

## 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 Israelites said to Moses, saying, “Look! We will die! We will be destroyed! All of us will perish!

13 Anyone who approaches the tabernacle of Yahweh will die. Will we all die?”

18:1 Yahweh said to Aaron, “You, your sons, and your family with you will bear the guilt of the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you will bear the guilt of your priesthood.

2 Moreover, bring your brothers with you, the tribe of Levi the tribe of your father, that they may be joined to you and minister to you, you and your sons with you before the tent of testimony.

3 They will keep your responsibility and the responsibility of all the tent, only they may not come near the vessels of the sanctuary and the altar, so both you and they will not die.

4 They will be joined to you, and they will keep the responsibility of the tent of assembly for the entire service of the tent; a stranger may not come near you.

5 You will keep the responsibility of the sanctuary and the responsibility of the altar, and there will no longer be wrath on the Israelites.

6 Look, I myself have chosen your brothers the Levites from the midst of the children. They are a gift to you given from Yahweh to perform the work of the tent of assembly.

7 But you with your sons will keep your priesthood to perform your priestly duties for everything at the altar and for the area behind the curtain. I give you the priesthood as a gift, but the stranger who approaches will be put to death.”

### Provision for the Priests

8 Yahweh spoke to Aaron, “Behold, I myself have given to you the responsibility of my contributions for all the holy objects of the Israelites; I have given them as a portion to you and your sons as an eternal decree.

9 This will be for you from the sanctuary of the holy things from the fire; all of their offerings, from every grain offering, from every sin offering, and from every guilt offering which they will bring to me *is* a most holy thing for you and your sons.

10 You will eat it in the most holy place; every male will eat it. It will be a holy object to you.

11 This *is also* for you: the contribution of their gift of the wave offerings of the children Israel. I have given them to you and your sons and your daughters with you as an eternal decree; whoever *is* clean in your house may eat it.

12 All *the* finest olive oil and all the finest new wine and their best grain that they have given to Yahweh, I have given them to you.

13 *The* firstfruits of all that *is* in their land that they present to Yahweh will be for you; whoever *is* clean in your house may eat it.

14 All consecrated possessions in Israel will be for you.

15 All *the* first offspring of a womb of any creature that they offer to Yahweh, whether human or animal, will be yours; you will surely redeem the firstborn of the human and the unclean firstborn of the animal.

16 As to their price of redemption, from a one-month-old you will redeem them according to your proper value, five shekels of silver according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which *is* twenty gerah.

17 Only the firstborn of an ox or the firstborn of a sheep or the firstborn of a goat you will not redeem; they *are* holy. Their blood you will sprinkle over the altar, and their fat you will turn into smoke *as* an offering made by fire, a fragrance of appeasement for Yahweh.

18 But their flesh will be for you like the breast section of the wave offering, and it will be for you like the right upper thigh.

19 All the contributions of holiness that the Israelites offer to Yahweh I have given to you and your sons and your daughters with you as an eternal decree; it *is* an eternal covenant of salt before Yahweh to you and your offspring with you.”

### Provision for the Levites (the Levitical Tithes)

20 Then Yahweh said to Aaron, “You will not receive an inheritance in their land, and there will not be a plot of ground for you in the midst of the Israelites.

21 “Behold, I have given to the descendants of Levi every tithe in Israel as an inheritance in return for their service, which they *are* doing, the work of the tent of assembly.

22 The Israelites will not come near again to the tent of assembly, or they will bear sin and die.

23 The Levites will perform the service of the tent of assembly, and they will bear their guilt, an eternal decree for all your generations. But they will not receive an inheritance in the midst of the Israelites

24 because the tithes of the Israelites that are offered to Yahweh as a contribution, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance; therefore I said to them, “They will not receive an inheritance in the midst of the Israelites.””

### A Tenth of the Levitical Tithes Goes to the Priests

25 Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying,

26 “You will speak to the Levites and say to them, ‘When you receive the tithe from the Israelites that I have given to you from them for your inheritance, you will present a contribution from it to Yahweh, a tithe from a tithe.

27 Your contribution will be credited to you like the grain from the threshing floor and like the produce from the press.

28 So you will present your own contribution to Yahweh from all your tithes that you receive from the Israelites; from it you will give the contribution of Yahweh to Aaron the priest.

29 From all your gifts you will present every contribution of Yahweh, from all its fat, the part *that is* sacred.’

30 You will say to them, ‘When you are presenting its fat, the rest will be credited to the Levites like a yield of the threshing floor and like a yield from the press.

31 You may eat it anywhere, you and your household, because it *is* a wage in return for your service in the tent of assembly.

32 You will not bear any sin because you have presented its fat; you will not defile the holy objects of the Israelites, or you will 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 Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,

2 “This *is* the decree of the law that Yahweh has commanded, saying, ‘Speak to the Israelites and let them take to you a red heifer without a physical defect, on which a yoke has not been placed.

3 And you will give it to Eleazar the priest, and it will be brought out to a place outside the camp, and it will be slaughtered in his presence.

4 Then Eleazar the priest will take *some of* its blood on his finger and spatter it toward the mouth of the tent of assembly seven times.

