

**People on the Move: The Book of Numbers**  
**Priests and Levites**

Lesson #8 for November 21, 2009

Scriptures: Numbers 9; 18; 19; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 14:6-12.

1. This lesson discusses the work given by God to the priests and Levites. This lesson also discusses spiritual gifts and the tithing system which God gave them for the support of the Levites and priests. The lesson ends with a discussion of the “red heifer” sacrifice.
2. Why don't we have priests today in the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Do we have the equivalent of Levites? If we have no Levites and no priests in our church today, what are we supposed to learn from these chapters in Numbers which were written more than 3000 years ago and which are mostly about the priests and Levites? Were the roles of priests and Levites officially dropped at some point in time? Did they just fade into history because they were “long ago obsolete” as suggested by the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*? (See Sabbath Afternoon)
3. When you pay your tithes and offerings to the church, do you believe that the pastors and others who work for the denomination have “earned” those tithes? Or are they a “gift” received “because of no merit of their own”? Is the tithing system on which our denomination depends “an example of God's grace”? What would that mean? Do you pay your tithe whether or not you think the pastor is doing a good job?
4. Read Numbers 18:1-7; Exodus 28:38; Leviticus 10:17; 22:15,16. The Israelites had just been informed that they were to spend the next forty years wandering in the desert and also die there. Notice that God was very particular about the handling of the temple and its furniture. Doesn't that sound harsh? Through several lessons we have discussed the clear distinction God was making between priests, Levites, and the ordinary people. God seemed to be taking it so seriously that He was making it a life-and-death matter! Why do you think that was? Only members of Aaron's family were to have contact with the holy things and to do the work of priests in the temple and at the altar. Only the Levites were allowed to go near the temple and assist the priests. How does that fit with Exodus 19:5,6 and 1 Peter 2:9? Was God saying that no one can take Christ's place? In what sense were the children of Israel to be “priests” to all other nations? Even when the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, he was to wear bells and pomegranates so that the people could know that he was still alive and moving! (Exodus 28:33,34; 39:25,26)
5. Read Numbers 18:7 again. What was God trying to tell them in the last phrase of this verse? Was God saying, “If you do exactly as I tell you, things will be fine; but if you don't, I will have to kill you”? What would you think about a God who made such a statement or “threat”? Did God have to say that to “save Israel from death through ignorance”? (See *Adult Teacher's Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, Sunday, November 15)
6. Was it necessary for God to make those very clear distinctions in order to avoid His “wrath coming down upon the Israelites”? (Numbers 18:5) Was that some kind of carrot-and-stick approach? How could God be offering mercy and threatening wrath at the same time? Did the sacred objects have special “magical powers” that would slay any unworthy person who touched them? Why did Uzzah die when he touched the ark? (2 Samuel 6) Since Uzzah apparently was a Kohathite (*PP* 705.2)—the family of Levites in charge of carrying the ark and the sacred objects from the sanctuary—and since the ark had been in his home for many years, he should have known very well that the ark was to be carried on the shoulders of the Levites rather than on a cart pulled by oxen. (Numbers 7:9) The ultimate sin is to tell God, “Step aside; I am going to do this my way!”
7. God told the priests that both the priesthood itself (Numbers 18:6) and the Levites were given to them as a gift to assist them to correctly represent God to the people.
8. Why do you think God chose the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron? Was that a totally random and arbitrary choice? Was it a reward for not being involved in the idolatry with the golden calf at Sinai?

Then, shouldn't Aaron, who "created" that calf, have been the first to die? Or, was it a reward for what Aaron had done for the Israelites? Or, was God asking them just to use the talents or spiritual gifts which He had already bestowed upon them? Did God realize that He needed someone to do that work, and they were as good as anyone else? Would that be arbitrary? Aaron had been chosen earlier to be a spokesman for Moses.

