

# **Alleged Contradictions and Problems in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy**

**Dub McClish**

## **Introduction**

Even inspired men have acknowledged that some passages of Scripture are “hard to be understood” (2 Pet. 3:16).<sup>1</sup> Peter warned in this same verse that “the ignorant and unstedfast wrest” such passages “unto their own destruction.” While this was a description of what some were doing when Peter wrote those words, it was also prophetic of what men would continue to do until time is no more. It is evident that men are doing so now, both within and without the kingdom. Atheists, infidels, humanists, and agnostics, as well as skeptical and unbelieving theologians employ difficult passages and alleged Biblical contradictions as a chief point of attack against God and His Word. It is therefore most appropriate for us to study such passages to the end that we may suggest Scriptural, reasonable, and satisfactory explanations of these passages and that we may answer the blasphemers of God’s Word. While we will likely not convince many of them, their calumny needs to be answered so that the beauty of God’s inerrant Word may shine forth and the faith of the elect may be fortified. Gainsaying infidels and modernists have assaulted several passages in the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and I now turn the reader’s attention to some of these.

## **Passages in Leviticus**

### ***Does the Rabbit Chew the Cud?***

In Leviticus 11 God commanded Moses and Aaron to instruct Israel concerning the distinction between clean and unclean creatures of various kinds. God specified that clean animals were those which had split hooves and which chewed the cud (v. 3). Only these could they use for food, and all others were “unclean,” neither to be eaten nor their carcasses to be touched (v. 8). Moses used the camel, the coney, the hare, and the pig to illustrate the application of the law concerning unclean animals (vv. 4–7). Verses 5 and 6 are of special interest:

And the coney, because he cheweth the cud but parteth not the hoof, he is unclean unto you. And the hare, because she cheweth the cud, but parteth not the hoof, she is unclean unto you.”

Hostile critics charge Moses (therefore the Bible and God) with making a mistake in classifying rabbits as ruminants (cud-chewers) when they actually are not so. They therefore

charge the Bible with an “undeniable scientific error,” thus rendering the claim of Biblical inerrancy as untenable, and the authorship of the Bible by God as disproved in their estimate. Of course, if Moses made an error, the critics are correct, but did Moses make an error?

First, we need to consider what the “coney” and “hare” really are. If one looks up *coney*, *hare*, and *rabbit* in any standard English dictionary he will find them generally used interchangeably. However, such a search for a definition is comparable to trying to discover the Biblical meaning of *baptism* by consulting a standard English dictionary. Our English dictionaries give us only current usage of the words they list, which may be far different from the meaning of the word used in the Biblical text. The ASV has a footnote on Leviticus 11:5 which identifies the coney as “the Hyrax Syriacus or rockbadger,” which is not actually a rabbit, although it resembles one in appearance.<sup>2</sup> Coneys are elsewhere described in Scripture as “rock-dwellers” (Psa. 104:18; Pro. 30:26). The “hare” referred to (v. 5) is actually a rabbit.

We can freely admit that neither of these animals chews the cud without admitting any error on the part of Moses or the Bible. The key to understanding why Moses identified these animals as ruminants is seen in the fact that they habitually make a chewing motion with their mouths when they are idle, thereby giving the distinct impression that they are chewing cud as surely as a cow does. It was not Moses’ intent to provide a scientific classification such as a modern comparative anatomist would provide (such classifications did not then exist), but simply to speak as an ordinary observer would of such matters. Modern comparative anatomy is a science of relatively recent date and concerning this fact, Jerry Moffitt correctly observes, “It would be gross prejudice to impose our classification system on them, and then judge their accuracy by our system.”<sup>3</sup> It was natural for animals of like appearance and function to be classed together, even though from a strictly scientific perspective they may not have been of the same kind (e.g., bats, which are actually mammals, are grouped with “birds” because they all fly [Lev. 11:13, 19], and it is not uncommon for whales to be spoken of as “fish” although they also are mammals, because, as do fish, they live and swim in water). I suppose that even scientists in unguarded moments sometimes refer to the beauty of a “sunrise” or “sunset” when, scientifically speaking, the sun does not move; rather, the earth moves around it, and the sun only appears to “rise” and “set.”

Arndt made a good observation on these Levitical passages:

We must remember that Moses is here giving to the children of Israel some practical rules which are to guide them in their choice of food. For that reason their own terms and their

own descriptions are employed in designating clean and unclean animals. When all this is considered, the difficulty which people have found in these verses must vanish.<sup>4</sup>

The critic who would fasten upon such as this in Scripture in an attempt to discredit the Sacred volume must be desperate indeed.

