

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 Then the sons of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, “Behold, we perish, we are dying, we are all dying!

13 Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the LORD, must die. Are we to perish completely?”

18:1 So the LORD said to Aaron, “You and your sons and your father’s household with you shall bear the guilt in connection with the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the guilt in connection with your priesthood.

2 But bring with you also your brothers, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you, while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony.

3 And they shall thus attend to your obligation and the obligation of all the tent, but they shall not come near to the furnishings of the sanctuary and the altar, or both they and you will die.

4 They shall be joined with you and attend to the obligations of the tent of meeting, for all the service of the tent; but an outsider may not come near you.

5 So you shall attend to the obligations of the sanctuary and the obligations of the altar, so that there will no longer be wrath on the sons of Israel.

6 Behold, I Myself have taken your fellow Levites from among the sons of Israel; they are a gift to you, dedicated to the LORD, to perform the service for the tent of meeting.

7 But you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything concerning the altar and inside the veil, and you are to perform service. I am giving you the priesthood as a bestowed service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”

Provision for the Priests

8 Then the LORD spoke to Aaron, “Now behold, I Myself have given you charge of My offerings, even all the holy gifts of the sons of Israel I have given them to you as a portion and to your sons as a perpetual allotment.

9 This shall be yours from the most holy *gifts reserved* from the fire; every offering of theirs, even every grain offering and every sin offering and every guilt offering, which they shall render to Me, shall be most holy for you and for your sons.

10 As the most holy *gifts* you shall eat it; every male shall eat it. It shall be holy to you.

11 This also is yours, the offering of their gift, even all the wave offerings of the sons of Israel; I have given them to you and to your sons and daughters with you as a perpetual allotment. Everyone of your household who is clean may eat it.

12 All the best of the fresh oil and all the best of the fresh wine and of the grain, the first fruits of those which they give to the LORD, I give them to you.

13 The first ripe fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to the LORD, shall be yours; everyone of your household who is clean may eat it.

14 Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours.

15 Every first issue of the womb of all flesh, whether man or animal, which they offer to the LORD, shall be yours; nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem.

16 As to their redemption price, from a month old you shall redeem them, by your valuation, five shekels in silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty gerahs.

17 But the firstborn of an ox or the firstborn of a sheep or the firstborn of a goat, you shall not redeem; they are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar and shall offer up their fat in smoke *as* an offering by fire, for a soothing aroma to the LORD.

18 Their meat shall be yours; it shall be yours like the breast of a wave offering and like the right thigh.

19 All the offerings of the holy *gifts*, which the sons of Israel offer to the LORD, I have given to you and your sons and your daughters with you, as a perpetual allotment. It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the LORD to you and your descendants with you.”

Provision for the Levites (the Levitical Tithe)

20 Then the LORD said to Aaron, “You shall have no inheritance in their land nor own any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the sons of Israel.

21 To the sons of Levi, behold, I have given all the tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service which they perform, the service of the tent of meeting.

22 The sons of Israel shall not come near the tent of meeting again, or they will bear sin and die.

23 Only the Levites shall perform the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, and among the sons of Israel they shall have no inheritance.

24 For the tithe of the sons of Israel, which they offer as an offering to the LORD, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance; therefore I have said concerning them, “They shall have no inheritance among the sons of Israel.”

A Tenth of the Levitical Tithe Goes to the Priests

25 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

26 “Moreover, you shall speak to the Levites and say to them, ‘When you take from the sons of Israel the tithe which I have given you from them for your inheritance, then you shall present an offering from it to the LORD, a tithe of the tithe.’”

27 Your offering shall be reckoned to you as the grain from the threshing floor or the full produce from the wine vat.
 28 So you shall also present an offering to the LORD from your tithes, which you receive from the sons of Israel; and from it you shall give the LORD's offering to Aaron the priest.
 29 Out of all your gifts you shall present every offering due to the LORD, from all the best of them, the sacred part from them.'
 30 You shall say to them, 'When you have offered from it the best of it, then *the rest* shall be reckoned to the Levites as the product of the threshing floor, and as the product of the wine vat.
 31 You may eat it anywhere, you and your households, for it is your compensation in return for your service in the tent of meeting.
 32 You will bear no sin by reason of it when you have offered the best of it. But you shall not profane the sacred gifts of the sons of Israel, 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 Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,
 2 "This is the statute of the law which the LORD has commanded, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel that they bring you an unblemished red heifer in which is no defect *and* on which a yoke has never been placed.
 3 You shall give it to Eleazar the priest, and it shall be brought outside the camp and be slaughtered in his presence.
 4 Next Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle some of its blood toward the front of the tent of meeting seven times.
 5 Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight; its hide and its flesh and its blood, with its refuse, shall be burned.
 6 The priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet *material* and cast it into the midst of the burning heifer.
 7 The priest shall then wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward come into the camp, but the priest shall be unclean until evening.
 8 The one who burns it shall also wash his clothes in water and bathe his body in water, and shall be unclean until evening.
 9 Now a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place, and the congregation of the sons of Israel shall keep it as water to remove impurity; it is purification from sin.
 10 The one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening; and it shall be a perpetual statute to the sons of Israel and to the alien who sojourns among them.