9. As you review all of those provisions and stipulations given by God in these books from Exodus to Deuteronomy, is it obvious to you that they are a "picture" "in miniature" of Calvary? Do you see the life and death of Christ clearly represented? Or even faintly portrayed? Do you think the people at that time had any idea that the provisions were revealing something about the life of the future Messiah? **As we have read through the book of Numbers, have you noticed any verses clearly explaining what all those rituals were supposed to mean?**
10. If the family of Aaron was chosen to be priests and the tribe of Levi to be their assistants, did those gifts of spiritual leadership automatically become hereditary? Or, was that a way to prevent just anyone who wanted to be a priest from lining up for the job? How would you have dealt with that "wild bunch" of ex-slaves? Do we have any problem today with people in church leadership competing over their roles and positions? Does political maneuvering have an appropriate place in church administration?
11. Read Numbers 18:8-20. These verses seem to suggest that offerings given to the Lord could be taken by the priests and Levites and used for their own personal needs. Were those gifts ever misused? What about Samuel's sons? Why were only the males allowed to eat some sacrifices (Numbers 18:8-10) while other offerings were for both the males and females? (Numbers 11:11, 18-20)
12. Read Exodus 19:5,6. What was God trying to tell them in these two verses? Were they expected to witness to all the nations around them? Were the Israelites in any sense ever priests to those around them? What about us? First of all, we must live what we preach! Are we supposed to be priests to those around us? What would that involve? (Revelation 14:6-12) How are we to be "priests" of the three angels' messages to the world? What is "the priesthood of all believers"? Were Jesus and Paul "priests"? Neither of them was of the tribe of Levi.  
  
Will there be priests in heaven? Is there a temple in heaven? Did Moses actually see a temple in heaven? How do we reconcile Revelation 15:5 and 21:22? We must be careful in our understanding of the sanctuary message! Jesus did not remain in the Holy Place in heaven for 1813 years before He could be reunited to His Father! The Father is omnipresent! God has trouble even communicating to us.
13. Consider tithing and what we know about the high priest and his associates in the times of Jesus. Only a few days before His crucifixion, Jesus took His disciples to an area in the temple where the offering receptacles were kept. There—unobserved—He quietly pointed to the actions of a widow who gave two "mites." (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4) What happened to that offering and those of others? Where did those two mites end up? Did Caiaphas need those two mites? But Jesus spoke with great admiration and commendation for the widow. Does this story make it clear to us that even if we think our offerings are being misused by the local church or even by the church organization, that does not justify us in withholding our offerings? If there are problems with the use of church finances, there are other ways for dealing with those problems.
14. Notice that the best of the first fruits of the produce of the land was supposed to be given to the Levites, and then, in turn, the Levites were to pay their tithes to the priests. A similar system is followed in our church even today.
15. If all of the children of Israel were faithful tithe payers, the Levites and priests should have fared very well. But what do you think happened later during times of apostasy? Were the Levites and even the priests forced to go out and find work or earn a living in some other way? In some regions in the Adventist church of today, tithing does not exceed 25% of the church membership.

16. Is that because the church leadership has not presented tithing in the right way? Or, is it because church members have become selfish? Or, is it some of both?
17. Does the tithe-paying plan for the support of the church seem like a fair one to you? Can you think of any valid reason why a faithful Christian should not pay a faithful tithe and give generous offerings? (Malachi 3:10-12)
18. Read Numbers 18:32. Does this verse suggest that those who do not pay a faithful tithe should be put to death? Or, does it suggest that Levites and priests who misused a portion of what was given them were to be put to death?
19. Would we be better off if our pastors and church leaders were all part-time, voluntary workers instead of full-time workers? Church elders and church deacons serve like that. Or, is God saying to us that at the head of His work He wants people who are totally dedicated to the job and not people who have to give to Him what is left over of their time?
20. Considering the fact that we are referring to events which apparently happened during or shortly before the 40 years of wandering by the Israelites in the wilderness, on what “income” did they pay tithe? Were they supposed to tithe their manna? Were the Levites and priests expected to go and collect manna on their own? What other forms of “increase” did they have which could be tithed? Their animals?
21. Certainly, we would recognize that the role of the priests and the role of the Levites were very important in the ancient Israelite economy. Our lesson suggests that the priests, the Levites, and the people each were to have their own function, and thus, there was an interdependence—they needed each other to carry out God’s plan.
22. The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* suggests that we are supposed to learn our complete interdependence through the system of tithing. The priests and Levites depended upon the other tribes for their income. On the other hand, the people were totally dependent upon the Levites and priests when they went to the sanctuary to make offerings, etc. Are we in a similar position today? To whom will we pay our tithe if the Seventh-day Adventist Church becomes illegal?
23. We are invited to consider the “gift” of the priesthood given to Aaron’s family and the gift of the Levites given to assist them and compare those with the spiritual gifts given to the members of the church in the times of the New Testament.
24. Read Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:28-31; Ephesians 4:11. While these three lists of spiritual gifts vary slightly, they give us a clear picture of the needs of the church. Hebrews 5:4 suggests that we can only serve God with the spiritual gifts He has given us.
25. Review the question about spiritual gifts raised by the Corinthian church, and review Paul’s answer in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Is it clear from those three chapters that love is the most important attribute needed in the Christian church? Isn’t it also clear that certain gifts are more important than others?
26. Do you personally know which gifts God has assigned to you? What role is God asking you to play in the church? What happens to gifts which God gives us which are not used? Do neglected gifts wither and die?
27. Read Numbers 19. Many people regard the sacrifice of the red heifer as the strangest ritual or ceremony in the entire sanctuary system. What are we supposed to learn from it? Clearly, that ceremony—the killing of a young heifer, the burning of the entire animal, the blood being tossed in the direction of the sacred tent, and the ashes later being used in a ceremony of cleansing for those who had touched something that had died or someone who had died—does not lend itself to a simple or obvious interpretation!
28. Some have suggested the following possible symbolism: 1) The animal was supposed to be without blemish and red in color. Those things were to represent the death of Jesus Christ. 2) The animal was slain outside of the camp just as Jesus died outside the gate. Did that suggest to them that the