### *Can Clothing or a House Contract Leprosy?*

Leviticus 13 and 14 give very extensive instructions of how to deal with the terrible disease of leprosy. Actually, the medical regulations given by Moses in these chapters are powerful proof that they he was inspired of God. These sanitation and quarantine regulations were contrary to the best medical advice of their own time and centuries ahead of medical science that would only much later be developed through extensive research, invention, and investigation. Dr. S.I. McMillen points this out in a vivid way:

If Moses had yielded to a natural inclination to add even a little of his modern university training, we would be reading such prescriptions as “the heel of an Abyssinian greyhound,” or “the tooth of a donkey crushed in honey,” not to mention the drugs the leading physicians were compounding out of the bacteria-laden dung of dogs, cats and flies.... For many hundreds of years the dreaded disease, leprosy, had killed countless millions of people in Europe.... Not even the Black Death in the fourteenth century or the appearance of syphilis toward the end of the fifteenth century produced a similar state of fright.... What did the physicians offer to stop the ever-increasing ravages of leprosy? Some taught that it was ‘brought on by eating hot food, pepper, garlic and the meat of diseased hogs.’ Other physicians said it was caused by malign conjunction of the planets....<sup>5</sup>

McMillen goes on to document the means by which the leprosy of the Middle Ages was brought under control. Some in the Roman Church remembered Moses’ regulations in Leviticus 13–14, which embodied the as-of-that-time-unheard-of concept of contagion. When they began to follow the Mosaic procedures of quarantine, the disease was methodically eradicated.<sup>6</sup>

The point at which the believer hears ridicule from the skeptic is Moses’ instruction concerning leprous garments (wool, flax, or leather) (Lev. 13:47–59) and the leprous wall of a house (14:33–53). “How can a house, clothing, or any inanimate object contract leprosy?” they contemptuously inquire.

The leprosy which attacks the flesh of mankind produces among its several symptoms various kinds of skin blemishes: “a rising, or a scab, or a bright spot” (13:2). The “leprosy” in clothing is also described as a “greenish or reddish” blemish on the surface of the material (13:49) and in the wall of a house as “hollow streaks, greenish or reddish” (14:37). Various explanations have been proffered as to the source of this condition in non-living objects. John Brown suggested that it was caused by “a small kind of vermin,”<sup>7</sup> although he gives no basis for

this supposition. Cook opined that “it was some form of ordinary decay which was familiarly known.”<sup>8</sup> *Smith’s Bible Dictionary* refers to the “leprosy” in clothing and houses as “a curious question” and attributes the condition to a fungus.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Keil and Delitzsch offered a similar explanation:

Leprosy in linen and woolen fabrics or clothes, and in leather, consisted in all probability in nothing but so-called mildew, which commonly arises from damp and want of air, and consists, in the case of linen, of round, partially coloured spots, which spread, and gradually eat up the fabric, until it falls to pieces like mould. In leather the mildew consists most strictly of “holes eaten in,” and is of a “greenish, reddish, or whitish colour, according to the species of the delicate cryptogami by which it has been formed.”<sup>10</sup>

But in what sense can a mildew or a fungus be called “leprosy”? The comments of Meyrick are helpful at this point:

The similarity of appearance presented by the two affections [i.e., leprosy in flesh and in cloth or leather, DM] is enough to account for their going by the same name. Leprosy in garments and in leather is a mildew which cannot be got rid of, called leprosy **by analogy**.... More probably it [i.e., leprosy in the wall of a house, DM] was the growth of some fungus. Whatever it was, the appearance created by it was so similar to that of leprosy in the human body, as to derive its name from the latter **by analogy** [emp. DM].<sup>11</sup>

### *What Is the Scapegoat?*

Leviticus 16 records the instructions Jehovah gave to Moses and which he gave to Aaron (v.2) concerning the annual (v. 29, 34) day of atonement for Israel (vv. 6, 16, 30). A part of the ritual of this day required the selection of two he-goats from the congregation “for a sin-offering” (v. 5). While these two were a single offering, they were to be offered in distinct ways. Aaron was to cast lots concerning them, with one lot designated “for Jehovah” and the other “for Azazel” (v. 8). The one chosen “for Jehovah” was to be slain as a sin-offering and its blood was to be sprinkled upon and before the mercy-seat to make atonement (vv. 9, 15–16).

