22:22

**“as an adversary.”** If God had really wanted to kill Balaam, He could have. The fact that He did not, and that the angel miraculously appeared to the donkey, shows that God was just trying to impress upon Balaam the seriousness of the situation and the need to speak only what God told him to speak (cf. Num. 22:35).

**“and his two servants were with him.”** Balaam went with the emissaries from Moab (Num. 22:21) and took his two servants (likely slaves) with him. This would have been the common practice. The high officials of Moab would never have been expected to serve Balaam's regular needs during the long journey from Mesopotamia to Moab, and not even his needs while he was in Moab. By mentioning the two servants, the text tells us how Balaam gets personal help during his journey and stay.

Num 22:23

**“The donkey saw the angel of Yahweh.”** Numbers 22:23 begins a long 13-verse interplay between Balaam, his donkey, and the angel of Yahweh. Balaam was determined to go with the officials of Moab, and so God had to work with Balaam so that when he arrived in Moab he would obey God and bless Israel and not curse them. There are a number of miracles in this interplay: the donkey seeing the angel, the donkey talking, and Balaam seeing the angel (angels are normally invisible).

Num 22:27

**“with his staff.”** In the ancient biblical culture, almost every man traveled with a staff (see commentary on Exod. 4:20). Balaam hit his donkey with his staff.

Num 22:28

**“Yahweh opened the mouth of the donkey.”** God has the power to give human speech to animals. In the future, an eagle will give the earth warnings from God (Rev. 8:13).

Num 22:29

**“Then Balaam said to the donkey.”** It is amazing that God had the donkey talk to Balaam, but perhaps more amazing that Balaam talked back to the donkey. There are seemingly two most possible explanations for this. One is that Balaam was so angry and blinded by his greed for the money King Balak would give him for cursing Moab that he momentarily overlooked that a donkey was talking to him. However, the most likely explanation seems to be that the prophet Balaam was used to spiritual experiences that to us would be highly unusual. Balaam seems to have had one foot in the demonic world and one foot in God’s spiritual world, and there are wild things that happen in both. In the black arts, demons regularly do highly unusual things including apparitions, things appearing and disappearing, unusual or unexpected feelings and sounds, hot and cold spots, and things moving around. God does unusual things too, such as angels talking from burning bushes, writing on the wall of Belshazzar’s palace, food mysteriously multiplying, etc. In light of the totally unusual things that Balaam might have seen in his years as a prophet, perhaps a talking donkey, though unusual, did not seem beyond possibility.

Num 22:31

**“and Balaam kneeled.”** The Hebrew text reads “he,” not “Balaam,” but the REV has “Balaam” to avoid any confusion about who the “he” refers to.

**“kneeled and bowed down.”** This kneeling preceded bowing down to the ground. The two actions—kneeling and then bowing to the ground—blended into one act of homage or worship. The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body and face to the earth. Also, instead of “kneeled and bowed down,” the text could be translated “bowed down and worshiped,” with “kneeling” being understood as part of the process of bowing down, and “bowing down” was the act of worship. The same Hebrew verb, *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), is translated as both “bow down” and “worship”; traditionally “worship” if God is involved and “bow down” if people are involved, but the verb and action are the same, the act of bowing down is the worship.

At this time Balaam realized the danger he was in. He was on the path to disobey God, and realized that God might well kill him for it. That apparently shocked Balaam enough that he decided to say what God wanted said and not risk his life for money, and so he ended up blessing Israel, which is what God wanted.

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship” and commentary on 1 Chron. 29:20.]

Num 22:32

**“your way is perverse before me.”** Balaam finally really gets this and decides to speak what God wants him to speak.

Num 22:36

**“which is on the extreme *northern* edge of the territory *of Moab*.”** Here King Balak shows eagerness and hospitality to the prophet Balaam by going as far north in Moab as he could get and still be in Moab.

Num 22:37

**“urgently send.”** The Hebrew text is the figure of speech polyptoton, where the verb “send” is repeated twice in a row, the first verb being an infinitive and the second verb being a qal perfect (for more on polyptoton, see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

**“Am I really not able to honor you?”** In this context, “honor” means to honor someone by giving them wealth, which could be in the form of silver, gold, jewels, livestock, etc. When King Balak says, “Am I really not able to honor you,” he is saying to Balaam something like, “Why would you doubt that I can greatly honor you,” i.e., by giving you great wealth.

Num 22:38

**“*but* am I now able to speak just anything?”** Balaam forewarns King Balak that he cannot speak whatever Balak wants said, but must speak the words that God gives him to say. But King Balak is so blinded by what he strongly desires that he does not hear what Balaam says.

Num 22:39

**“Kiriath-huzoth.”** The Hebrew means “city of streets,” but the site is unknown.

Num 22:40

**“Balak sacrificed cattle and sheep and sent to Balaam, and to the officials.”** We do not know enough about the sacrificial practices of Moab to be sure about what these sacrifices were. However, since people generally got to eat some of the meat from sacrifices, many scholars conclude, and likely rightly so, that the animals were sacrificed both to procure the blessings of the gods and to have fresh meat for a royal welcome for Balaam. These sacrifices were not part of Balaam’s ritual to procure the favor of God.

Num 22:41

**“Bamot-baal.”** The Hebrew can mean “the high places of Baal” or “the shrines of Baal.” This would have been a height in the mountains of Moab that overlooked at least part of the camp of Israel, and there would be shrines to the god Baal there. There would have been some kind of temple or shrine there for it to be called “the high places (or “shrines”) of Baal,” so Baal would have been one of the gods worshiped there.

[For more on the Hebrew word *bamot* being translated as “shrines,” see REV commentary on Num. 33:52.]

**“the extremity.”** The Hebrew text is unclear as to whether “the extremity” refers to the whole nation of Israel or just one end of the nation of Israel. The situation and context seem to favor it referring to all the people of Israel. It seems Balak would first take Balaam to a place where he could see, and thus curse, the whole nation of Israel (NET, NKJV, REB), and when Balaam did not do that, later take Balaam to a place where he could only see some of the people of Israel (Num. 23:13). In spite of that, a number of versions say something such as “some of the people” or “a portion of the people” (e.g., AMP, CEB, CJB, ESV, NASB, NLT, NRSV). The text is not totally clear. What we do know is that Balaam could see Israel, and Balak wanted him to curse them.

**Numbers Chapter 23**

Num 23:1

**“seven altars...seven bulls...seven rams.”** The number seven has special significance to God and His people, but also in the area of magic arts in general. Even in the Harry Potter movies the number 7 is referred to as the most powerful magic number. God tied the number seven into creation when he created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, thus making the seven-day week. Also, the seventh month was especially holy, as was the seventh year, the “year of release.” Here Balaam apparently tries to tap into the spiritual power of seven with his altars and offerings.

Num 23:4

**“and Balaam said to him, ‘I have prepared…’”** It seems like Balaam was trying to follow some specific formula that would please God and get His attention and favor.

Num 23:7

**“saying.”** The Hebrew word generally refers to something that is said, especially a poem, proverb, or simile. In this case, it refers to Balaam saying what God told him to say.

**“harm Israel.”** The Hebrew word in this context, paired with “curse,” means to harm or injure.[[6]](#footnote-24506)

Num 23:9

**“and does not consider itself to be among the nations.”** Israel would not consider itself to be just one of the nations due to its special relationship with Yahweh and the laws and practices it lived by.

Num 23:10

**“Let me die the death of the righteous!”** Balaam is not wishing to die, but making a profound statement. The everlasting future of a righteous person is everlasting life in Christ’s kingdom. The future of an unrighteous person is death in the Lake of Fire. Balaam wants, rightly so, to die as a righteous person and have his “last end,” his death and everlasting future, be like that of the righteous person.

Num 23:11

**“blessed, yes, blessed.”** The verb translated as “blessed” is repeated twice for emphasis. The first verb is a perfect, the second is an infinitive. The repetition of the verb this way is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16). The repetition catches the attention of the reader and strongly emphasizes the word “blessed.” Thus the meaning is something like, “I brought you *here* to curse my enemies, but behold, you have BLESSED them!”

Num 23:12

**“But Balaam answered.”** The text is literally “he” answered, but it refers to Balaam.

**“Don’t I have to be careful to speak *only* what Yahweh puts in my mouth?”** This is a very important lesson that everyone who prophesies or interprets what he or she has just spoken in a tongue must learn. The words people speak in those situations are to come from God, not from what the person thinks they should say. Today, the message that comes in prophecy or interpretation comes from God or the Lord Jesus Christ and needs to be spoken accurately and faithfully as the Lord gives the message.