gift of Jesus was for all humanity and not just for the Israelites? 3) Seven is a number which, in the Hebrew economy, suggested perfection or completeness. Tossing the blood toward the tabernacle seven times might suggest that the death of Jesus was a complete sacrifice. 4) The ashes were used to purify those who came in contact with something dead. That might suggest purification from sin. 5) The fact that after being mixed with water, the ashes were sprinkled on the object which was unclean could suggest that we are purified by the spilled blood of Jesus. But sprinkling does not do very much real cleaning! 6) The fact that these offerings were repeated again and again suggests a lack of thoroughness in the cleansing. Does this symbolism have any meaning for you in 2009?

29. Notice that when the heifer was sacrificed and burned, some cedar wood, some hyssop, and some scarlet thread were to be burned along with the heifer. Cedar wood and hyssop were regarded by the ancients as having medicinal properties. The scarlet was probably to represent the blood of Jesus. There are two questions we might ask about the use of the ashes of that heifer: 1) What was the nature of the “sin” or “uncleanness” that could be purified by those ashes mixed with water? and, 2) What actually happened in the act of purification? The “sin” that was to be dealt with through the use of those ashes and water was the “sin” or “uncleanness” of having come into contact with a dead body or entering the home where someone had died. Even touching a grave whether intentionally or unintentionally required such a purification. Was there any true medicinal value in that “cleansing”? Or was it the washing of his clothes and bathing himself that cleansed him? (Numbers 19:19)
30. The word used for *sin* in this instance is a word that means “a misstep” or “a slip of the foot.” It should be clear that the purification described was a ceremonial one because it applied to objects (which cannot sin) as well as to people. Anything that was open in the tent of someone who died needed to be purified. (Numbers 19:14-16)
31. This was obviously a separate type of defilement or uncleanness from the more serious and true rebellion—sin or moral depravity—discussed in earlier chapters.
32. In this lesson we have seen that God was leading His children to do a variety of things on His behalf. Do you understand what God wants you to do on His behalf? Does God seem somewhat arbitrary in some of His statements and actions discussed in this lesson?
33. With this chapter of Numbers coming to a close, we notice that the events connected with the early history of the wanderings of the children of Israel in the wilderness ends. In the next chapter, we notice that Miriam died only a short time before they entered the land of Canaan. What happened during the 40 years between those events? Where did the children of Israel go? Did they wander back and forth? Why do we apparently have no biblical or archeologic record of almost 40 years of wandering?
34. There are many unanswered questions that can be raised by consideration of the book of Numbers. Why are we told about the things which are there? Why are we not told about so many other things that could have been included? We have seen that God is a God of order and cleanliness, a God who on many occasions reaches down to meet us where we are. Many of these ceremonies were minor adaptations of ceremonies from other religions with which the children of Israel were already familiar. But, God is always trying to move His children closer to the ideal. What would God say to us today? What does He want us to do today to move us closer to the ideal? Or, do we already have the ideal?

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