

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 The Israelites said to Moses, “We are bound to die! We perish, we all perish!

13 Anyone who even comes close to the tabernacle of the LORD will die! Are we all to die?”

18:1 The LORD said to Aaron, “You and your sons and your tribe with you must bear the iniquity of the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you must bear the iniquity of your priesthood.

2 “Bring with you your brothers, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, so that they may join with you and minister to you while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony.

3 They must be responsible to care for you and to care for the entire tabernacle. However, they must not come near the furnishings of the sanctuary and the altar, or both they and you will die.

4 They must join with you, and they will be responsible for the care of the tent of meeting, for all the service of the tent, but no unauthorized person may approach you.

5 You will be responsible for the care of the sanctuary and the care of the altar, so that there will be no more wrath on the Israelites.

6 I myself have chosen your brothers the Levites from among the Israelites. They are given to you as a gift from the LORD, to perform the duties of the tent of meeting.

7 But you and your sons with you are responsible for your priestly duties, for everything at the altar and within the curtain. And you must serve. I give you the priesthood as a gift for service; but the unauthorized person who approaches must be put to death.”

Provision for the Priests

8 The LORD spoke to Aaron, “See, I have given you the responsibility for my raised offerings; I have given all the holy things of the Israelites to you as your priestly portion and to your sons as a perpetual ordinance.

9 Of all the most holy offerings reserved from the fire this will be yours: Every offering of theirs, whether from every grain offering or from every purification offering or from every reparation offering which they bring to me, will be most holy for you and for your sons.

10 You are to eat it as a most holy offering; every male may eat it. It will be holy to you.

11 “And this is yours: the raised offering of their gift, along with all the wave offerings of the Israelites. I have given them to you and to your sons and daughters with you as a perpetual ordinance. Everyone who is ceremonially clean in your household may eat of it.

12 “All the best of the olive oil and all the best of the wine and of the wheat, the first fruits of these things that they give to the LORD, I have given to you.

13 And whatever first ripe fruit in their land they bring to the LORD will be yours; everyone who is ceremonially clean in your household may eat of it.

14 “Everything devoted in Israel will be yours.

15 The firstborn of every womb which they present to the LORD, whether human or animal, will be yours. Nevertheless, the firstborn sons you must redeem, and the firstborn males of unclean animals you must redeem.

16 And those that must be redeemed you are to redeem when they are a month old, according to your estimation, for five shekels of silver according to the sanctuary shekel (which is twenty gerahs).

17 But you must not redeem the firstborn of a cow or a sheep or a goat; they are holy. You must splash their blood on the altar and burn their fat for an offering made by fire for a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

18 And their meat will be yours, just as the breast and the right hip of the raised offering is yours.

19 All the raised offerings of the holy things that the Israelites offer to the LORD, I have given to you, and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual ordinance. It is a covenant of salt forever before the LORD for you and for your descendants with you.”

Provision for the Levites (the Levitical Tithe)

20 The LORD spoke to Aaron, “You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any portion of property among them—I am your portion and your inheritance among the Israelites.

21 See, I have given the Levites all the tithes in Israel for an inheritance, for their service which they perform—the service of the tent of meeting.

22 No longer may the Israelites approach the tent of meeting, or else they will bear their sin and die.

23 But the Levites must perform the service of the tent of meeting, and they must bear their iniquity. It will be a perpetual ordinance throughout your generations that among the Israelites the Levites have no inheritance.

24 But I have given to the Levites for an inheritance the tithes of the Israelites that are offered to the LORD as a raised offering. That is why I said to them that among the Israelites they are to have no inheritance.”

A Tenth of the Levitical Tithe Goes to the Priests

25 The LORD spoke to Moses:

26 “You are to speak to the Levites, and you must tell them, ‘When you receive from the Israelites the tithe that I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you are to offer up from it as a raised offering to the LORD a tenth of the tithe.’”

27 And your raised offering will be credited to you as though it were grain from the threshing floor or as new wine from the winepress.

28 Thus you are to offer up a raised offering to the LORD of all your tithes which you receive from the Israelites; and you must give the LORD's raised offering from it to Aaron the priest.

29 From all your gifts you must offer up every raised offering due the LORD, from all the best of it, and the holiest part of it.'

30 "Therefore you will say to them, 'When you offer up the best of it, then it will be credited to the Levites as the product of the threshing floor and as the product of the winepress.

31 And you may eat it in any place, you and your household, because it is your wages for your service in the tent of meeting.

32 And you will bear no sin concerning it when you offer up the best of it. And you must not profane the holy things of the Israelites, or else 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 The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron:

2 "This is the ordinance of the law which the LORD has commanded: 'Instruct the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without blemish, which has no defect and has never carried a yoke.

3 You must give it to Eleazar the priest so that he can take it outside the camp, and it must be slaughtered before him.

4 Eleazar the priest is to take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of the blood seven times directly in front of the tent of meeting.

5 Then the heifer must be burned in his sight—its skin, its flesh, its blood, and its offal is to be burned.

6 And the priest must take cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool and throw them into the midst of the fire where the heifer is burning.