After the first goat had been offered, Aaron was to take the live goat, place his hands upon its head, and confess over it all of the iniquities, transgressions, and sins (nothing was to be left out!) of Israel (vv. 20–21a). The live goat was then to be sent away into the wilderness by the hands of a man chosen for the task, symbolically bearing the sins of the people Aaron had confessed over him (vv. 21a–22). Meyrick suggested the following purpose in the employment of these two goats: “As atonement was made by the blood of the sacrificed goat ceremonially covering sin, so it was also made by the live goat symbolically removing sin.”<sup>12</sup>

I cannot help thinking of the typical nature of these goats as they foreshadowed the perfect sacrifice of the Only Begotten. The atonement of the inferior covenant had to be repeated each year because the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins except in a promissory and symbolic sense (Heb. 10:1-4). However, the Perfect Son of God both sacrificed and offered His own perfect blood so that no other blood ever need be offered (Heb. 9:12, 24- 25). He also was the One who bore or carried our sins away, as the typical scapegoat symbolically did those of Israel (Isa. 53:11; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 2:24). Only the Christ is the true "Lamb of God" Who has taken away the sins of the world (John 1:29).

The question that arises concerning this passage has to do with the identity of and the meaning of the word Moses used to describe the live goat that was sent into the wilderness bearing the sins of Israel. *Scapegoat* is the term used by the KJV translators (vv. 8, 10, 26). The ASV translators made a proper name of the word and rendered it "Azazel." The Hebrew word used in reference to this sin-bearing goat is found nowhere else in Scripture, so we cannot derive help from comparing Leviticus with other contexts. A wide range of opinions exists as to the meaning and significance of this word, some of which are rather incredible. Some conjecture that Azazel is actually the name of a geographical location (i.e., a wilderness or a place in the wilderness) to which the goat was to be sent. However, this could hardly be so since Israel was moving around for at least four decades after this legislation was given and would have soon left the location far behind as they constantly moved about.

Some have conjectured (yea insisted) that *Azazel* was a proper name of Satan, or at least, an evil spirit and that the correct translation of the term in reference to the sin-bearing goat should be "for Azazel." The argument is then made that the goat was to bear the sins of Israel to Satan or to an evil spirit in the wilderness thereby to appease, bribe, or even mock him. However, this can hardly be the case. Such is totally out of harmony with anything else in all of the Mosaic system. Why is Satan (or one of his minions) never called by this name elsewhere in Scripture? More than these, however, note that both of the goats were brought to be offered to Jehovah (v. 7). Can we conceive of God's instructing Aaron to take that which was to be offered to Him and then giving it to Satan?

The ASV footnote on the term is helpful, I believe. It suggests that the Hebrew term *Azazel* means "removal" (vv. 8, 26). This most certainly correctly expresses the function the sin-bearing goat was to fulfill: "And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a solitary

land: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness” (v. 22). Accordingly, Heynick translates verses 9–10 as follows:

And Aaron shall bring in the goat upon which the lot for the Lord fell and shall offer him for a sin offering. But the goat, upon which fell the lot for a remover of sins, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make an atonement with him, and to send him away for a remover of sins into the wilderness.<sup>13</sup>

With this understanding, the term “scapegoat” of the KJV correctly describes the second goat of the atonement. A “scapegoat” is one upon whom blame and guilt due others is placed, and this was precisely the role of this goat in the atonement ritual.

### **Passages in Numbers**

#### ***At What Age Were the Levites To Begin Their Tabernacle Service?***

The revelations given by God to Moses in Numbers 1–10:20 were during the encampment at the foot of Sinai. In Numbers 4 instructions are given concerning the numbering of the male descendants of the sons of Levi (Kohath, Gerson, Merari; cf. Gen. 46:11). Each family of Levi’s three sons were assigned certain duties relating to the tabernacle, respectively. They were all to enter upon their assigned work at the age of thirty years and to cease from it at the age of fifty (Num. 4:3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47). However, a short while later (they were still at Sinai), Moses decreed concerning the Levites: “from twenty and five years old and upward they shall go in to wait upon the service in the work of the tent of meeting” (8:24). Critics gleefully suppose they have found a glaring contradiction. How shall we answer their calumny?