5 The heifer will be burned in his sight; its skin, its meat, and its blood, in addition to its offal, will burn.

6 The priest will take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson thread, and he will throw them in the midst of the burning heifer.

7 The priest will wash his garments and his body in the water, and afterward he will come to the camp; the priest will be unclean until the evening.

8 The one who burns it will wash his garments and his body in water; he will be unclean until the evening.

9 A clean man will gather the ashes of the heifer, and he will put *them* in a clean place outside the camp; it will be for the community of the Israelites as a requirement for waters of impurity; it *is* a purification *offering*.

10 The one who gathers the ashes of the heifer will wash his garments; he will be unclean until evening. It will be an eternal decree for the Israelites and for one who dwells as an alien in their midst.

#### General Rule for Purification

11 “ ‘The one who touches a corpse of any person will be unclean for seven days.

12 He will purify himself on the third day, and on the seventh day he will be clean. If he does not purify himself on the third day, he will not be clean on the seventh day.

13 Anyone who touches a corpse, the person of a human being who died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of Yahweh, and that person will be cut off from Israel because the waters of impurity were not sprinkled on him. He will still be unclean, and uncleanness *is* on him.

#### Purification in Specific Cases

14 “ ‘This *is* the law of a person who dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent and all who *are* in the tent will be unclean seven days.

15 Every container that is opened that does not have a lid cord on it *is* unclean.

16 Anyone in the open field who touches one who has been slain, or a corpse, or a bone of a person, or a burial site, he will be unclean for seven days.

17 For the unclean *person* they will take from the powder of the burnt purification offering, and they will put running water into a container.

18 A clean person will take hyssop and dip *it* into the water and sprinkle *it* on the tent and on all the objects and persons who were there, and on one who touched the bone, or the one slain, or the dead, or the burial site.

19 The clean *person* will spatter the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he will purify him, and he will wash his garments; he will bathe in the waters, and in the evening he will be clean.

20 But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself, that person will be cut off from the midst of the assembly because he defiled the sanctuary of Yahweh; the water of impurity was not sprinkled on him; he *is* unclean.

21 “ ‘It will be an eternal decree for them. The one who spatters the waters of impurity will wash his garments, and the one who touches the waters of impurity will be unclean until the evening.

22 Anything that the unclean *person* touches will be unclean, and the person who touches *it* will be unclean until the evening.’”

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

Numbers 33:18–35

- 18 They set out from Hazeroth and camped at Rithmah.
- 19 They set out from Rithmah and camped at Rimmon Perez.
- 20 They set out from Rimmon Perez and camped at Libnah.
- 21 They set out from Libnah and camped at Rissah.
- 22 They set out from Rissah and camped at Kehelathah.
- 23 They set out from Kehelathah and camped at Mount Shapher.
- 24 They set out from Mount Shapher and camped at Haradah.
- 25 They set out from Haradah and camped at Makheloth.
- 26 They set out from Makheloth and camped at Tahath.
- 27 They set out from Tahath and camped at Terah.
- 28 They set out from Terah and camped at Mithcah.
- 29 They set out from Mithcah and camped at Hashmonah.
- 30 They set out from Hashmonah and camped at Moserah.
- 31 They set out from Moserah and camped at Bene-Jaakan.
- 32 They set out from Bene-Jaakan and camped at Hor Haggidgad.
- 33 They set out from Hor Haggidgad and camped at Jotbathah.
- 34 They set out from Jotbathah and camped at Abronah.
- 35 They set out from Abronah and camped at Ezion Geber.

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

Psalm 90

#### A Prayer of Moses, the Man of God.

- 1 O Lord, you have been our help in all generations.
- 2 Before *the* mountains were born  
and you brought forth *the* earth and *the* world,  
even from everlasting to everlasting, you *are* God.
- 3 You return man to *the* dust,  
saying, "Return, O sons of man."
- 4 For a thousand years in your eyes  
*are* like yesterday when it passes,  
or *like* a watch in the night.
- 5 You sweep them away *like a flood*.  
They fall asleep.  
In the morning *they are* like grass *that* sprouts anew.
- 6 In the morning it blossoms and sprouts anew;  
by evening it withers and dries up.
- 7 For we are brought to an end by your anger,  
and we hasten *off* by your wrath.
- 8 You have put our iniquities before you,  
our hidden *sins* into the light of your countenance.
- 9 For all of our days dwindle away in your rage;  
we complete our years like a sigh.
- 10 As for the days of our years, within them *are* seventy years  
or if by strength eighty years, and their pride *is* trouble and disaster,  
for it passes quickly and we fly *away*.
- 11 Who knows the strength of your anger,  
and your rage consistent with *the* fear due you?
- 12 So teach *us* to number our days  
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
- 13 Return, O Yahweh. How long?  
And have compassion on your servants.
- 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your loyal love,  
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
- 15 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,  
*for as many years as* we have seen calamity.

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| 16 | Let your work be visible to your servants,<br>and your majesty to their children.  |
| 17 | And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us,<br>and establish for us the work of our hands,<br>yes, the work of our hands, establish it. |

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### **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."