Num 23:13

**“Come with me to another place.”** The Bible does not say why King Balak thought Balaam might be able to curse Israel from another place, but a possible explanation is that in ancient times, many people thought that “gods” were territorial, and had powers in certain land areas (see commentary on 1 Kings 20:23). So it would make sense to Balak that if Balaam’s god would not let him curse Israel from one place, he might allow it in another.

Num 23:14

**“the field of Zophim.”** This field is unlocated. “Zophim” is likely the man’s name who owns the field, but “Zophim” is related to watching, or a look-out, so it could also be something like “the field of the Watchers,” a well-known place where people went to look for omens and such.

**“seven altars and offered up a bull and a ram on every altar.”** The pattern of seven bulls and seven rams occurs several times in the chapter (Num. 23:1, 14, 29). The number seven was thought to have special power. That may go all the way back to God creating the earth in six days and resting the seventh day, thus making the seven-day week.

Num 23:15

**“while I meet *Yahweh* over there.”** The Hebrew text does not have an object to the verb, and reads, “while I meet over there.” The REV supplies “Yahweh” from the similar passage in Numbers 23:3. Most English versions supply a word like “LORD” or “God” as an object to the verb for clarity of English reading.

Num 23:16

**“and put a word in his mouth.”** This is a way of saying that God gave Balaam revelation. God gave Balaam the words to say.

Num 23:17

**“What has Yahweh spoken?”** This is the first time Balak mentions Yahweh, the God of Israel. It does not seem, however, that Balak could truly realize the fullness of what he was saying, because if he had, he would not have expected Yahweh, Israel’s God, to curse Israel. We must remember that in the ancient world, the pagan gods were capricious and unpredictable, and would afflict the people who worshiped them for almost any reason or no reason at all. One only needs to read the myths about the Greek and Roman gods to see this. So it is likely that Balak thought that with the right formulas, incantations, and sacrifices, Yahweh could be enticed to curse Israel.

Num 23:18

**“Rise up, Balak.”** Balak was already standing, so in this context, the imperative phrase means more like, “Pay attention!”

**“Listen to me, O son of Zippor.”** Balaam told King Balak to listen, but Balak did not listen. He knew what he wanted, which was for Balaam to curse Israel, and he did not “hear” anything that Balaam spoke to the contrary. God gave great gems of wisdom and knowledge to Balaam, who spoke them to Balak and those with him and now, through the Word of God, to the whole world. Amazingly, if King Balak had really listened to Balaam, and went and made peace with Israel, who had no fight with Moab, Balak and the Moabite nation would have been blessed (cf. Gen. 12:3; Num. 24:9).

Num 23:19

**“God.”** Here in Numbers 23:19 the Hebrew word is “El.”

**“human being.”** The Hebrew does not specifically refer to a male, but rather to a human being. The word is masculine singular, but it still refers more to an “individual” or “human” than to a “man.”

**“that he would lie.”** The Hebrew verb translated as “lie” is *kazab* (#03576 כָּזַב) and its most common meaning is “lie.” However, in the piel aspect of the verb, which it is in Numbers 23:19, *kazab* can also mean to fail.[[7]](#footnote-32598) This opens the door for the verse to be read two different ways, both true (this is the figure of speech amphibologia).[[8]](#footnote-14394) It is true that God is not a man and He does not lie.

Timothy Ashley writes: “God is definitely not a man. He is the Creator, not a creature. Of the many predications that could have been chosen here, [*God is not a man*] *that he should fail* points to a very basic distinction between the Creator and a creature. Although the translation ‘lie’ is common, the context shows that the primary thought is not that God does not utter untruths (although that is true), but that his purposes are utterly true and reliable, and that his nature does not disappoint or fail, as is the case with human creatures.”[[9]](#footnote-19729)

The idea of God not failing in what He sets out to do is reflected in the next verse, Numbers 23:20, in which Balaam says, “He [God] has blessed, and I cannot reverse it.” God will not fail in His purposes, so Balaam has no power to change what God had decided to do.

**“change his mind.”** The Hebrew word translated “change his mind” is *nacham* (#05162 נָחַם). This verse has been considered difficult by some people because it seems to contradict what God has said in other places. For example, a number of verses say that God did change his mind (cf. Exod. 32:14; Jer. 18:8; Amos 7:3, 6; Jon. 3:10). But the resolution to the apparent contradiction is to realize that Numbers 23:19 (and similarly, 1 Sam. 15:29) is spoken in a specific context, it is not a general statement. God changes his mind and adapts to people, who He is committed to work with, but He does not change His mind when it comes to His purposes for the earth and the creatures on it, including people. The context here in Numbers is Balaam the prophet telling Balak the king of Moab that God will not change His mind about His purpose for Israel and that therefore God will not allow Balaam to curse Israel, no matter how badly Balak wants Him to.

[For more on God changing His mind, see commentary on Jer. 18:8.]

Num 23:20

**“reverse it.”** The Hebrew word translated as “reverse” is *shuv* (#07725 שׁוּב), and it means to revoke, cancel, countermand, reverse, turn back. Balaam cannot reverse or revoke what God has said.

Num 23:21

**“He has not beheld iniquity in Jacob, nor has he seen perversity in Israel.”** The Hebrew words translated in the REV as “iniquity” and “perversity” both have quite a wide range of meanings and so the English versions vary considerably. They can refer to either misfortune/disaster and trouble/harm in a physical sense or, as the REV is translated, iniquity/evil and wrongdoing/perversity in a moral sense. A number of English versions read “iniquity” and “perverseness” (e.g., ASV, AMPC, RV, KJV, LSV, YLT) leaning toward the meaning of the verse being more a moral issue. God had not seen iniquity or perversity in Israel, so He had no reason to curse them.

**“acclaimed as a king among them.”** The Hebrew word sometimes translated as “shout” (ASV, ESV, KJV) refers to a loud cry that can be a battle cry, a cry of rejoicing, or, in this case, a cry of “jubilant homage for the king” (*HALOT*). Like the REV, some other English versions have “acclaimed as king” or something similar (e.g., CEB, CJB. CSB, JPS, NET, NLT, NRSV).

By the time of the events in Numbers 23, when Israel was encamped on the eastern edge of the Jordan River across from Jericho, the forty years of the wilderness wanderings were almost over and most of the older unbelieving generation of Israelites had died. The generation that was left, along with Joshua who was about to take over the leadership of Israel, had some trouble but mostly followed Yahweh as their God and acclaimed Yahweh as their true king. God acknowledged that and so overlooked their other problems and would not curse them.

Num 23:22

**“God is bringing them out of Egypt.”** Although the 40 years of wilderness wanderings were almost over, they were not completely over. God was still in the process of bringing Israel out of Egypt.

**“horns.”** The exact meaning of the Hebrew word in this context is unknown. Many scholars usually think it refers to “horns,” where horns would refer to the strength or power of the wild ox, thus most English translations have either “horns” or “strength.”

**“wild ox.”** Timothy Ashley writes that the “wild ox (*re’ēm*) is equivalent to Akkadian *rîmu* and Ugaritic. *r’um*, evidently a large, fierce, powerful wild bovine...the now-extinct ancestor of modern cattle (cf. Num. 24:8; Deut. 33:17; Isa. 34:11; Job 39:9; Ps. 22:22 [Eng. 21]; 29:6; 92:11 [Eng. 10]). It is probable that the wild ox was already extinct in the Middle Bronze Age [when Abraham lived], and that the allusions in the Bible are derived from long-transmitted stories about it.”[[10]](#footnote-14500)

Num 23:23

**“against Jacob...against Israel.”** There are two ways to understand the Hebrew text. One is like the REV reads, “no magic curse against Jacob.” The other way the Hebrew text can be understood is “no magic curse among Jacob,” meaning the people of Israel are not involved in practicing magic and divination. In this context, the first meaning seems to be the correct one for two reasons: the context is Balaam attempting to curse Israel, so it would be appropriate for Yahweh to say to him that there is no magic curse against Israel. The second reason is that there did seem to be some amount of magic arts practiced among Israel, and God had to warn them about it (Deut. 18:9-14). Israel was never able to totally divest itself of the worship of pagan gods and the practices that went along with that worship.

