



Wanderings in the Wilderness: Numbers



Introduction to Numbers

An Outline of the Book of Numbers

I. Preparations for Leaving Sinai (1:1-10:10)

- The census & order of the camp (1:1-4:49)
- The Nazirite vow (Num 6:1-21)
- The Aaronic Priestly blessing (Num 6:22-27)
- The second passover (9:1-10:10)

II. From Sinai to the Plains of Moab (10:11-21:35)

- Unrest among the tribes (11:1-15)
- The provision of quails (11:16-35)
- Miriam's leprosy (12:1-16)
- The twelve spies (13:1-14:45)
- Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (16:1-17:13)
- Miriam's death; events at Meribah (20:1-13)
- Edom's refusal to let Israel pass;
Aaron's death (20:14-29)

III. Events in the Moabite Plains (22-26)

- Balaam (22:1-24:25)
- The second census (26:1-65)
- War against Midian (31:1-54)
- Inheritance in Transjordan (32:1-42)
- Allotment of territory west of Jordan; appointment of
Levitical and refugee cities; marriage of heiresses (33:50-36:13)

The purpose of Numbers is to contrast the faithfulness of God with the faithlessness and rebellion of the Israelites. The former is seen in God's keeping of his covenant promise to make Israel a numerous people. The latter is attested by the record of Israel's grumbling about their living conditions, rebellion against God's leadership, and refusal to enter the land. Numbers outlines a steadfast refusal of Israel to achieve their call to holiness coupled with God's mercy to preserve the nation and to provide a future generation with the opportunity to choose life.

The book emphasizes:

- The holiness of God
- The sinfulness of humanity
- The necessity of obedience to Yahweh
- The tragedy of disobedience to Yahweh's commands
- The utter faithfulness of God to his covenant agreement with Israel

The Census of the Exodus Generation (1:1–4:49)

- **The First Census of Israel** (1:1–54): **603,550 military-aged men**
- The Order of Encampment and Marching (2:1–34)
- The First Census of the Levites (males a month or older, 3:14–39): **22,000**
 - Gerhsonites and their duties (3:18–26)
 - Kohathites and their duties (3:27–32)
 - Merarites and their duties (3:33–39)
- The Redemption of the First-Born (3:40–51): **22,273 males from the rest of Israel**
- Duties of Levitical Clans Detailed
 - The Duties of the Kohathites (4:1–20)
 - The Duties of the Gershonites (2:21–28)
 - The Duties of the Merarites (4:21–33)
- Census of the Levites (twenty-five to fifty years, 4:34–49): **8,580 old enough to serve**

How should we understand the Numbers provided in the book of Numbers?