Some say that Moses simply lowered the age,<sup>14</sup> which is possible, but I think not likely in such a short span and with no explanation that this is what he was doing. The explanation is really very simple. In the assignments in Numbers 4 all of the instructions relate to the duties of the Levitical families in regard to the dismantling, transporting, and reassembling of the tabernacle when God directed them to move. Each of the three families had carefully specified responsibilities concerning the various pieces of furniture and the numerous parts of the structure itself (Kohathites – 4:4–20; Gershonites – 24–29; Merarites – 31–33). All of these instructions (including the entry age of thirty) had to do with the service and work of “bearing burdens in the tent of meeting” (v. 47). By this means the work of moving the tabernacle could be efficiently done.

However, the instructions of Moses in Numbers 8:24 which give the entry age of twenty-five do not relate to moving the tabernacle (as the detailed instructions of Ch. 4 clearly do), but

to the service the Levites were to render in the ongoing rituals conducted in the tabernacle. These latter instructions would apply both to the period of their wanderings in the wilderness and to the time when they would settle in Canaan and they would no longer need to move the tabernacle from place to place. In giving the two different ages at which the Levites were to begin their work, Moses was speaking of two different kinds of work they were to do. Thus at twenty-five, the Levites could begin their tabernacle service in assisting the priests with the sacrifices and other rituals (see 1 Chr. 23:28-32 for a listing of their duties), but not until thirty were they allowed to take part in the bearing of some part of the holy tent. Later, David lowered the age of entry upon their work by the Levites to twenty and stated the purpose for which he did it (1 Chr. 23:24-27).

Once again, the quest of the destructive critic and skeptic to find some flaw in the Word of God is shown to be in vain.

### ***Why Was Israel Punished for Eating Quail Provided by God?***

Of the several times that Israel murmured against God, the instance in Numbers 11:1- 10 is perhaps one of the most notable and fully-documented. God was feeding them with manna in the wilderness, for which they had to expend no labor to produce. Rather than being thankful, they complained because they had no flesh, fish, or vegetables to suit their tastes. Because of this God's anger was exceedingly hot against these ingrates. In response to their murmurings God told Moses He would send them flesh for them to eat and that there would be so much of it they would have to eat it for thirty days so that they would come to despise it (vv. 18-20). He then caused a great wind to sweep a vast swarm of quail to the camp of Israel so that even the smallest quantity gathered was ten homers (the equivalent of more than 100 bushels) (vv. 31-32). As the people bit into these objects of their lust, even before they chewed the flesh, God's anger was rekindled, and He caused many of the people to die of an unnamed plague (v. 33). The place where they were buried was memorialized in the name, Kibroth-hattaavah, which means "the graves of lust" (v. 34).

The question some skeptics have about this episode is why a just God would give the people the flesh they wanted and then punish them for consuming it? My first response is to ask, "Who is man to judge what is 'just' or 'unjust' in the mind or in any act of God (Gen 18:25; Rom. 9:19-21)?" God is the Judge of man, not vice versa (Rom. 14:11-12). In the second place, we see here a clear demonstration that God is a God of anger and wrath against sin and against sinners if they do not repent. Furthermore, the "meek and lowly" Jesus, the Only Begotten of

the Father, was also capable of displaying anger (Mark 3:5). When He comes to judge the living and the dead, he will come with vengeful wrath against all who know not God and have not obeyed the Gospel (2 The. 1:7-9). The liberals and modernists who depict God the Father as some sort of spiritual “Santa Claus” or indulgent grandfather and the Christ as some sort of effeminate weakling who never raised His voice to oppose anyone or anything are as wrong as wrong can be.

There is really no problem in Numbers 11 except for those who are seeking one (those who find a difficulty in this inspired record have tripped over a feather!). It is apparent that God was trying to teach those selfish Hebrews the terrible folly, sin, and danger of ingratitude and murmuring. There was nothing “unjust” about it—it was a strong object lesson. It should also teach readers in all subsequent ages the same lesson. Verily, such things were written as examples for us and for our admonition (1 Cor. 10:6, 10-11).