7 Then the priest must wash his clothes and bathe himself in water, and afterward he may come into the camp, but the priest will be ceremonially unclean until evening.

8 The one who burns it must wash his clothes in water and bathe himself in water. He will be ceremonially unclean until evening.

9 "'Then a man who is ceremonially clean must gather up the ashes of the red heifer and put them in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp. They must be kept for the community of the Israelites for use in the water of purification—it is a purification for sin.

10 The one who gathers the ashes of the heifer must wash his clothes and be ceremonially unclean until evening. This will be a permanent ordinance both for the Israelites and the resident foreigner who lives among them.

General Rule for Purification

11 "'Whoever touches the corpse of any person will be ceremonially unclean seven days.

12 He must purify himself with water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third day and the seventh day, then he will not be clean.

13 Anyone who touches the corpse of any dead person and does not purify himself defiles the tabernacle of the LORD. And that person must be cut off from Israel, because the water of purification was not sprinkled on him. He will be unclean; his uncleanness remains on him.

Purification in Specific Cases

14 "'This is the law: When a man dies in a tent, anyone who comes into the tent and all who are in the tent will be ceremonially unclean seven days.

15 And every open container that has no covering fastened on it is unclean.

16 And whoever touches the body of someone killed with a sword in the open fields, or the body of someone who died of natural causes, or a human bone, or a grave, will be unclean seven days.

17 "'For a ceremonially unclean person you must take some of the ashes of the heifer burnt for purification from sin and pour fresh running water over them in a vessel.

18 Then a ceremonially clean person must take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent, on all its furnishings, and on the people who were there, or on the one who touched a bone, or one killed, or one who died, or a grave.

19 And the clean person must sprinkle the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he must purify him, and then he must wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and he will be clean in the evening.

20 But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself, that person must be cut off from among the community, because he has polluted the sanctuary of the LORD; the water of purification was not sprinkled on him, so he is unclean.

21 "'So this will be a perpetual ordinance for them: The one who sprinkles the water of purification must wash his clothes, and the one who touches the water of purification will be unclean until evening.

22 And whatever the unclean person touches will be unclean, and the person who touches it will be unclean until evening.'"

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

Numbers 33:18–35

- 18 They traveled from Hazeroth and camped in Rithmah.
- 19 They traveled from Rithmah and camped at Rimmon-perez.
- 20 They traveled from Rimmon-perez and camped in Libnah.
- 21 They traveled from Libnah and camped at Rissah.
- 22 They traveled from Rissah and camped in Kehelathah.
- 23 They traveled from Kehelathah and camped at Mount Shepher.
- 24 They traveled from Mount Shepher and camped in Haradah.
- 25 They traveled from Haradah and camped in Makheloth.
- 26 They traveled from Makheloth and camped at Tahath.
- 27 They traveled from Tahath and camped at Terah.
- 28 They traveled from Terah and camped in Mithcah.
- 29 They traveled from Mithcah and camped in Hashmonah.
- 30 They traveled from Hashmonah and camped in Moseroth.
- 31 They traveled from Moseroth and camped in Bene-jaakan.
- 32 They traveled from Bene-jaakan and camped at Hor-haggidgad.
- 33 They traveled from Hor-haggidgad and camped in Jotbathah.
- 34 They traveled from Jotbathah and camped in Abronah.
- 35 They traveled 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 protector through all generations!
- 2 Even before the mountains came into existence,
or you brought the world into being,
you were the eternal God.
- 3 You make mankind return to the dust,
and say, "Return, O people!"
- 4 Yes, in your eyes a thousand years
are like yesterday that quickly passes,
or like one of the divisions of the nighttime.
- 5 You bring their lives to an end and they "fall asleep."
In the morning they are like the grass that sprouts up;
- 6 in the morning it glistens and sprouts up;
at evening time it withers and dries up.
- 7 Yes, we are consumed by your anger;
we are terrified by your wrath.
- 8 You are aware of our sins;
you even know about our hidden sins.
- 9 Yes, throughout all our days we experience your raging fury;
the years of our lives pass quickly, like a sigh.
- 10 The days of our lives add up to seventy years,
or eighty, if one is especially strong.
But even one's best years are marred by trouble and oppression.
Yes, they pass quickly and we fly away.
- 11 Who can really fathom the intensity of your anger?
Your raging fury causes people to fear you.
- 12 So teach us to consider our mortality,
so that we might live wisely.
- 13 Turn back toward us, O LORD!
How long must this suffering last?
Have pity on your servants!
- 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your loyal love!
Then we will shout for joy and be happy all our days!
- 15 Make us happy in proportion to the days you have afflicted us,

- in proportion to the years we have experienced trouble!
- 16 May your servants see your work!
May their sons see your majesty!
- 17 May our sovereign God extend his favor to us!
Make our endeavors successful!
Yes, make them successful!

Scripture quoted by permission. All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the NET Bible® copyright ©1996–2006 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. <http://bible.org> All rights reserved. This material is available in its entirety as a free download or online web use at <http://netbible.org/>.

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."