There was quite a lot of “sympathetic magic” in the worship of pagan gods. The concept of sympathetic magic is that people on earth can do something that invokes or inspires the gods to act in a similar fashion, or something in the spiritual world can be affected by something in the physical world that it is somehow connected to, or represents. For example, some of the ritual sex that was involved with pagan worship was supposedly done to invoke and inspire the gods to fertilize the earth and bring forth the crops. Supposedly the gods would see the sex act and then act in a way that fertilized the earth. Another common example of sympathetic magic occurs in voodoo and some witches’ curses when a symbol of something physical on earth is stabbed, stuck with a pin, or otherwise harmed and the gods are supposed to get the idea and then harm the intended victim. Curses and curse texts of different kinds were common in the ancient world, and so similarly, as if in defense, protective amulets, charms, and symbols were just as common. Almost every culture has charms of some kind to protect people from harm, and so there are literally hundreds of different kinds that have been used through history and many “defensive charms” are still being used today.[[11]](#footnote-13406) God considers all those symbols, amulets, charms, and “things that protect” to be a distraction from Him and His ability to protect. Believers need to be diligent to cleanse their lives from things that detract from the glory and power of the one true God.

**“See what God has done!”** The Hebrew text is just “What God had done,” but the meaning is “See what God has done!”

Num 23:24

**“like a lion.”** Israel was sometimes portrayed as a lion, projecting strength and power. In this case, the idea is that Israel is invincible and will win the conflict. The lion analogy is used here in Numbers 23:24 in Balaam’s second prophecy, and it is used again in Balaam’s third prophecy (Num. 24:9).

Here again, it is helpful to remember that God had told Israel not to harass Moab (Deut. 2:9), and if Moab had simply left Israel alone, the Israelites would have passed by them without incident. But Balak’s unnecessary fear caused him to act in a way that harmed his own people. Irrational and causeless fear has harmed many people and nations. The Bible encourages believers not to be anxious or afraid.

Num 23:25

“**Neither curse them at all nor bless them at all!”** Balak is so frustrated that he has an emotional outburst. He did not actually mean it, however, and continues to try to get Balaam to curse Israel.

Num 23:27

**“Perhaps it will be right in the eyes of God.”** Balak has already taken Balaam to two places, and the message from Yahweh has been consistent that He will not let Israel be cursed. Balak must have been overcome with blind fear of Israel combined with pride to think that Yahweh would somehow change His mind and decide to energize a curse upon Israel.

**“curse them for me from there.”** Balak had moved Balaam before, perhaps based on the notion that gods were territorial and might do in one place something that they might not do in another place (see commentary on Num. 23:13)

Num 23:28

**“the top of Peor.”** “Peor” seems to be the name of one of the peaks in the mountain range that is in western Moab, looking to the west over the Jordan Valley where Israel was camped. Thus, from the top of Peor, Balaam could see part of the camp of Israel. The exact site of Peor is unknown. It likely had a sacrificial site dedicated to Baal, because the Baal that is worshiped there is referred to as Baal-peor (i.e., the Baal of Peor) in a few different places in the Bible (e.g., Num. 25:3, 5; Deut. 4:3; Hos. 9:10).

Num 23:29

**“seven altars.”** The number seven was thought to have some sort of magical power (see commentary on Num. 23:1).

**Numbers Chapter 24**

Num 24:1

**“to make use of divinations.”** The Hebrew text is more literally “to encounter (or, “meet with”) divinations,” and in this context that probably means to use the normal practices used in divination. What those practices were is not described, likely because they were the normal practices associated with divination.

There were distinctive differences between this third time that Balaam heard from God and the previous two times that he went to meet with God. For one, Balaam did not use divination techniques, as he previously had. Furthermore, as we see also here in Numbers 24:1, Balaam “did not go out” away from Balak and his officials when he sought to hear from God, but stayed with them. Also, significantly, “the spirit of God came upon him,” like it did on other prophets of God, and then he spoke his message (e.g. Num. 11:25-29; Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 1 Sam. 16:13; 2 Kings 2:9; 2 Chron. 15:1; 20:14).

**“he set his face toward the wilderness.”** In this context, the wilderness is the Judean wilderness to the west, where Balaam could see the wilderness and part of the tribes of Israel (see Num. 24:2).

Num 24:2

**“and the spirit of God came upon him.”** God can put His holy spirit upon people in the Old Testament as He chooses, and different phrases in the Bible describe the spirit coming upon the person. God generally put His holy spirit upon godly people and prophets (Num. 11:17, 25-26; Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 1 Sam. 10:10; 16:13; 1 Chron. 12:18; 2 Chron. 15:1).

False prophets and evil people generally are possessed by evil spirits, demons, and prophesy via them. Thus, some of the false prophets in the Old Testament prophesied “by Baal” (Jer. 2:8; 23:13). The woman who followed Paul and prophesied had a “spirit of divination” (literally a “python spirit”) and Paul cast it out of her (Acts 16:16-18).

While God does not usually put His gift of holy spirit upon false prophets and evil people, He can do so if He chooses and sees a profit in it. A strange example of this is in 1 Samuel 19:18-24. King Saul was trying to kill David and sent messengers to capture him, but the spirit of God would rush upon them and they would prophesy, and that happened to Saul himself.

Num 24:3

**“whose eye was closed.”** This “eye” is the eye of one’s understanding. Balaam did not understand, but now he says he does. He did not realize how unique and valuable to God the Israelites were, but now he realizes it, at least to some extent. He certainly foretells the coming of the Messiah (cf. Num. 24:17).

Num 24:4

**“God.”** The Hebrew word here is “El,” an ancient name for God. It was used by the Canaanites for one of the highest gods in their pantheon, and it is used as a name of God in the Bible. Interestingly, there are four different words for God used in Balaam’s last two oracles, and three of them were ancient names that were also used in the ancient Akkadian, Canaanite, and Ugaritic myths about God. Numbers 24:2 uses *Elohim* (“the spirit of Elohim”). Numbers 24:4 uses *El* (“the words of El”), a very ancient name for God that is found in the Canaanite, Akkadian, and Ugaritc mythology. It also uses *Shaddai* (“the vision of Shaddai”). Numbers 24:16 uses three ancient names for God: *El*, *Elyon* (“Most High”), and *Shaddai* (the “One of the Mountain;” see commentary on Gen. 17:1).

**“falling.”** What is happening here is not well described and is debated. Some commentators simply see this as Balaam recognizing the revelation he is receiving from God and falling prostrate as a sign of humility and submission, which would be quite similar to what Balaam did when God opened his eyes and he saw the angel with a sword who was positioned to kill him (Num. 22:31), and also how Daniel reacted when the angel appeared in a vision and spoke with him (Dan. 8:17). However, others see this falling down as a result of the overcoming power of the visionary experience that was happening to Balaam, in which case this is similar to what Daniel experienced at a different time (Dan. 10:9). For example, Robert Alter writes: “‘Prostrate’ (literally ‘falling’) most likely refers to the state of ecstasy in which the seer is flung to the ground.”[[12]](#footnote-31729) The text does read, “falling and having his eyes uncovered,” so Timothy Ashley writes: “...it is clear that in this ‘fallen’ state Balaam’s eye of perception was ‘uncovered’ by God. The word *uncover* (*gala*) is used of divine revelation.”[[13]](#footnote-12381) The text is not clear on exactly what happened, and so we cannot be sure, but it does seem that his falling and his seeing the vision happened at basically the same time.

**“having his eyes uncovered.”** The Hebrew word translated as “uncovered” is *galah* (#01540 גָּלָה), and the first definition in the *HALOT* Hebrew-English lexicon is “uncover, to lay bare.” Although it gets translated as “opened” in many versions, the translation “uncovered” is more accurate because it refers to “uncovering” divine secrets by revelation. Balaam had the spirit of God, and by revelation, God “uncovered” things that Balaam would not have otherwise known and revealed them to Balaam. Quite a few English versions read “uncovered” (CEB, CSB, ESV, LSV, NASB, NRSV, RSV, and YLT), or, “unveiled” (JPS, NAB).

When God gives powerful revelation to the mind, the regular activity of the mind is superseded by the revelation vision (or voice, or taste, or touch), and what the person “sees” is the vision that God is giving to him or her. “The cessation of all perception by means of the outer senses, so far as self-conscious reflection is concerned, was a feature that was common to both the vision and the dream, the two forms in which the prophetic gift manifested itself (cf. Num. 12:6)….”[[14]](#footnote-12040)

Num 24:5

**“Jacob...Israel.”** The two names refer to the same people but do not carry the same emphasis. The name “Jacob” looks back to the origin of the tribes and places more emphasis on family unity, while the name “Israel” looks forward to the destiny of God’s chosen people and places more emphasis on the nation and covenant community and the destiny of that community.