***What Is Meant by the Expression, “...a Land that Eateth up the Inhabitants Thereof”?***

When the twelve Hebrew spies that Moses sent into Canaan from Kadesh returned, they all reported finding a rich and prosperous land with well-fortified cities and strong inhabitants (Num. 13:26-29). Ten of the spies were faithless in the promise, power, and providence of God and they spread a report that it was “...a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof” (v. 32). What did they mean by this descriptive phrase? We may first observe that whatever the spies actually meant by this expression, there can be no doubt about their purpose in repeating this expression to the people—their aim was to discourage the people from any ambition to enter and conquer Canaan. John Calvin offered the following interesting possible explanations of this description of the land:

...[T]he wretched inhabitants were worn out by the laborious task of cultivating it, or...the land was pestilential on account of the inclemency of the weather, or...the cultivation of the land was difficult, and attended with many evils.”<sup>15</sup>

I agree with Keil and Delitzsch that these can hardly be the meaning of the words. One commentator mentions the possibility that the spies had seen numerous funerals while they were in Canaan resulting from some sort of plague.<sup>16</sup> However, this is purely speculative and would have contradicted their good report of the land. Note that the spies did not say that Israel would be “eaten up” in the course of trying to take the land, but in the act of inhabiting it.

Likely, the idea of this expression has to do with the perpetual attacks from those outside of Canaan who were constantly seeking to invade the land due to its great desirability.



The spies had already reported how desirable it was, so in the expression in question they would be saying, “If we should be able to go in and take the land, we would never be able to rest from defending it against would-be conquerors, just as its present inhabitants cannot.” In fact, God warned Israel in very similar words: Should they prove rebellious and disobedient upon settling in Canaan, He promised that they would “...perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up” (Lev. 26:38). So because the land was so strategically located and so fruitful, “...as the different nations strove for its possession, its inhabitants wasted away.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Elmer Smick captured the idea most succinctly in his comment: “This does not mean that the land was poor—they had shown otherwise—but that many people fought over it because it was such a good land.”<sup>18</sup>

I cannot leave this context of Scripture without emphasizing the extreme and sorry degree of both cowardice and faithlessness which was exhibited by these ten spies. This was in spite of an unbroken string of demonstrations of God’s power in their favor in a brief span of time, including all of the plagues upon Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground, the destruction of the Egyptian army, the provision of food and drink in a wasteland, and the giving of the Ten Commandment Law to Israel (Num. 14:11, 22). If any men were ever without excuse before their Creator, these men were. We should observe also how infectious their defeatist attitude was upon Israel. The fickle congregation was ready to desert Moses and Aaron, elect a new captain to lead them back to Egypt, and to stone Joshua and Caleb (vv. 1–10). We look at these people across thirty-five centuries and judge them harshly, which they deserve. However, let us also reflect on the cowardice and lack of faith in the people of God who now live. When faced with the necessity of administering discipline in the local congregation for false doctrine or immorality, brethren often cower behind excuses no better than those of the ten spies. And what about the Lord’s commission for us to take the Gospel into all the world? Are those in the time of Moses any worse than those in God’s spiritual Israel who wilt and compromise when the Truth is under attack because they are faithless, lily-livered cowards, afraid the liberal “giants” might slay them by ridiculing them with such names as *legalists*, *Pharisees*, or some other uncomplimentary term. While we are right to be hard on those men of old who so miserably failed, let us also examine and prove ourselves, whether we are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5).

### *Did Israel Pass Through Edom and Did Edom Sell Israel Provisions?*

Numbers 20:14–21 tells of an embassy of Moses to the Edomites, descendants of Esau, thus distant cousins of the Hebrews. The most direct route by which Israel might reach the east side of Jordan from whence they would eventually cross over into Canaan was through the land of Edom. God had commanded them to turn northward toward Canaan (Deu. 2:3) but forbade them to attack the Edomites or take any of their land because He had given it to Esau as a possession (v. 5). Israel merely wanted the warranty of safe passage, promising to plunder neither field, vineyard, nor well – nor to stray from the “king’s highway” (Num. 20:17). Edom refused the request and enforced the refusal with an army, causing Israel to turn away (vv. 20–21). Some profess to see a contradiction between this passage and Deuteronomy 2:4: “And command thou the people, saying, Ye are to pass through the border of your brethren the children of Esau, that dwell in Seir.” They say that God here ordered Moses to lead Israel through Edom, which, of course, would be contrary to what he did.

There is actually complete harmony among all of the accounts of this part of Israel’s final push toward Canaan. First, notice that Moses initially attempted to pass through Edom, but was rebuffed by the Edomites. We must remember that God had ordered Moses not to resist Edom, which would preclude forcing his way into Edomite territory. The understanding of what God commanded Moses to do hinges upon the phrase, “through the border,” of Edom. Moses’ action, as described in the context, helps us understand what God meant by it. After warning Moses not to contend with the Edomites and instructing him to pay for any provisions received from them (vv. 5–6), Moses then wrote...

