

Wilderness Wandering: Duties and Provisions for Levites and Priests (1444–1408 BC)

Numbers 17:12–18:32

Priests and Levites to Bear Sole Responsibility for Any Future Encroachment on the Tabernacle

17:12 And the children of Israel spake unto Moses, saying, Behold, we die, we perish, we all perish.

13 Whosoever cometh any thing near unto the tabernacle of the LORD shall die: shall we be consumed with dying?

18:1 And the LORD said unto Aaron, Thou and thy sons and thy father's house with thee shall bear the iniquity of the sanctuary: and thou and thy sons with thee shall bear the iniquity of your priesthood.

2 And thy brethren also of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of thy father, bring thou with thee, that they may be joined unto thee, and minister unto thee: but thou and thy sons with thee *shall minister* before the tabernacle of witness.

3 And they shall keep thy charge, and the charge of all the tabernacle: only they shall not come nigh the vessels of the sanctuary and the altar, that neither they, nor ye also, die.

4 And they shall be joined unto thee, and keep the charge of the tabernacle of the congregation, for all the service of the tabernacle: and a stranger shall not come nigh unto you.

5 And ye shall keep the charge of the sanctuary, and the charge of the altar: that there be no wrath any more upon the children of Israel.

6 And I, behold, I have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel: to you *they are* given as a gift for the LORD, to do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation.

7 Therefore thou and thy sons with thee shall keep your priest's office for every thing of the altar, and within the veil; and ye shall serve: I have given your priest's office *unto you* as a service of gift: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death.

Provision for the Priests

8 And the LORD spake unto Aaron, Behold, I also have given thee the charge of mine heave offerings of all the hallowed things of the children of Israel; unto thee have I given them by reason of the anointing, and to thy sons, by an ordinance for ever.

9 This shall be thine of the most holy things, *reserved* from the fire: every oblation of theirs, every meat offering of theirs, and every sin offering of theirs, and every trespass offering of theirs, which they shall render unto me, *shall be* most holy for thee and for thy sons.

10 In the most holy *place* shalt thou eat it; every male shall eat it: it shall be holy unto thee.

11 And this *is* thine; the heave offering of their gift, with all the wave offerings of the children of Israel: I have given them unto thee, and to thy sons and to thy daughters with thee, by a statute for ever: every one that is clean in thy house shall eat of it.

12 All the best of the oil, and all the best of the wine, and of the wheat, the firstfruits of them which they shall offer unto the LORD, them have I given thee.

13 *And* whatsoever is first ripe in the land, which they shall bring unto the LORD, shall be thine; every one that is clean in thine house shall eat of it.

14 Every thing devoted in Israel shall be thine.

15 Every thing that openeth the matrix in all flesh, which they bring unto the LORD, *whether it be* of men or beasts, shall be thine: nevertheless the firstborn of man shalt thou surely redeem, and the firstling of unclean beasts shalt thou redeem.

16 And those that are to be redeemed from a month old shalt thou redeem, according to thine estimation, for the money of five shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary, which *is* twenty gerahs.

17 But the firstling of a cow, or the firstling of a sheep, or the firstling of a goat, thou shalt not redeem; they *are* holy: thou shalt sprinkle their blood upon the altar, and shalt burn their fat *for* an offering made by fire, for a sweet savor unto the LORD.

18 And the flesh of them shall be thine, as the wave breast and as the right shoulder are thine.

19 All the heave offerings of the holy things, which the children of Israel offer unto the LORD, have I given thee, and thy sons and thy daughters with thee, by a statute for ever: it *is* a covenant of salt for ever before the LORD unto thee and to thy seed with thee.

Provision for the Levites (the Levitical Tithes)

20 And the LORD spake unto Aaron, Thou shalt have no inheritance in their land, neither shalt thou have any part among them: I *am* thy part and thine inheritance among the children of Israel.

21 And, behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tenth in Israel for an inheritance, for their service which they serve, *even* the service of the tabernacle of the congregation.

22 Neither must the children of Israel henceforth come nigh the tabernacle of the congregation, lest they bear sin, and die.

23 But the Levites shall do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation, and they shall bear their iniquity: *it shall be* a statute for ever throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they have no inheritance.