Num 24:6

**“Like valleys they are stretched out.”** When Israel was encamped, they pitched their tents in an orderly fashion so that from far away they looked like valleys or like trees by rivers.

**“aloes.”** The species of plant is not known. Scholars have educated guesses, but they are just guesses.

**“cedar trees.”** Tall and stately trees, highly valued for their wood.

Num 24:7

**“Water will flow from his buckets.”** Israel is personified here as a man carrying buckets of water. Water was essential for life and especially valued in the ancient Near East where it was often scarce. In this case, Israel is portrayed as being a source of life for themselves and others. The “water” that flows from Israel will be both physical and spiritual. When Israel was walking with God, the weather was good and the rain came in its season, and in the future living water will flow from the Millennial Temple and heal the land (Ezek. 47:1-12). Also, however, the “water” is a metaphor for the spirit and the life that the spirit produces and energizes (cf. John 7:37-39).

**“his seed will be in many waters.”** This second clause in the sentence has no verb, which has led to different ideas and translations as to what the clause means. The two most likely possibilities are that the verb “flow” is distributed from the first clause to the second: “and his seed will flow in many waters,” or, the “to be” verb is meant: “his seed will be in many waters.” The “to be” verb is sometimes left out in Hebrew. Most scholars assert that the text is saying that in the future the “seed” of Israel, the progeny of Israel, will be abundantly supplied with what they need to flourish and grow. That was certainly the case in the immediate future and will be the case in the ultimate future, but sadly for much of its history Israel turned away from God, their source of supply, and suffered consequences for it.

**“His king will be higher than Agag.”** “Agag” was the name of an Amalakite king in Samuel’s time (1 Sam. 15:8). Although there is no evidence of an Amalakite king from the time of Moses and Joshua being named “Agag,” we can assume from the reliability of the Bible that either there was a king named Agag or that “Agag” was a title for kings of the Amalekites in the same way that “Jabin” was a title of the king of Hazor (Josh. 11:1). It is well-known that personal and dynastic names were repeated in the genealogies in the ancient Near East and the biblical culture. At this time in history, the Amalekites were one of the stronger nations that inhabited the Promised Land, and they were one of the reasons that the Israelites were afraid to try to conquer Canaan (cp Num. 13:29).

Num 24:8

**“God is bringing him out of Egypt.”** At the time Balaam spoke this prophecy, God was still bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. He said He would bring them into the Promised Land, and He was still in the process of doing that.

Num 24:9

**“as a lion, as a lioness.”** Israel was sometimes portrayed as a lion, projecting strength and power. The lion analogy was used in Balaam’s second prophecy (Num. 23:24), and here in Numbers 24:9 it is used again in Balaam’s third prophecy.

**“Everyone who blesses you is blessed.”** This prophecy of Balaam harkens back to Genesis 12:3, in which God said to Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who treats you with contempt I will curse, and all of the clans of the earth will be blessed through you.” Abraham had eight sons, and as it turned out, the primary focus of this pronouncement that God made to him was his son Isaac, through whom the Messiah would come. Years later, Isaac said to Jacob, “Cursed be everyone who curses you. Blessed be everyone who blesses you.” True to form, Isaac had two sons, but the Messiah would come through Isaac’s son Jacob. Balaam’s prophecy did not reveal which tribe of Israel the Messiah would come through, but was a more general prophecy that people who blessed Israel would be blessed and people who cursed Israel would be cursed.

**“curses...cursed.”** Here in Numbers 24:9, the word translated as “curses...cursed” is *ʾarar* (#0779 אָרַר), and *ʾarar* is commonly translated as “curse” (see commentary on Gen. 12:3).

Num 24:10

**“and he clapped his hands together.”** Balak clapped his hands together out of emotion, anger, and frustration. Although most translations say that Balak “struck” his hands together, we use the translation “clap,” suggested in *HALOT*. Most people know what it is to be so frustrated with something that we clap our hands together, and that is what Balak did.

**“blessed, yes, blessed.”** The verb “blessed” is repeated twice for emphasis, which is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16). In this case, the first “blessed” is a perfect verb and the second is an infinitive. In Hebrew an emphatic infinitive can be used to “highlight the certainty of the verbal action”[[15]](#footnote-23486) or to emphasize the verb. This is the case here. It would be kind of like how we use capitalization in modern English to emphasize a word. Instead of Balak saying, ‘You did the opposite of what I asked!” he emphasizes his point by repeating the verb. In more colloquial English this would be, ‘You did the OPPOSITE of what I asked!”

Num 24:11

**“run back to your place!”** Balak wants no more of Balaam, he just wants him to leave, and leave quickly. Some English versions have the word “flee” but that does not seem appropriate here. We usually flee from danger, but Balak was not threatening Balaam, he just wanted him to go back home.

**“honor, yes, honor you.”** The verb “honor” is repeated twice for emphasis, which is the figure of speech polyptoton (see commentary on Gen. 2:16). In this case, the first verb is an infinitive and the second is an imperfect verb. The meaning of the emphasized phrase is “greatly honor,” and it referred to a large payment for an effective curse.

**“but behold, Yahweh has kept you back from honor.”** It is amazing how God has been blamed for all kinds of evil and misfortune, and has been blamed for them through the ages and still today. In this case, all Yahweh did was continue to fulfill the promise he made to Abraham centuries earlier, and be consistent in his blessings upon Israel. It was Balaam’s choice to obey the voice of Yahweh and not try to disobey God and curse Israel, which would only have resulted in harm to him. Today, Christians blame God for all kinds of evil that is actually due to the Devil’s workings and/or people’s sin (see commentary on Luke 4:6).

Num 24:13

**“from my *own* mind.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “from my own heart,” but in the ancient Hebrew culture, the heart was thought of as the place where thoughts and emotions originated, so in this context and given our modern Western culture, the translation “mind” is good, while the translation “heart” could well be misleading.

Num 24:14

**“in the future.”** This phrase is used in Genesis 49:1 (see commentary on Gen. 49:1).

Num 24:15

**“the man whose eye was closed says.”** See commentary on Numbers 24:3.

Num 24:16

**“God...the Most High...*El* Shaddai.”** It is important to note that here in Numbers 24:16, Balaam refers to God by three different ancient names: “El,” “Elyon” (“the Most High”), and also as “Shaddai.”

“El” was one of the primary gods in the Mesopotamian and Canaanite pantheons, and appears in Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Canaanite mythology. The name “Elyon” means “Most High,” a fitting title because Yahweh was the “most high” God on the holy mountain of assembly (Isa. 14:13; Ezek. 28:14, 16). “Shaddai” means “the One of the Mountain.” “Shaddai” was a name for God used in Akkadia and thus also in Mesopotamia and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew God by the name “Shaddai.” Balaam came from Mesopotamia and would have been very familiar with all three of those names for God and uses them all here in Numbers 24:16 as well as the name Yahweh (Num. 22:5; Deut. 23:4).

It is worth noting that Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Moabite—ancient languages that have much similar vocabulary to Hebrew and shed light on the meaning of the Hebrew text—had not been translated and understood before the mid-1800s, and Ugaritic before the 1930’s. Thousands of tablets have been discovered in those languages since 1928, and so today we have a much better understanding of many Hebrew words, including the ancient names for God such as “Shaddai,” than we had even just 100. years ago. Thus today we have a much better understanding of the ancient religious beliefs that we had even when English versions such as the American Standard Version of 1901 were translated. That is one reason why, for those who really want to understand the Bible, reading modern versions of the Bible is a better choice than reading older versions, especially versions done before 1950.

[For more on the name Shaddai (the One of the Mountain), and also the mountain being referred to, and also that God is referred to as the “Most High” because He is the highest God on the mountain, see commentary on Gen. 17:1].

**“having his eyes uncovered.”** The Hebrew phrase is used earlier in the chapter (see commentary on Num. 24:4).

Num 24:17

**“I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near.”** These words of Balaam about the coming Messiah are very accurate. We know that many Old Testament greats like Abraham (John 8:56; Heb. 11:8-10) and Moses (Heb. 11:24-26) looked forward to the Messiah, but here Balaam accurately foretold that he was not “now,” not “near,” and indeed the Messiah did not come until 1,400 years after Moses.