So we passed by from our brethren the children of Esau, that dwell in Seir, from the way of the Arabah from Elath and from Ezion-Geber. And we turned and passed by the way of the wilderness of Moab” (v. 8).

Obviously, these words describe how they turned aside from going through the mountains of Edom that lay directly in their path. Rather, they had to turn southward down the Arabah and go all the way to Elath and Ezion-Geber on the extreme northern tip of the northeastern fork of the Red Sea (the “Gulf of Arabia” on modern maps) in order to skirt Edom proper. This detour cost them well over one hundred extra miles and therefore many weeks or even months of travel time. However, by this means they “...journeyed from mount Hor by the way to the Red Sea, to compass the land of Edom” (Num. 21:4). By this route they proceeded northward through the extreme western edge of the Arabian Desert, which marked the eastern

border of Edom. They thereby went around (“compassed”) Edom and “...passed by the way of the wilderness of Moab,” which lay directly north of Edom.

Related to the route Israel followed pertaining to Edom, some have also questioned whether the Edomites did or did not sell provisions to Israel as she passed by their borders. In Numbers 20:19 the ambassadors Moses sent to Edom offered to pay for any food or water Israel might consume if they could only pass through the land of Edom. However, verses 20–21 reveal that Edom refused such direct passage, and, as mentioned above, enforced the refusal with an army. Some assume that, since Israel’s request for passage was refused, this implies that Edom also refused to sell them provisions. However, Deuteronomy 2:28–29 seems to indicate that the Edomites did indeed sell the Israelites food and water. In the first place, as Kline points out, the Numbers passage does not say that the Edomites refused to sell provisions to the Israelites once it was clear that Israel was content to go around Edom. Moreover, Deut [sic.] 2:6 and 29 do not clearly state that Edom did sell provisions to Israel. For even 2:29a possibly refers only to the last clause in verse 28 (cf. 29b with 23:3, 4). Hence there is no contradiction between Numbers and Deuteronomy on this matter.<sup>19</sup>

DeHoff had the correct view of this case in his succinct statement: “At first they [the Edomites] did not furnish supplies, later, by virtue of necessity, they did furnish supplies.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Questions About God’s Instructions to Balaam***

Numbers 22 tells of the arrival of Israel in the country of Moab, east of the Jordan. In his fear of Israel, Balak, the Moabite king, conspired with the Midianites and sent messengers to Balaam, the sooth-sayer (Jos. 13:22), with the intent to pay him to curse Israel (Num. 22:4–7). God asked Balaam who his visitors were and the purpose of their coming, and when told, forbade Balaam to go with them and to curse Israel, His blessed people (vv. 8–12). Admirably, Balaam told the messengers God would not allow him to go with them and he sent them back to Balak (vv. 13–14). However, Balak was persistent and he sent a second and more noble envoy to Balaam with promise of much greater reward (vv.15–17). At first Balaam responded by saying he could not be persuaded to do more or less than God required of him even if Balak offered his house full of silver and gold in return (v. 18). It is sad that he had not the sense to stop there and send the messengers back with this final answer. Rather, he invited them to stay the night, during which he would inquire if God would tell him something more or different (v. 19). This time God told him to go with the men, but that he was to speak and act only as God would instruct him (v. 20).

He rode off on his ass the next morning with Balak's messengers, and the Lord sent an angel with a drawn sword to block the road (vv. 21–22). Balaam could not see the angel at first, but the ass could and at first left the road, then crushed Balaam's foot against a wall, and finally lay down in an effort to avoid the angel. All the while Balaam's anger against the animal intensified from at first smiting her repeatedly to threatening to kill her (vv. 23–27, 29). It was on this occasion that God enabled Balaam's ass to speak and rebuke him. Ironically, on this occasion, the ass spoke in man's language and the man, Balaam, "Nayed" (vv. 28, 30)! Upon this, God allowed Balaam to see His angel as the ass had seen him and the angel rebuked Balaam even as his ass had earlier. Further, the angel told Balaam that God had sent him to block the way as an adversary because he was behaving in a perverse ("headlong," ASV fn.) manner in going with Balak's servants and that had his ass not turned aside the angel would have killed Balaam (vv. 31–33). Balaam then confessed that he had sinned and offered to return home, but the angel of God, as God had earlier done, told him to go on, but to speak only the words God would give him (vv. 34–35).