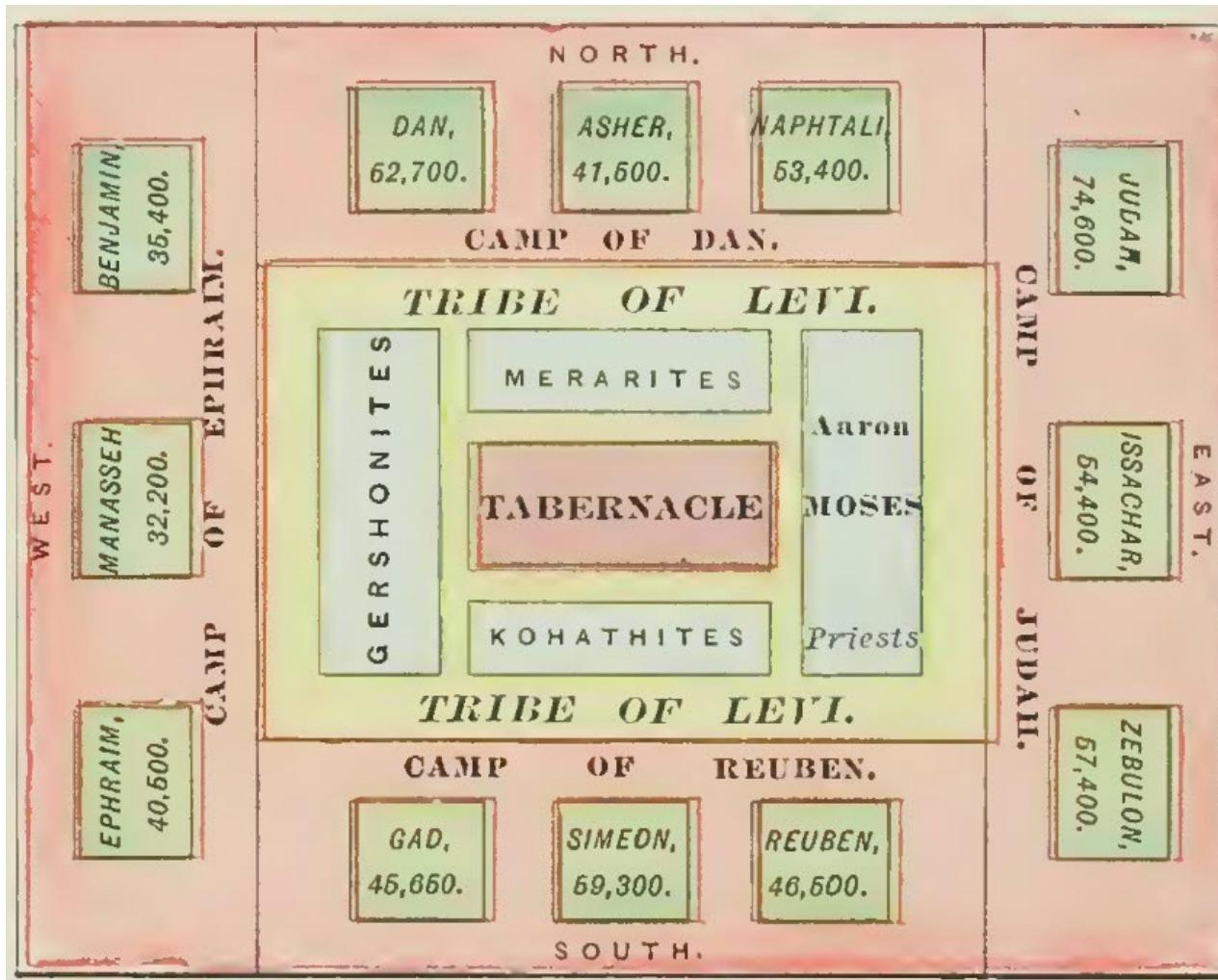
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The most common explanation for the large numbers of Israelites in the Bible is that modern readers misinterpret the text. The Hebrew word translated as “thousand” is ’elep. It is generally accepted that a homonym means “clan, military group,” and could have designated in earlier times a military company of no specific size. So a statement such as “those that were numbered of ... the tribe of Reuben, were forty and six thousand [’elep] and five hundred” (Num 1:21) may have originally been intended to mean forty-six companies or clans [’elep], totaling five hundred men. So calculated, the total number of fighting men listed in Numbers 1 would diminish from **603,550 to about 18,000**. If this were the case, the size of the whole camp of Israel was probably about **60,000 to 70,000 people**.

Holzapfel, Pike, and Seely, 126

The Order of Encampment and Marching (2:1-34)



- Israel with YHWH in its midst
- The priests and Levites are camped around the Tabernacle with the other tribes arrayed around them
- Israel moved as a community towards the Promised Land, just as the Church moves forward as a community led by God and directed by his prophet

Sons of Aaron and the Rest of the Tribe of Levi

- Numbers, reflecting “the camp on the move,” focuses on the rest of the Levites, who had the primary responsibility for packing and transporting the Tabernacle and its furnishings
- Levites Chosen and Given to Aaron’s Sons (3:5–13)
 - Take the place of the rest of the firstborn of Israel, which the Lord claimed when he slew the firstborn of Israel
 - Given to YHWH, they are in turn “given” to Aaron and his descendants, much as portions of the sacrificial offerings were given to support them
- The First Census of the Levites (males a month or older, 3:14–39): **22,000**
 - Gerhsonites and their duties (**accessories made of fabric**, 3:18–26)
 - Kohathites and their duties (**sacred things made of gold and bronze**, 3:27–32)
 - Merarites and their duties (**wooden items and supporting structures**, 3:33–39)
- The Redemption of the First-Born (3:40–51)

Many of these duties seem menial or trivial, but all were necessary to move the people of the Lord under his guidance—just as no church service, is unimportant in moving the people of God towards the “promised land” of heaven.