**“A star will come out of Jacob.”** It is agreed upon by conservative Christian scholars and many ancient rabbis that the “star” is the Messiah.[[16]](#footnote-11952) So here in Numbers 24:17, the Gentile prophet Balaam foretold that the Messiah would be an Israelite, and would not come on earth for a long time. As it turned out, it was around 1,400 years later that Jesus was born.

**“forehead.”** The Masoretic text reads “corners,” but it has been pointed out by some scholars that “corners” can refer to the corners of the head, meaning the forehead. Furthermore, the Septuagint, Vulgate, Peshita, and some targums read “forehead,” so there is quite good evidence that either the original text read “forehead,” or that was the understood meaning of the Hebrew text. The *HALOT*[[17]](#footnote-30200) notes that the forehead of Moab refers to the rulers of Moab, and that is a good possibility. The rabbi Rashi says the forehead refers to the temples, which were the spiritual head of Moab. In any case, Balak the king of Moab hired Balaam to curse Israel, but instead, Moab was the country that was eventually destroyed.

**“and the crown of the head.”** The Masoretic Hebrew text reads “break, devastate,” but the Samaritan Pentateuch reads “crown of the head” and that seems to be confirmed by Jeremiah 48:45.

**“all the sons of Seth.”** This is an expansion of the prophecy. The first part was just about Moab, but “all the sons of Seth” expands the prophecy to the whole earth. Since Seth was the son of Adam and Eve that led to Noah, and Noah’s flood killed everyone on earth except his line, “all the sons of Seth” would be everyone on earth. The Messiah will subdue everyone on earth, and everyone will submit to him, either willingly or unwillingly.

Here, as well as in the last clause, “the crown of the head” can refer to the temples and gods, and this could well be a prophecy that not only the people, but the gods of those people will be subdued by the Messiah.

Num 24:18

**“Edom...Seir.”** In many contexts, “Edom” refers to the people and “Seir” to the territory (Gen. 32:3), but in this case “Seir” is referred to as “his enemies,” so it also is being used for the Edomites. So here in Numbers 24:18 Edom and Seir are being used synonymously. Technically, when Jesus comes and conquers the earth, all the nations and territories will be his (cf. Ps. 2:8; Dan. 2:35; 7:14).

Num 24:19

**“from the cities.”** In the Hebrew text, the word translated as “cities” is singular, but it seems to refer to a collective singular, and is thus translated as “cities” in some English versions (e.g. ESV, GW, RSV, Tyndale). Some English versions take the Hebrew to be the name of a specific city and thus have “Ar” or “Ir.” Although the text may be speaking of the Messiah, destroying the remnants of the Edomites out of one specific city, it makes more sense that he would be destroying the Edomites out of any city in which they lived. In a context like this, the “Edomites” would stand for people who were enemies of Yahweh and stood against God’s Messiah.

Num 24:20

**“He saw Amalek.”** Balaam “saw” Amalek by revelation, just as he “saw” the Messiah (Num. 24:17).

**“Amalek was the first of the nations.”** C. F. Kiel and H. Delitzsch write: “Amalek is called the beginning of the nations, not ‘as belonging to the most distinguished and foremost of the nations in age, power, and celebrity’ (*Knobel*)—for in all these respects this Bedouin tribe, which descended from a grandson of Esau, was surpassed by many other nations—but as the first heathen nation which opened the conflict of the heathen nations against Israel as the people of God (see at Exod. 17:8-16). As its beginning had been enmity against Israel, its end would be…falling into destruction….”[[18]](#footnote-23439)

**“but his latter end will come to destruction.”** The Amalakite nation was defeated by Saul and Samuel (1 Sam. 15:1-3) and by David (1 Sam. 27:8; 30:1-31) and disappeared after Hezekiah (1 Chron. 4:41-43), but it seems that Haman the enemy of the Jews was a descendant of the Amalakite kings (Esther 3:1), and met his end during the time of the Persian control of Israel.

Num 24:21

**“the Kenites.”** The Kenites were portrayed as somewhat friendly toward Israel (Judg. 1:16; 5:24; 1 Sam. 27:10; 30:29) yet the prophecy is that they will be destroyed. The reason for the prophecy is unclear. Perhaps it was because they were friendly with Israel that they were possibly carried away by Assyria.

Num 24:22

**“Kain.”** This is a name for the Kenites.

**“Asshur.”** Scholars debate who “Asshur” refers to. There are two most likely possibilities. One is Assyria, which is commonly called “Asshur,” and Assyria conquered the area where the Kenites lived. The other is the Canaanite tribe known as the Asshurim (Gen. 25:3). It seems most likely that the Assyrians are the ones spoken of in the prophecy, and they did often carry their captives away from their homeland and settle them in other areas, which is what they did to Israel and to other people that they conquered and resettled in Israel (2 Kings 17:6, 24)

Num 24:24

**“But ships will come from the coast of Kittim.”** This refers to ships coming to the Middle East from the west. However, no such known invasion occurred during the time of the Assyrian Empire. However, the people of Assyria were still there centuries later even if their empire was not, so this prophecy could be speaking of a future that was distant to Balaam, when the Greeks (or less likely, even the Romans), came from the west and invaded and conquered the Middle East. Eventually, they too were destroyed.

**“Asshur.”** See commentary on Numbers 24:22.

**“Eber.”** It is not clear who the text is referring to, and the scholars are too divided about it to make a probable guess.

Num 24:25

**“Balaam rose up and went and returned to his place.”** Balaam apparently returned to his home in Mesopotamia (Num. 22:5). However, it seems that at some point, Balaam returned to Midian and was killed by the Israelites in Midian. Exactly what Balaam was doing in Midian is not described in the text (Num. 31:8, 16).

**Numbers Chapter 25**

Num 25:1

**“While Israel was staying in Shittim.”** Shittim was a place in the plains of Moab where Israel was encamped. Joshua sent the spies into the Promised Land from Shittim (Josh. 2:1; 3:1). So Shittim was technically in the country of Moab.

**“began to prostitute themselves with the daughters of Moab.”** “Prostituting themselves” would involve both physical sex and also being pulled into the worship of pagan gods, and in fact the phrase “prostitute themselves” is used with both physical prostitution and spiritual prostitution with pagan gods. The pagan worship in Moab and the Canaanite culture in general involved ritual sex, which is why the text refers to the Israelites becoming yoked to Baal-peor (Num. 25:2-3). Numbers 25:1 refers to “the daughters of Moab,” but in this context, the word “daughters” does not refer to young women, but women in general. All the women in Moab were “daughters” of Moab, just as any woman alive is a daughter of someone no matter how old she is. So some younger and some older women would have been involved in the ritual sex just as they were involved with the other worship practices of the pagan gods.

Although Numbers 25:1 only mentions the daughters of Moab, there were women of Midian who were included in the pagan worship. Israel was encamped in the Plains of Moab adjacent to the Dead Sea when this incident about Baal-peor occurred, so there were likely more Moabite women than Midianite women involved in seducing the Israelite men, which would explain why only Moab is mentioned in Numbers 25:1. However, other verses mention Midianite women, and Israel went to war with Midian over the incident, and Balaam the prophet was killed in that war (Num. 25:6, 17, 18; 31:7, 15, 16).

Num 25:2

**“they invited the people *of Israel* to the sacrifices of their gods.”** The worship of the pagan gods involved ritual sex, as we see from Numbers 25:1. That was a major reason it was so attractive to the Israelite men. The verb “they invited” (more literally, “they called”) is a feminine plural verb, so the text indicates that it was primarily the women who invited the men of Israel to the sex and sacrifice.

**“and the people ate.”** That is, they ate of the sacrifices that were offered to the pagan gods, thereby participating in the worship of those pagan gods, and they bowed down to them, that is, they gave them the reverence that should have been Yahweh’s alone. This was a huge affront to God and included breaking the covenant and promises they had made with God. Technically, in that biblical and ancient culture, what the people of Israel did was worthy of death, which is indeed what we see in the following verses: the leaders were executed and a plague killed some 24,000 Israelites.

**“bowed down.”** The common biblical way of bowing down before people or God was to fall to one’s knees and bow the upper body to the earth. It is the same Hebrew word as “worship.”

[For more on bowing down, see Word Study: “Worship.”]