By way of summary, God first told Balaam not to go at all (v. 12), then told him to go (v. 20), then sought to kill him through the angel He sent (v. 33), and finally, through the angel, God told him to go on with Balak's princes (v. 35). What are we to make of these apparently contradictory directions from God? Some allege that the initial prohibition to go with the messengers and to curse Israel (v. 12) meant that God forbade him to go in order to curse Israel. Cook cites the following rule of Hebrew grammar: "In Hebrew, two clauses of which the one is logically subordinate to the other, often appear as coordinate."<sup>21</sup> The argument from this would be that God was not forbidding Balaam merely to go with the men, but to go with the intent to curse Israel. This, of course, would remove any hint of contradiction between the instructions God gave Balaam. Indeed, this would harmonize with subsequent instructions that he was to go, but to speak only according to God's revelation to him (vv. 20, 35).

It is also possible that God did intend absolutely to refuse permission for Balaam to go with the men at all, much less curse His favored people, but that when Balaam came back to Him for a "second opinion" ("that I may know what Jehovah will speak unto me more," v. 19), Balaam indicated his desire to manipulate God for his own gain if he could. Peter wrote that Balaam "...loved the hire of wrongdoing" (2 Pet. 2:15). Had he truly felt in his heart what he said to the messengers he would have stood by his initial answer and would have sent the second group of ambassadors back to Balak before they alighted from their mounts. That he had

a presumptuous attitude toward God's will is born out in the angel's statement to Balaam: "...thy way is perverse before me" (v. 32).<sup>22</sup> As indicated above, the ASV footnote suggests that "perverse" might be rendered "headlong," indicating that he acted rashly and recklessly. Peter described Balaam's attitude as "...the madness of the prophet" (2 Pet. 2:16). When he demonstrated this attitude, it is as if God then said, "All right, go ahead if you are determined to do so, but you must bear the consequences of your recklessness concerning my will." When men are determined to do what they desire rather than what God demands, God will allow them to do it, even to their own hurt or damnation (2 The. 2:10-12).

But what about the attempt on Balaam's life by the angel of God? Why would God tell Balaam to go with the men and then threaten his life when he did? Moses plainly states that God was angry with Balaam for going and because of His wrath, placed His adversarial angel in Balaam's path (v. 22). God certainly could have slain Balaam, either by His angel or by some other means, whether or not the ass took her diversionary action. We thus conclude that God's wrath was tempered by His mercy when Balaam's ass proved wiser than her master in this ill-fated journey, so He allowed Balaam to live and to pursue his determined course of covetousness and greed, which led to his eventual destruction.

### ***How Many Died Because of Their Worship of Baal-peor?***

When Israel was encamped at Shittim in the country of Moab east of the Jordan, she became infected with the idolatry of the Moabites and Midianites, who had joined forces to destroy Israel (Num. 22:4, 6). Their pagan worship of Baal-peor included fornication (Num. 25:1-2). In His fierce wrath provoked by Israel's apostasy, God commanded Moses to hang up and display publicly the chiefs of the people, doubtless after executing them. Moses told the judges of the people to execute those under their jurisdiction who were guilty (vv. 3-5). By this means God brought a great plague upon Israel which was not stayed until righteous Phinehas executed Zimri and Cozbi in the very act of fornication (vv. 6-8, 14-15). The question of how many died in this plague arises by comparing verse 9, which declares 24,000 died, with 1 Corinthians 10:8 in which Paul declared the number to be 23,000.

This discrepancy between these figures is obvious and admitted, but this does not mean they are contradictory. My judgment is that the "plague" which at first seems to be abruptly mentioned in Numbers 25:8 is not separate from the judgments ordered by God and Moses in verses 4 and 5, but, in fact, is a further description of those judgments. The Hebrew word for "plague" (*maggephah*) in verses 8-9 does not necessarily refer to an affliction by disease, but may

also mean a stroke or a defeat.<sup>23</sup> The Brown, Driver, and Briggs Lexicon gives “blow” and “divine judgment” as meanings of this word (e.g., a slaughter in battle [1 Sam. 4:17]) and cites Numbers 25:8–9 as an illustrative passage.<sup>24</sup> Clarke obviously understood these orders of execution to be the “plague” of this context, rather than to some separate and previously unmentioned fatal disease God visited upon Israel.<sup>25</sup>