The Nazarite Vow (6:1–21)

- A way of extending the special holiness of the priests to the average Israelite
- As they were holy or “set apart” by calling, an individual could set him or herself apart to the Lord for a set period of time
 - Think of mission calls with specific dress, grooming, and behavior standards
- During this period, not even the death of close family members could separate them from their service to the Lord, much as was the case for the high priest

Complaining in the Desert (11:1–15)

- “And when the people complained, it displeased the Lord: and the Lord heard it; and his anger was kindled; **and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed some outlying parts of camp.** But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated” (11:1–2)
 - “And he called the name of the place Taberah: because the fire of the Lord burnt among them.” (11:3; place names are frequently etymological)
 - Quite possibly lightning
- “Manna is so boring!”**
 - “And there went forth a wind from the Lord, and brought quails from the sea... (11:31)
 - Even in the midst of their murmuring, Israel is still blessed.
- Moses has had enough of their complaining**
 - “And Moses said unto the Lord, Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? And wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me? Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers?” (11:11–12)
 - Cf. Exodus and Jethro’s advice when Moses cannot handle everything



The Seventy Elders (11:16–30)

- Seventy Chosen Men
 - “And the Lord said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee. And I will come down and talk with thee there: and **I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone.**” (11:16-17)
 - Set apart as judges in Israel
 - And the Lord came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took of the spirit that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders: and it came to pass, that, **when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, and did not cease.** OR **When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again (NIV).** although they never did so again (NKJV). But they did not do so again (NRSV)
 - At issue here is who has the right to prophesy. The dominant translation is that it was a one-time event.
- Eldad and Medad: the spirit rested upon them and they prophecy – what does this mean?
 - See Revelation 19:10 “...for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”
 - Joshua speaks against them but is rebuked by Moses
 - “And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? **would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!**” (11:29)

Miriam & Aaron Questioning Moses(Numbers 12)

“For Miriam the prophetic task centers not upon a single male (Moses) but embraces diverse voices, female and male. Her questions seem to harmonize with Moses’ own wish that “all the Lord’s people were prophets” (Numbers 11:29 RSV). But Miriam makes clear what Moses’ words did not: that “all the Lord’s people” includes women. After all, as “the prophet,” she has already spoken for God at the sea . . . So now in the wilderness she seeks an equal sharing of prophetic leadership.” (Phyllis Trible, 7)

- 2 And they said, Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us? And the Lord heard it.
- 3 (Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.)

The Lord’s response is severe:

- 10 And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow:



And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. (Exodus 15:20)

Aaron Is the First Levitical Priest

Micah 6:4 For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. (Exodus 15:20)

Miriam was often viewed in rabbinic literature as enjoying equality with her two brothers and being counted as one of Israel's three redeemers. She is often treated identically with her brothers.

"indicate that ancient Israelites were also familiar with other forms of female authority that did not survive into later periods" (Kramer 120).



Micah 6:4 For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

Miriam & Aaron Questioning Moses: What is at Stake?

- 2 And they said, Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us? And the Lord heard it.
- 3 (Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.)
- 6 And he said, “Hear my words:
When there are prophets among you,
I the Lord make myself known to them in visions;
I speak to them in dreams.
7 Not so with my servant Moses;
he is entrusted with all my house.
8 With him I speak face to face— clearly, not in riddles;
and he beholds the form of the Lord.

The Lord's response is severe:

- 10 And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow:



No one could deny that Aaron and Miriam were inspired, and that they uttered the words of God, and had a prophet vocation; but God had never called them to the same leadership of Israel to which Moses was called. He is teaching us about lines of authority—who can receive revelation for the Church and speak for God to the people

Why is Miriam punished more harshly than Aaron?

As the main priest, Aaron offered sacrifice on behalf of Israel. The punishment of leprosy would preclude his priestly duties and render Israel even more vulnerable to God's judgment and punishment. There is also the nature of leprosy itself. The traditional understanding of leprosy in the Old Testament as Hansen's disease is incorrect.