General Rule for Purification

11 'The one who touches the corpse of any person shall be unclean for seven days.
 12 That one shall purify himself from uncleanness with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, *and then* he will be clean; but if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean.
 13 Anyone who touches a corpse, the body of a man who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from Israel. Because the water for impurity was not sprinkled on him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is still on him.

Purification in Specific Cases

14 'This is the law when a man dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent and everyone who is in the tent shall be unclean for seven days.
 15 Every open vessel, which has no covering tied down on it, shall be unclean.
 16 Also, anyone who in the open field touches one who has been slain with a sword or who has died *naturally*, or a human bone or a grave, shall be unclean for seven days.
 17 Then for the unclean *person* they shall take some of the ashes of the burnt purification from sin and flowing water shall be added to them in a vessel.
 18 A clean person shall take hyssop and dip *it* in the water, and sprinkle *it* on the tent and on all the furnishings and on the persons who were there, and on the one who touched the bone or the one slain or the one dying *naturally* or the grave.
 19 Then the clean *person* shall sprinkle on the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall purify him from uncleanness, and he shall wash his clothes and bathe *himself* in water and shall be clean by evening.
 20 But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself from uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD; the water for impurity has not been sprinkled on him, he is unclean.
 21 So it shall be a perpetual statute for them. And he who sprinkles the water for impurity shall wash his clothes, and he who touches the water for impurity shall be unclean until evening.
 22 Furthermore, anything that the unclean *person* touches shall be unclean; and the person who touches *it* shall be unclean until evening.'"

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

Numbers 33:18–35

- 18 They journeyed from Hazeroth and camped at Rithmah.
- 19 They journeyed from Rithmah and camped at Rimmon-perez.
- 20 They journeyed from Rimmon-perez and camped at Libnah.
- 21 They journeyed from Libnah and camped at Rissah.
- 22 They journeyed from Rissah and camped in Kehelathah.
- 23 They journeyed from Kehelathah and camped at Mount Shepher.
- 24 They journeyed from Mount Shepher and camped at Haradah.
- 25 They journeyed from Haradah and camped at Makheloth.
- 26 They journeyed from Makheloth and camped at Tahath.
- 27 They journeyed from Tahath and camped at Terah.
- 28 They journeyed from Terah and camped at Mithkah.
- 29 They journeyed from Mithkah and camped at Hashmonah.
- 30 They journeyed from Hashmonah and camped at Moseroth.
- 31 They journeyed from Moseroth and camped at Bene-jaakan.
- 32 They journeyed from Bene-jaakan and camped at Hor-haggidgad.
- 33 They journeyed from Hor-haggidgad and camped at Jotbathah.
- 34 They journeyed from Jotbathah and camped at Abronah.
- 35 They journeyed 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 Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.
- 2 Before the mountains were born
Or You gave birth to the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.
- 3 You turn man back into dust
And say, "Return, O children of men."
- 4 For a thousand years in Your sight
Are like yesterday when it passes by,
Or *as* a watch in the night.
- 5 You have swept them away like a flood; they fall asleep;
In the morning they are like grass which sprouts anew.
- 6 In the morning it flourishes and sprouts anew;
Toward evening it fades and withers away.
- 7 For we have been consumed by Your anger
And by Your wrath we have been dismayed.
- 8 You have placed our iniquities before You,
Our secret *sins* in the light of Your presence.
- 9 For all our days have declined in Your fury;
We have finished our years like a sigh.
- 10 As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years,
Or if due to strength, eighty years,
Yet their pride is *but* labor and sorrow;
For soon it is gone and we fly away.
- 11 Who understands the power of Your anger
And Your fury, according to the fear that is due You?
- 12 So teach us to number our days,
That we may present to You a heart of wisdom.
- 13 Do return, O LORD; how long *will it be*?
And be sorry for Your servants.
- 14 O satisfy us in the morning with Your lovingkindness,
That we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
- 15 Make us glad according to the days You have afflicted us,
And the years we have seen evil.

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| 16 | Let Your work appear to Your servants
And Your majesty to their children. |
| 17 | Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us;
And confirm for us the work of our hands;
Yes, confirm the work of our hands. |

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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."