Num 25:3

**“yoked.”** A very unusual word occurring only here and Psalm 106:28. The word likely has a specific cultic meaning in this context, but that meaning is lost in history. The major sin involved in the worship of Baal-peor (the Baal of Peor) was partly sexual, as the Bible makes clear. Philip Budd writes: “Clearly some formal recognition by the Israelites of the Baal localized at Peor is implied. Baal was widely recognized in Canaan as the fertility god.”[[19]](#footnote-28357)

**“Baal-peor.”** The text could be translated “Baal of Peor.” Baal was the god and Peor was the place. The worship, rituals, and beliefs about the gods could differ from place to place even if the name of the god, and much about him, were generally the same. The specific beliefs and rituals about Baal of Peor are not known. However, the fact that the god was related to Baal shows the kinds of evil acts that were likely involved, such as human sacrifice and ritual sex.

Num 25:4

**“leaders.”** The Hebrew is simply “heads,” referring to the top men, but saying “the heads of all the people” could be easily misunderstood.

**“hang them up.”** This would usually be done by impaling the person on a tree, not by hanging by a rope. A branch would be cut off and the person would simply be impaled on the cut branch. Sometimes the person was executed first and then the dead body was hung up. The text is unclear as to how the “hanging” was done in this case.

**“broad daylight.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “in front of the sun,” but it means when the sun is shining on them, thus, “in broad daylight.”

Num 25:6

**“brought to his brothers a Midianite woman.”** This is a serious escalation of the evil associated with Baal-peor. In the phrase “brought to his brothers,” the word “brothers” most likely refers to his fellow Israelites. However, since Israel camped according to their tribes, when the man brought the woman to his tent, he also brought her to his fellow tribe members, the Simeonites.

It was bad enough that Israelites went to the worship sites of Moab to participate in their idolatrous worship and ritual sex (Num. 25:1-2). But now an Israelite man—Zimri, a ruler in the tribe of Simeon (Num. 25:14)—brings a Midianite woman into the camp of Israel and has sex with her, even while many people in Israel were at the Tabernacle weeping over Israel’s sin. Furthermore, the woman—Cozbi, the daughter of Zur, a leader in Midian (Num. 25:15)—would have had access to the advice and guidance of Balaam the prophet about seducing the Israelite men and leading them into pagan worship and ritual sex (Num. 31:16). Zimri and Cozbi came boldly into the camp of Israel, which had laws from Yahweh about worshiping Yahweh only and laws about proper sexual behavior, and they flaunted their ungodliness in front of everyone. So Phinehas, who had just seen leaders who had led Israel into idolatry executed (Num. 25:3-5), took it upon himself to execute these two as well, even apparently as they were in the act of having sexual intercourse.

Num 25:7

**“Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest saw it.”** That Phinehas was a priest partly explains the bold action that Phinehas took. The priests were in charge of making sure the camp was righteous and ritually pure in God’s eyes, and an Israelite having sex with a pagan in the middle of the camp of Israel was an issue that the priests had to deal with. Other leaders who had broken their covenant with Yahweh had been killed and hanged, and now Phinehas executed Zimri and Cozbi.

Num 25:8

**“the inner *part of the* tent.”** The inner part of the tent was the part that was partitioned off so the women would have privacy. The only males allowed in the women's part of the tent were the husband and boys who were small children. The fact that this man took a Midianite woman into the women’s quarters of his tent was prima facia evidence that he considered her his wife or concubine and willfully disobeyed the Mosaic law about marrying people from that pagan culture.

Num 25:11

**“zealous with my zeal.”** The same Hebrew phrase can be “jealous with my jealousy.” Everett Fox (The Schocken Bible) translated it such that Phinehas was zealous with God’s jealousy, which makes sense because God is the jealous God because His Israel, with whom He had a covenant, was being won over by a pagan god, and Phinehas was zealous to defend God’s honor. Fox wrote that Phinehas was “being zealous with my [God’s] jealousy.”

Num 25:13

**“it will be to him and to his seed after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood.”** Phinehas did become the High Priest (Judg. 20:28). The office of the High Priest went from Aaron to Eleazar to Phinehas.

**“of a perpetual priesthood.”** This is a good example of when “perpetual,” or “age-lasting” does not actually mean “last forever.” Although many versions translate the Hebrew as “everlasting,” (and it does mean “everlasting” in some contexts), that is not its meaning here. So, for example, we know the office of the High Priest will be taken by Jesus Christ, who was from the tribe of Judah. But thousands of years before that, the sin of Eli and his sons caused God to take the priesthood away from the descendants of Eleazar and Phinehas and transfer it to the descendants of Ithamar (Exod. 6:23; 1 Sam. 3:11-14).

Num 25:15

**“a father’s house.”** That refers to an ancestral house, a house with “fathers” that went back for generations.

**Numbers Chapter 26**

Num 26:2

**“*Take a census*.”** Although these italicized words do not appear in the Masoretic Hebrew text, they, or words like them, are added to most English versions for clarity. Moses took a census of the fighting men of Israel in the second year of the wilderness wanderings, and here he takes a census in the last year of the wanderings (see commentary on Num. 1:2).

Num 26:3

**“in the plains of Moab across from Jericho.”** This describes exactly where Israel was encamped when Moses left to go up Mount Nebo where he died, and the place from which Joshua sent out the spies and from where Israel began its cross over the Jordan River bed. Israel was encamped east of the Jordan River in the flat plains just west of the steep mountain inclines that lead up the mountains on the east side of the Jordan Valley, which is part of the Great Rift Valley that leads from north of Israel all the way down into Africa.

Num 26:51

**“601,730.”** This is very close to the number of fighting men who were counted in Numbers chapter 1. A year after leaving Egypt there were 603,550 fighting men. The men under 20 years old, the women, and the Levites were not included in the census. Now, almost 40 years later, there are 601,730 (see commentary on Num. 1:2).

Num 26:55

**“fathers.”** In this context, the “fathers” are the ancestors of the individual tribes (e.g., Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Zebulun, etc.). The “fathers” of Israel are usually considered to be Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Num 26:58

**“the family of the Libnites.”** Not all the sons of the three founding families from Levi—Kohath, Gershon, and Merari (Num. 3:17)—are mentioned here, apparently only the sons who had descendants that formed a family. For example, “the family of the Libnites” descended from Gershon, but Gershon had two sons, Libni and Shimei (Num. 3:18) but only the family of Libni is mentioned. Although no reason is given for not listing the family of Shimei, we can quite safely assume that Shimei did not have descendants that grew into a family. Shimei may not have had any children, or they all died young, or some other tragedy may have occurred. A detailed study will show some other missing descendants as well, but this is a list of the Levite families that existed to go into the Promised Land.

Num 26:61

**“Nadab and Abihu died.”** The record of that incident is Leviticus 10:1-7.

**“unauthorized fire.”** See commentary on Leviticus 10:1.

Num 26:62

**“were 23,000.”** The number of Levites increased while Israel was in the wilderness, but not by much. Near the start of the 40 years of wilderness wanderings there were 22,000 Levites in Israel (Num. 3:39), but that was a round number. Now there were 23,000 (which may also be a round number. See commentary on Num. 1:2).

Num 26:65

**“They will surely die in the wilderness.”** After the spies who spied out the Promised Land came back with an evil report and the people believed them, God swore that none of the generation who were over 20 when they left Egypt would go into the Promised Land except for Joshua and Caleb; the people would die in the wilderness (Num. 14:28-38). It does seem, however, that the tribe of Levi was exempt from that curse. They were not counted in the census of Numbers chapter 1, and furthermore, none of the spies that Moses sent into the Promised Land were Levites (Num. 13:4-15).

**Numbers Chapter 27**

Num 27:3

**“in the company of Korah.”** Korah fomented a rebellion against Moses and Yahweh and he and his co-conspirators were destroyed (Num. 16:1-35). The point that the daughters of Zelophehad are making is that their father had not rebelled against Moses or Yahweh even though some people might have thought so since he had five daughters but no sons.

Num 27:14

**“because you rebelled against my word.”** The record of Moses’ rebellion against the word of Yahweh is recorded in Numbers 20:8-13.

Num 27:21

**“the judgment of the Urim.”** The Urim was a stone in the breastplate of the High Priest.

[For more on the “lot” and the Urim and Thummim, see commentary on Exod. 28:30.]

**Numbers Chapter 28**

Num 28:5

**“a tenth of an ephah.”** The amount of the ephah is unknown, but a tenth part of an ephah may likely be around two quarts (see commentary on Exod. 16:36).

**“a hin.”** The biblical liquid measure of a hin was likely around 1 ½ gallons, or six quarts, so a fourth of that would be about a quart and a half.

Num 28:6

**“instituted.”** The Hebrew is simply “made,” but in this case “made” would not carry the full connotation of the event, so “instituted” fits much better (cf. JPS, NET, NIV, NLT). The CEB has “begun,” and the CSB has “established,” both of which carry the intention of the Hebrew text well. Some English versions have “ordained,” but most people think of ordination as referring to a person, not an event.