Archaeological evidence does not attest to the presence of this sort of leprosy in the Middle East before the time of Alexander's return from India, in the late fourth century BC. Instead, this leprosy is best understood as a form of psoriasis. **Thus Miriam has this temporary condition. Why does this require her exclusion from the camp? The answer lies in the holiness of God, who cannot tolerate death or even signs of death.** Psoriasis looks like dead skin (and often is). Its connection with this symbol of death renders the victim unclean and requires removal from the camp. Thus the punishment is temporary. **Further, Miriam may have led her brother Aaron in this protest.** Numbers 12:1 mentions her first as acting subject and then Aaron second. The verb, 'speak (against)', is a feminine singular highlighting Miriam's role. Richard S. Hess, The Old Testament, 113



The people's great regard for Miriam

Numbers 12:15 And
Miriam was shut
out from the camp
seven days: and the
people journeyed
not till Miriam was
brought in again.



Josephus gives an account of her funeral obsequies, which were celebrated in the most solemn manner for thirty days; the same honor was shown to a woman endowed with the prophetic commission that was given to her brothers; and not only so, but, as late as the time of St. Jerome, the tomb of Miriam was shown as an object of veneration. (Harriet Beecher Stowe)

In Kadesh "Miriam died and was buried there. Now there was no water for the community" (Numbers 20:1-2). Nature's response to Miriam's death is immediate and severe. It mourns, and the community suffers. Miriam, protector of her brother at the river's bank and leader in the victory at the sea, symbolized life. How appropriate, then, that waters of life should reverence her death. Like the people of Israel, nature honors Miriam. (Trible 10)

Challenge to Aaron's Authority: Korah, Dathan, and Abiram seek the Priesthood (Numbers 16)

"the revolt of Korah, combined by P with that of Dathan and Abiram, is another episode of priestly rivalry. A group of Levites led by Korah claimed that since the entire people of Yahweh was a holy people, the special status of Moses and Aaron was unjustified. Moses proposed a test: They should bring incense to the sanctuary, and if Yahweh answered with fire, then they too would be considered chosen. But when the fire from Yahweh came, they and their supporters were burned to death. The fire-holders that they had used, however, were now sacred, and so were incorporated into the sanctuary furnishings as a warning reminder. . . . In the sequence in Numbers 17, the status of Aaron was reaffirmed on the very next day: Only his staff produced shoots, blossoms, and almonds (an example of a tree of life), and it too was saved another memorial warning against rebellion" (Coogan 169).

Why so harsh?



Because of the rebellion of Korah, the Lord needed to set the record straight—in a public setting who had the authority to preside and administer the temple. This ended any more people seeking to take away the special status of Moses and Aaron.

God must move them from where they are to where they need to be.

Pragmatically, part of the purpose of Numbers was to order and organize the former Hebrew slaves into a unified community of God prepared to fulfill their covenant obligations. The intent of Numbers was to transform an oppressed people into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation through civil and ceremonial legislation, religious instructions, administrative census takings, tribal marching and camping arrangements, priestly ordinances, the cloud of guidance, and laws related to the allotment and inheritance of the land. Finally, the tragic examples of covenant disobedience preserved in Numbers were stern warnings to future generations of the Hebrew nation. (Hill & Walton 149)



God's judgment against Israel is coupled with his mercy to preserve the nation and to provide a future generation with the opportunity to choose life.

The Spies Report of Canaan: 10 vs 2

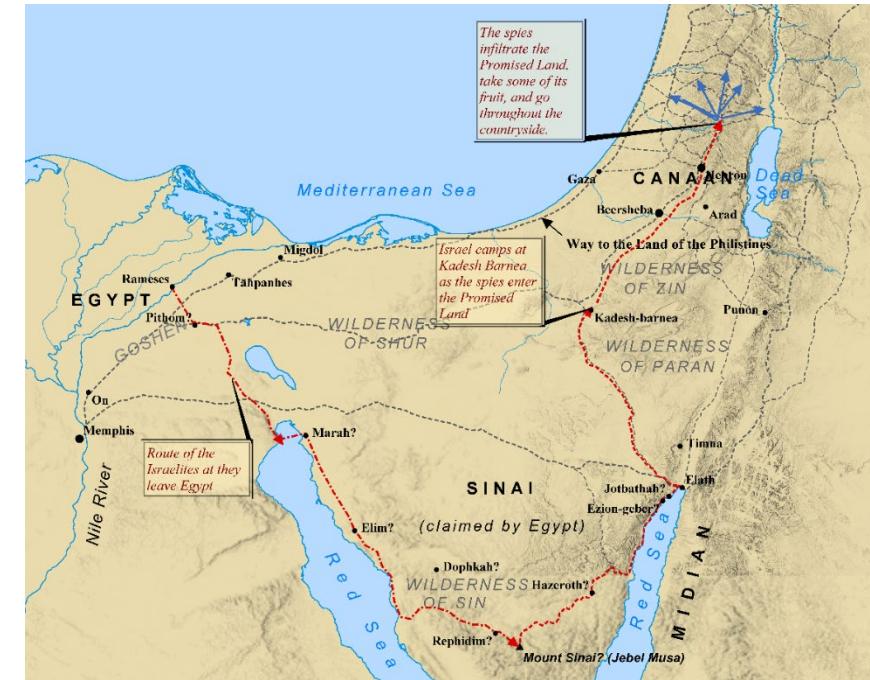
13:30 And Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it.