24 But the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer *as* an heave offering unto the LORD, I have given to the Levites to inherit: therefore I have said unto them, Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.

A Tenth of the Levitical Tithes Goes to the Priests

25 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,

26 Thus speak unto the Levites, and say unto them, When ye take of the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from

them for your inheritance, then ye shall offer up an heave offering of it for the LORD, *even* a tenth *part* of the tithe.

27 And *this* your heave offering shall be reckoned unto you, as though *it were* the corn of the threshing-floor, and as the fullness of the winepress.

28 Thus ye also shall offer an heave offering unto the LORD of all your tithes, which ye receive of the children of Israel; and ye shall give thereof the LORD's heave offering to Aaron the priest.

29 Out of all your gifts ye shall offer every heave offering of the LORD, of all the best thereof, *even* the hallowed part thereof out of it.

30 Therefore thou shalt say unto them, When ye have heaved the best thereof from it, then it shall be counted unto the Levites as the increase of the threshing-floor, and as the increase of the winepress.

31 And ye shall eat it in every place, ye and your households: for it *is* your reward for your service in the tabernacle of the congregation.

32 And ye shall bear no sin by reason of it, when ye have heaved from it the best of it: neither shall ye pollute the holy things of the children of Israel, lest ye die.

Wilderness Wandering: The Red Heifer and Water of Purification (1444–1408 BC)

Numbers 19

Preparation of the Ashes of a Red Heifer

1 And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying,

2 This *is* the ordinance of the law which the LORD hath commanded, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring thee a red heifer without spot, wherein *is* no blemish, *and* upon which never came yoke:

3 And ye shall give her unto Eleazar the priest, that he may bring her forth without the camp, and *one* shall slay her before his face:

4 And Eleazar the priest shall take of her blood with his finger, and sprinkle of her blood directly before the tabernacle of the congregation seven times:

5 And *one* shall burn the heifer in his sight; her skin, and her flesh, and her blood, with her dung, shall he burn:

6 And the priest shall take cedar wood, and hyssop, and scarlet, and cast *it* into the midst of the burning of the heifer.

7 Then the priest shall wash his clothes, and he shall bathe his flesh in water, and afterward he shall come into the camp, and the priest shall be unclean until the even.

8 And he that burneth her shall wash his clothes in water, and bathe his flesh in water, and shall be unclean until the even.

9 And a man *that is* clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and lay *them* up without the camp in a clean place, and it shall be kept for the congregation of the children of Israel for a water of separation: it *is* a purification for sin.

10 And he that gathereth the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the even: and it shall be unto the children of Israel, and unto the stranger that sojourneth among them, for a statute for ever.

General Rule for Purification

11 He that toucheth the dead body of any man shall be unclean seven days.

12 He shall purify himself with it on the third day, and on the seventh day he shall be clean: but if he purify not himself the third day, then the seventh day he shall not be clean.

13 Whosoever toucheth the dead body of any man that is dead, and purifieth not himself, defileth the tabernacle of the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off from Israel: because the water of separation was not sprinkled upon him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness *is* yet upon him.

Purification in Specific Cases

14 This *is* the law, when a man dieth in a tent: all that come into the tent, and all that *is* in the tent, shall be unclean seven days.

15 And every open vessel, which hath no covering bound upon it, *is* unclean.

16 And whosoever toucheth one that is slain with a sword in the open fields, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.

17 And for an unclean *person* they shall take of the ashes of the burnt heifer of purification for sin, and running water shall be put thereto in a vessel:

18 And a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip *it* in the water, and sprinkle *it* upon the tent, and upon all the vessels, and upon the persons that were there, and upon him that touched a bone, or one slain, or one dead, or a grave:

19 And the clean *person* shall sprinkle upon the unclean on the third day, and on the seventh day: and on the seventh day he shall purify himself, and wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and shall be clean at even.

20 But the man that shall be unclean, and shall not purify himself, that soul shall be cut off from among the congregation, because he hath defiled the sanctuary of the LORD: the water of separation hath not been sprinkled upon him; he *is* unclean.

21 And it shall be a perpetual statute unto them, that he that sprinkleth the water of separation shall wash his clothes; and he that toucheth the water of separation shall be unclean until even.