Num 28:7

**“the fourth part of a hin.”** The biblical liquid measure of a *hin* was about 124 fluid ounces. There are 128 fluid ounces in a gallon, so a fourth part, or a quarter, of a *hin* was a tiny bit less than a quart, but basically a quart.

Num 28:9

**“On the Sabbath day *offer* two male lambs.”** This is along with the regular daily offering of two lambs, so the Sabbath Day offerings were double the offerings done on regular days.

Num 28:11

**“In the beginnings of your months.”** This could also be translated “at your new moons” (cf. JPS, TNK). Each month was dedicated to God with special sacrifices as we see here in Numbers 28:11-15, and with the blowing of trumpets (Num. 10:10; Ps. 81:3). Although God did not specifically designate it in the Law of Moses as a national feast or day of rest, in time that came to be the accepted practice.

Numbers 28 and 29 contain a list of the occasions when sacrifices and offerings were offered to God, and these included the daily sacrifices and offerings (Num. 28:1-8), the Sabbath offerings (Num. 28:9-10), the new moon offerings (Num. 28:11-15); the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread (Num. 28:16-25); the Feast of Weeks also called the Day of Pentecost (Num. 28:26-31); the Feast of Trumpets (Num. 29:1-6); the Day of Atonement (Num. 29:7-11); and the Feast of Tabernacles (Num. 29:12-38).

The new moon, with its sacrifices and then later with its additional trappings of being a feast day and a day of rest, shows up a number of times in Scripture (cf. 1 Sam. 20:5, 18, 24; 2 Kings 4:23; 1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 8:13; 31:3; Ezra 3:5; Neh. 10:33; Isa. 1:13; 66:23; Ezek. 45:17; 46:1; Hos. 2:11; Amos 8:5; Col. 2:16).

[For more information and a more complete list of the feasts and sabbaths in Israel, see commentary on Lev. 23:2.]

Num 28:18

**“On the first day.”** The Passover lamb was killed on the 14th of Nisan and eaten on the evening of the 14th and past sunset, which started the new day, the 15th day of Nisan. The 15th day of Nisan was the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was a seven-day feast. That first day, the 15th of Nisan, the day after the Passover lamb was killed, was to be a special Sabbath no matter what day of the week it fell on. So, like many of our Western holidays, it fell on different days of the week in different years. That meant that in the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread there could be three Sabbaths: the regular Saturday Sabbath and the two special Sabbaths associated with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The first day, the 15th, was a special Sabbath, and the last day, the 21st of Nisan, was a special Sabbath.

**Numbers Chapter 29**

Num 29:1

**“In the seventh month.”** The first day of the month Tishri was considered the first day of the year for over 2,500 years, from Adam until the Exodus. At the Exodus, God changed the Jewish calendar and switched it by six months. The seventh month, which had been Nisan (also called Abib), became the first month (Exod. 12:2). That change made the first month (Tishri) become the seventh month (see commentary on Exod. 12:2). The Hebrew “Rosh Hashanah” literally means “head of the year (from the Hebrew *rosh*, “head”).” This feast occurred on Tishri 1, the beginning of the civil new year (Lev. 23:24-25; Num. 29:1-6). The religious new year began on Nisan 1. Rosh Hashanah was to be a special day of rest and memorialized by blowing shofars, the ram’s horn trumpet, so it became known as the “Feast of Trumpets,” although that name is not in the Bible.

[For more on the feasts and Sabbaths of Israel and their order in the calendar, see commentary on Lev. 23:2.]

**“on the first day of the month.”** The first day of the month was the new moon, and there were special sacrifices and offerings done on every new moon that dedicated the new month to God (Num. 28:11-15; 10:10). But the first day of the seventh month was the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, literally, the “head (*rosh*) of the year.” On Rosh Hashanah there were additional sacrifices and offerings, a sabbath day, and a day when Shofars (Ram’s horn trumpets) were blown.

**“shofar.”** The ram’s horn trumpet, not the metal trumpet.

Num 29:6

**“in addition to the burnt offering of the *regular* new moon and its grain offering .”** Each new moon, the new month, was dedicated to God by special offerings and blowing of trumpets (Num. 28:11-15; Num. 10:10). But the seventh month, the month Tishri, was to be especially holy. Besides the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles occurring in that month, the first day of the month, the new moon, was to be dedicated with special offerings in addition to the regular offerings of the new moon and the regular offerings at the Tent of Meeting, above and beyond what was offered at the regular new moon.

Num 29:7

**“On the tenth day of this seventh month.”** This is the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16; 23:26-32).

**“you are to afflict your souls.”** In the context of the Day of Atonement, which was the tenth day of the seventh month (Nisan calendar) the primary meaning of the phrase “afflict your souls” is to go without food, to fast (see commentary on Lev. 16:29).

Num 29:12

**“On the fifteenth day of the seventh month.”** This is the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:33-44). The Feast of Tabernacles had a different order of sacrifices and offerings on each of the seven days.

**Numbers Chapter 30**

**Numbers Chapter 31**

Num 31:2

**“you will be gathered to your people.”** A customary phrase that means you will die. Moses was 120 years old. He had spent 40 years in Egypt early in his life, 40 years as a shepherd in Midian, and 40 years with the Israelites wandering in the wilderness.

Num 31:4

**“From each tribe.”** At this time there were actually 13 tribes of Israel, according to the way the Israelites were counted for war, because the men from 12 tribes went to war but the men from the tribe of Levi did not. (Num. 1:47-50). Even at this early time, before Israel conquered the Promised Land, Ephraim and Manasseh, the two sons of Joseph, were counted as separate tribes (Num. 1:32-35), and when Joshua conquered Canaan, Ephraim and Manasseh each got their own land area.

Num 31:6

**“they and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest *went* to the war.”** The phrase means, “they” [the Israelite warriors] and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest went to the war. The Bible specifically mentions that Phinehas went to the war because according to God’s command in Numbers 1:47-50, the Levites were not to go out to fight wars like the men of the other tribes. So normally we would not think that Phinehas the priest would have gone to war with the other men, but in this case he did go, and he brought the holy trumpets from the Tabernacle with him (see commentary on Num. 31:4).

**“the utensils of the sanctuary, that is, the trumpets for the signaling.”** In this case, the “utensils” of the Tabernacle were the trumpets, which were used for various purposes, but in this case for “signaling” (more literally “sounding” or even “clamoring”). The trumpets would sound the battle cry and likely start the charge. The phrase “that is” is normally translated “and” but in this case “that is,” or “even” is the meaning.[[20]](#footnote-12858) Phinehas the priest and the holy trumpets from the sanctuary went to this battle because it was a holy war to avenge what the Midianites had done to Israel.

Num 31:8

**“Zur.”** It is extremely likely, but cannot be conclusively proven, that this Zur is the father of Cozbi, the woman who went boldly into the camp of Israel to have sex with Zimri, a man from the tribe of Simeon (Num. 25:6-15). If Zur was the father of Cozbi, that would help explain why she felt so entitled as to go into the camp of Israel and have sex in an Israelite man’s tent—she had likely been raised with money, power, and privilege all her life, in short, she was likely a spoiled brat.

**“they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword.”** What Balaam was doing in Midian is not described in the Bible, but he was killed by the Israelites.

Num 31:11

**“all the spoil and all the prey.”** The “spoil” is the material goods, while the “prey” refers to the living things, both people and animals.

Num 31:12

**“captives and the prey and the spoil.”** In Numbers 31:11, the things taken from Midian were divided into two classes: material things, the “spoil,” and living things, the “prey.” Now they are further divided. The material things are still the “spoil,” but the living things are divided into “captives,” i.e., the people, and the “prey,” i.e., the animals.

Num 31:16

**“Behold, these, on the advice of Balaam, caused the children of Israel to trespass against Yahweh in the matter of Peor.”** The record of the sin at Baal-peor is Numbers 25:1-5. Balaam had apparently coached the Moabites on how to lead the men of Israel into sin, and it ended up costing Israel a lot of people: leaders, men, and some 24,000 people in a plague (Num. 25:4, 5, 9).

**“there was a plague among the congregation.”** Israel’s sin in participating in the worship of Baal-peor cost Israel dearly. Many leaders were executed for breaking the covenant they had made with God (Exod. 24:3-8) and for their idolatry (Num. 25:3-5), and there was a plague among the congregation that killed some 24,000 people (Num. 25:9).