31 But the men that went up with him said, We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we. . . . 33 And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.

14:1-4 And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt? And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt.

7-10 And they spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land, which we passed through to search it, is an exceeding good land. If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey. Only rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the Lord is with us: fear them not. But all the congregation bade stone them with stones.

They all saw the same thing, but their perspectives were different



"Despite all that God has done for Israel and the demonstrations of his power, they refuse to believe that he can give them victory over the Canaanites and the Amorites in the promised land. Their refusal to believe seals their fate." (Hess 120).

Numbers outlines a steadfast refusal of Israel to achieve their call to holiness.

The land belongs to those who fully trust Yahweh (Joshua and Caleb); the faithless clamoring of the crowd disqualifies them from settling there.

“For he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory.

“And he who cannot abide the law of a terrestrial kingdom cannot abide a terrestrial glory.

“And he who cannot abide the law of a telestial kingdom cannot abide a telestial glory. ...” (D&C 88:19–24.)

Symbolic nature of the land: the reality of God’s requirements for the Celestial Kingdom.



Allowing God to prevail in our lives begins with faith that He is willing to guide us. President Nelson, April 2021

God moving them from where they are to where they need to be.

- Equality: 15:15 One ordinance shall be both for you of the congregation, and also for the stranger that sojourneth with you, an ordinance for ever in your generations: as ye are, so shall the stranger be before the Lord.
- Remember: 15:39 And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them
- Cities of Refuge: 16:9-15 The concept of a haven for the protection of the ‘manslayer’ was designed to short-circuit the ancient Near Eastern custom of blood vengeance, in which the near kinsman of the victim was obligated to avenge the death of his deceased relative by killing the ‘manslayer.’ The institution of the cities of refuge was unique in the ancient world and elevated Hebrew social and moral life to a higher plan than the surrounding nations.
- 20:4-5 And why have ye brought up the congregation of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our cattle should die there? And wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? it is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink. **This is another revealing passage highlighting the contrast between Egypt, a place of bondage but security, and the wilderness, a place on the way to freedom and opportunity, but filled with insecurity and challenge.**



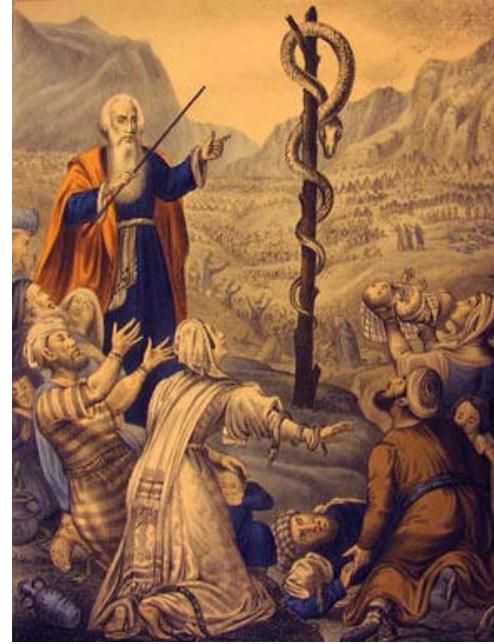
Brass Serpent (Numbers 21:4-9)



“Do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way; for so was it with our fathers; for so was it prepared for them, that if they would look they might live; even so it is with us. The way is prepared, and if we will look we may live forever.” (Alma 37:46)