22 And whatsoever the unclean *person* toucheth shall be unclean; and the soul that toucheth *it* shall be unclean until even.

Wilderness Wandering: Records of Camps (1444–1408 BC)

Numbers 33:18–35

18 And they departed from Hazeroth, and pitched in Rithmah.
 19 And they departed from Rithmah, and pitched at Rimmonparez.
 20 And they departed from Rimmonparez, and pitched in Libnah.
 21 And they removed from Libnah, and pitched at Rissah.
 22 And they journeyed from Rissah, and pitched in Kehelathah.
 23 And they went from Kehelathah, and pitched in mount Shapher.
 24 And they removed from mount Shapher, and encamped in Haradah.
 25 And they removed from Haradah, and pitched in Makheloth.
 26 And they removed from Makheloth, and encamped at Tahath.
 27 And they departed from Tahath, and pitched at Tarah.
 28 And they removed from Tarah, and pitched in Mithcah.
 29 And they went from Mithcah, and pitched in Hashmonah.
 30 And they departed from Hashmonah, and encamped at Moseroth.
 31 And they departed from Moseroth, and pitched in Benejaakan.
 32 And they removed from Benejaakan, and encamped at Horhagidgad.
 33 And they went from Horhagidgad, and pitched in Jotbathah.
 34 And they removed from Jotbathah, and encamped at Ebronah.
 35 And they departed from Ebronah, and encamped at Eziongaber.

Wilderness Wandering: Moses' Prayer (c. 1444–1408 BC)

Psalm 90

A Prayer of Moses the man of God.

1 Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.
 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou *art* God.
 3 Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.
 4 For a thousand years in thy sight *are but* as yesterday when it is past, and *as* a watch in the night.
 5 Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are *as* a sleep: in the morning *they are* like grass *which* groweth up.
 6 In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.
 7 For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled.
 8 Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret *sins* in the light of thy countenance.
 9 For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale *that is told*.
 10 The days of our years *are* threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength *they be* fourscore years, yet *is* their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.
 11 Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, *so is* thy wrath.
 12 So teach *us* to number our days, that we may apply *our* hearts unto wisdom.
 13 Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.
 14 O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
 15 Make us glad according to the days *wherein* thou hast afflicted us, *and* the years *wherein* we have seen evil.
 16 Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.
 17 And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

Scripture quotations are from The King James Version (KJV). The KJV is in the public domain.

Chronological Notes

1) Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses in the superscription, and most conservative scholars accept Mosaic authorship. However, opinions as to *when* the psalm was written vary widely, and we don't have enough data to date it with certainty. I have chosen to place it in the last third of Moses' life (sometime during the wilderness wandering). Below are a selection of the opinions of commentators:

A) Delitzsch—" [Psalm 90] comes out of the midst of the dying off of the older generation during the march through the wilderness."

- B) Allen P. Ross—“the occasion of his writing [Psalm 90] it is unknown. However, the period of the wilderness wanderings, when a generation of Israelites perished in the desert, readily suggests itself as the background for the psalm.”
- C) Albert Barnes—“It is impossible, of course, now to determine the time when the psalm was composed, but it may not improbably be supposed to have been near the close of the wanderings in the wilderness....It seems, then, not improper to regard this psalm as one of the last utterances of Moses, when the wanderings of the Hebrew people were about to cease; when an entire generation had been swept off; and when his own labors were soon to close.”
- D) Eric Lane—“It [Psalm 90] was composed at a time when numbers of the people were being struck dead as a judgment on their sin (vv. 5–8). Occasions when this happened include the people’s complaint about their diet of manna (Num. 11:33) and their discouragement over the report of the spies (Num. 14:26–45). The one that fits best however, is Numbers 21:4–7, when further murmuring over food provoked a plague of venomous snakes from God.”
- E) James M. Boice—“If the psalm really is by Moses, as I believe, the historical setting is probably best understood by the incidents recorded in Numbers 20: (1) the death of Miriam, Moses’ sister; (2) the sin of Moses in striking the rock in the wilderness, which kept him from entering the Promised Land; and (3) the death of Aaron, Moses’ brother.”