Num 31:36

**“sheep.”** The Hebrew word can include both sheep and goats, which it almost certainly does here.

Num 31:50

**“signet rings.”** A signet ring was a ring that was engraved with special letters and/or characters that identified the owner of the ring.

[For more on signet rings and cylinder seals, see commentary on Gen. 41:42.]

Num 31:52

**“16,750 shekels.”** 16,750 shekels is roughly (a little less than) 42 pounds (19 kg). A shekel was roughly .4 ounces (11 or 11.5 grams). See commentary on Genesis 24:22, “shekel.”

**Numbers Chapter 32**

**Numbers Chapter 33**

Num 33:52

**“destroy all their stone idols.”** God has no tolerance for idols of any kind. They are harmful in many different ways. They are to be destroyed (see commentary on Deut. 7:5).

**“shrines.”** The Hebrew word translated “shrines” is *bamah* (#01116 בָּמָה), the plural, “shrines,” is *bamot*. The Hebrew word *bamah* should not be confused with the Greek word *bēma* (#968 βῆμα), because the Greek word *bēma* mostly refers to a judgment seat (cf. Matt. 27:19; John 19:13; Acts 18:12, 16, 17; 25:6; Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10), whereas the Hebrew word *bamah* generally refers to a place of worship, a shrine.

Although the Hebrew word *bamah* can refer to a hill or a place of high ground, when it is used in a cultic context the word *bamah* usually refers to a raised platform on which a statue or representation of a god or gods, and often an altar, would be placed. That is why *bamah*/*bamot* gets translated “shrine” in some English versions. Sometimes the raised area would be large and there would also be some kind of temple or temples there too. The fact that the platform was usually raised up above ground level explains why it was called a *bamah*, i.e., an area that was high or lifted up. The worship of various gods and variations of gods (even Yahweh) was common in the cities and towns, so many of them had a *bamah*, a shrine. For example, after Israel split into the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel, there were many cities in Samaria (Israel) that had shrines, and Judah had them also (1 Kings 13:32; 2 Kings 17:9; 23:5).

There is no single English word that exactly captures the cultic meaning of *bamah*, so the English versions differ in the way they translate it, e.g., “high places” (CSB, ESV, KJV, NIV); “shrines” (CEB); “places of worship” (GNT, GW, ICB, NOG); “pagan shrines” (NLT); and “cult places” (TNK). Also, the English versions are not consistent in the way they translate *bamah* due to the different contexts in which it occurs.

Although many English versions use the translation “high place,” in some contexts that translation can be misleading because often the *bamah*, the shrine, was inside the town rather than being outside of town on some nearby hill, and often where the shrine was in the town was not on a hill or height at all, but was simply a place that had been built up a little above the surrounding ground. For example, Solomon’s Temple was not just built at ground level, but a platform, a raised area (a “high place”) was built and then the Temple was built on that platform, that “high place,” but Solomon’s Temple was not outside the city on a hill somewhere.

The shrines were usually built and maintained by a family or families in town who were attached to the shrine because they believed in the gods associated with them, or because of family sentiment (“My grandfather built that shrine!”). Knowing that fact helps explain why so many good kings could not seem to get rid of the *bamot*, the shrines (cf. 1 Kings 15:14; 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3; 14:4; 15:4, 35; 2 Chron. 15:17; 20:33). The people liked them and often protected them. Often, if the shrines were torn down they were soon rebuilt (2 Chron. 33:3). Good evidence that the *bamot* were not always on a hill is in Jeremiah, where he accuses people of building *bamot*, shrines, in the Valley of Hinnom, which was the valley just south of Jerusalem. Thus the *bamot* that Jeremiah referred to were leveled out places in the valley, and the hills around the valley were much higher than the valley. So the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem is a good example of how a “high place” (a *bamah*) could actually be much lower than the area around it. A study of the various uses of *bamah* shows that the shrine could be inside a town or in a place close to the town, whether on a hill or in a valley (Jer. 7:31; 32:35).

**Numbers Chapter 34**

Num 34:5

**“the Brook of Egypt.”** This is not the Nile River, but the Wadi El-arish. which drains central Sinai westward out to the Mediterranean Sea.

Num 34:6

**“Great Sea.”** The common Old Testament name for the Mediterranean Sea.

**Numbers Chapter 35**

Num 35:7

**“All the cities that you will give to the Levites will be 48 cities.”** The Levites did not get a tribal land area in Israel as the other tribes did. They were given the tithe of the Israelites to eat and live from (Num. 18:21, 24), and the service of Yahweh to do (Num. 18:23). That the Levites were not given a tribal land area but instead got the service of Yahweh is important and is stated a number of times in the Bible (e.g., Num. 18:23-24; 26:62; Deut. 18:2; Josh. 13:14, 23; 14:3).

The Levites were given their 48 cities when Joshua conquered the Promised Land (Josh. 21:1-43, esp. v. 41). Of those 48 cities, 6 were cities of refuge for the killer (Num. 35:6, 9-15, 22-25), and 13 were to be for the priests, the descendants of Aaron (Josh. 21:13-19).

Num 35:16

**“put to death, yes, put to death.”** The Hebrew text doubles the verb for emphasis, using the figure of speech polyptoton, and this figure occurs five times in this chapter (Num. 35:16, 17, 18, 21, 31).

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

Murderers are to be put to death.

[For information on murder, manslaughter, and the death penalty for murder, see commentary on Exod. 21:12. Verses that speak about murder and manslaughter include Exod. 20:13; 21:12, 28-30; Deut. 5:17; and Num. 35:9-34.]

Num 35:19

**“avenger of blood.”** The ancient world did not have a police force to keep people safe. The best personal safety came from being a member of a large and powerful family, clan, or tribe that would seek revenge if anything happened to one of their members. If a family member was harmed, the person who avenged that family member was called “the avenger of blood” (cf. Num. 35:19-29; Deut. 19:6-12; Josh. 20:2-9).

The problem with the system was that, as has often happened in trials throughout the millennia, different people feel very differently when someone is killed. To some the killing was justified, to others, it was unjustified murder. So one person would kill another. Then the avenger of blood from the dead man’s family would kill the killer. Then an avenger of blood from the family of the man just killed would kill that person. And so the pendulum would swing back and forth with people killing one another, and “blood feuds” would often last many generations.

In a case that made it before the king, like in the case of the woman in 2 Samuel 14:1-11, the king could command the killing to stop, but that was only marginally effective because the king’s command did not stop the animosity, which could erupt at any time.

Num 35:21

**“put to death, yes, put to death.”** The Hebrew text doubles the verb for emphasis, using the figure of speech polyptoton.

[For more on polyptoton and the way it is translated in the REV, see commentary on Gen. 2:16.]

**“The avenger of blood.”** The avenger of blood was usually a family member or close relative (see commentary on Ruth 2:20, “kinsman-redeemer”).

**Numbers Chapter 36**

1. Hartley, *The Book of Job* [NICOT], 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-11702)
2. Cf. Everett Fox, *The Schocken Bible*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14450)
3. Herbert May, ed., *Oxford Bible Atlas*, 3rd ed., 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-31956)
4. Cf. *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. [↑](#footnote-ref-31875)
5. Jacob Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-25595)
6. Timothy Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* [NICOT], 470. [↑](#footnote-ref-24506)
7. *HALOT* , s.v. “כָּזַב.” [↑](#footnote-ref-32598)
8. E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, 804-06, “amphibologia.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14394)
9. Timothy Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* [NICOT], 477. [↑](#footnote-ref-19729)
10. Timothy Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* [NICOT], 474. [↑](#footnote-ref-14500)
11. Desmond Morris, *Body Guards: Protective Amulets and Charms*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13406)
12. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: The Five Books of Moses*, 567. [↑](#footnote-ref-31729)
13. Timothy Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* [NICOT], 489. [↑](#footnote-ref-12381)
14. C. F. Kiel, *Kiel and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, 779. [↑](#footnote-ref-12040)
15. Gary Practico and Miles Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar*, 3rd ed., 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-23486)
16. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Book 4, Appendix 8, “List of Old Testament Passages Messianically Applied in Rabbinic Writings,” 714. [↑](#footnote-ref-11952)
17. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. [↑](#footnote-ref-30200)
18. C. F. Kiel and F. Delitzsch, *Kiel and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, 784, 785. [↑](#footnote-ref-23439)
19. Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* [WBC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-28357)
20. C. F. Kiel and F. Delitzsch, *Kiel and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12858)