“[God] sent fiery flying serpents among them; and after they were bitten he prepared a way that they might be healed; and the labor which they had to perform was to look; and **because of the simpleness of the way, or the easiness of it, there were many who perished.**” (1 Nephi 17:41)

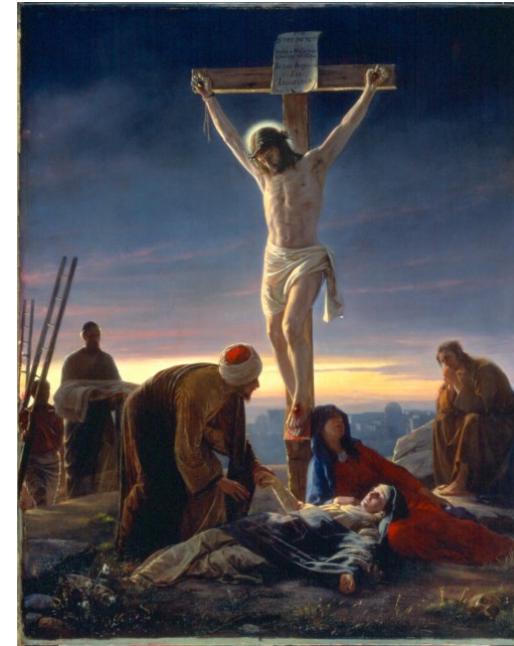
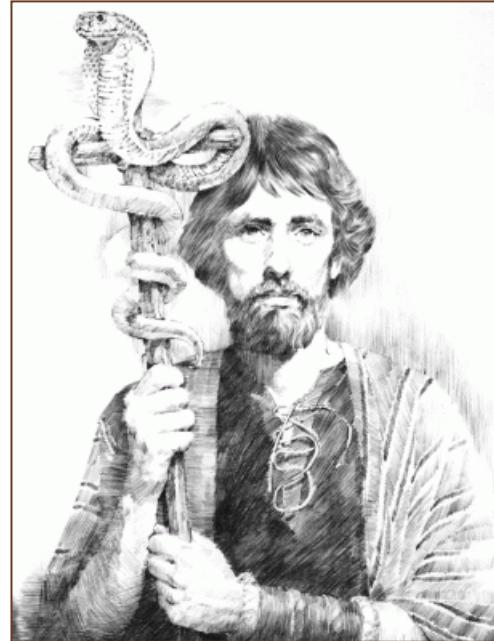
**The Book of Mormon gives two reasons why the Israelites would not look*



“[The Brass Serpent] was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live. But few understood the meaning of those things, and this because of the hardness of their hearts. But there were many who were so hardened that they would not look, therefore they perished. **Now the reason they would not look is because they did not believe that it would heal them.**” (Alma 33:19 - 20)

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.” (John 3:14)

“[Christ] was spoken of by Moses; yea, and behold a type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. (Alma 33:19)



“Did [Moses] not bear record that the Son of God should come? And as he lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so shall he be lifted up who should come. And as many as should look upon that serpent should live, even so as many as should look upon the Son of God with faith, having a contrite spirit, might live, even unto that life which is eternal.” (Helaman 8:14 - 15)

Balak and Balaam (22:1–25:18)

Israel on the Plains of Moab (22:1–36:13)



What Balaam was not able to do to the Israelites, they brought on themselves. Staying near the city of Beth-Peor, some “began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab,” which apparently included sexual sin as well as the worship of Baal-peor.

God working on our behalf even when we are not

- Balak Summons Balaam to Curse Israel (22:1–21)
- *Balaam, the Donkey, and the Angel (22:22–40)*
- Balaam’s First Oracle (22:41–23:12)
 - “Who can count the dust of Jacob?”
- Balaam’s Second Oracle (23:13–30)
 - “It shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, what has God wrought?”
- Balaam’s Third Oracle (24:1–14)
 - “Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee”
- Balaam’s Fourth Oracle (24:15–25)
 - *“There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel” (24:17; cf. Matt 2:9)*
- **Worship of Baal of Peor (25:1–18)**
 - *Phineas’ “zeal” for the Lord*

Daughters of Zelophehad: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, & Tirzah

These five women petition Moses to allow them to inherit their father's property. Moses hear their petition and takes it to God, who answers favorably. They are restricted to marrying within their father's clan to preserve the tribal property (Numbers 27 & 36)