I call attention to the fact that there were two stages to the “plague” of execution God brought upon Israel in this incident. First, there was the execution Moses visited upon the chiefs who allowed this terrible sin to occur without judgment upon it (v. 4) (those who condoned the sin were as guilty as those who committed it [cf. 2 John 10–11]). Apparently, Moses was the only one who was authorized to execute the chiefs. Second, the “judges” (those men appointed by Moses at Sinai, Exo. 18) were to slay all of those within their respective jurisdictions who were guilty (v. 5). Many conservative commentators harmonize Moses and Paul by suggesting that Moses may have slain 1,000 of the guilty chiefs, while the judges slew an additional 23,000 people of the congregation. While this is a possibility, Paul’s number (23,000) is particularly of those who “...fell in one day.” The additional 1,000 may have died on some other day or days. DeHoff wrote well: “All the Old Testament manuscripts say, ‘And those that died in the plague were twenty and four thousand.’ Paul said, ‘And there fell in one day three and twenty thousand.’ Both statements are true. Where’s the contradiction?”<sup>26</sup>

### **Passages in Deuteronomy**

#### ***Where Did Aaron Die?***

Deuteronomy 10:6 states that “...the children of Israel journeyed from Beeroth Bene-jaakan to Moserah. There Aaron died, and there he was buried....” However, twice in the book of Numbers, Moses stated that Aaron died in Mt. Hor (20:22–28; 33:38). The answer lies in realizing that the exact site “Moserah” has been totally obscured by history and that while there is a mountain peak in the Arabah a few miles south of the Dead Sea that is reputed to be Mt. Hor (and surely it is one of the peaks in that general area), it cannot be certainly and precisely identified. Obviously, Moserah was a place near Mt. Hor. In the original account of Aaron’s death, God commanded Moses and Aaron to “go up unto mount Hor” where Aaron was to die (Num. 20:25), yet Israel had already come unto the mount to encamp (v. 22). I conclude that Moserah was the name of a place near or at the foot of Mt. Hor where Israel camped and during

which encampment Moses and Aaron went up to the top of the mountain where Aaron died. Thus in the accounts of Aaron's death in the Numbers passages, Moses described the specific place (upon Mt. Hor) where Aaron died. However, in the account in Deuteronomy he mentioned the site where Israel was encamped near Mt. Hor at the time of Aaron's death.

***Would there Be or Would there not Be Poor Folk Among Israel?***

Deuteronomy 15:4 says: "Howbeit there shall be no poor with thee; (for Jehovah will surely bless thee in the land which Jehovah thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it)." However, verse 11 says:

For the poor will never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt surely open thy hand unto thy brother, to thy needy, and to thy poor, in thy land.

While the first of these passages appears at first glance to be declaring that there would be no poor folk among God's people when they had settled Canaan, this cannot be the meaning of the passage. The concluding verses of the previous chapter (14:28–29) give explicit instructions for making provisions, not only for the Levites, but for the fatherless and the widow – those who would be poor and in need of the benevolence of their brethren. Chapter 15 naturally follows this introduction of the subject of the poor and unfortunate. Moses would hardly instruct Israel on how to deal with the poor and in the midst of the instructions deny that there would be any poor among them!

The purpose of Deuteronomy 15:1–11 is to give instruction concerning how to treat those who were poor in their land – note that the poor among them are mentioned not only in verse 11, but in verses 7 and 9. Verse 4 can therefore hardly be construed as a declaration that there would be no poor in the land. The key to removing the apparent difficulty is in understanding the instruction in verse 4. The subject in verses 1–3 is the way creditors were to deal with debtors. There was to be a "release" made each seven years, except in the case of foreigners who were debtors. (The "release" was not a cancellation of the debt, but an extension of the credit till the next year of harvest.) This seventh year coincided with the sabbatical year in which the land was to rest from cultivation (Lev. 25:1–7). Since there would be no harvest every seventh year, there would be no means of paying the debt that year. Therefore, creditors were cautioned that they were not to be oppressive in collecting their debts until that year had passed, particularly lest they cause or increase the poverty of those who were poor by demanding that which was impossible for them to fulfill. W.L. Alexander made a good summary statement that demonstrates the proper relationship between Deuteronomy 15:4 and

11: "This statement [v. 11] is not inconsistent with that in ver. 4, for there it is the prevention of poverty by not dealing harshly with the poor that is spoken of; here it is the continuance of occasion for the relief of the poor that is referred to."<sup>27</sup>

***If Children Were Not to Be Executed for the Sins of Their Fathers, Why Was the Infant Son of David and Bathsheba Slain?***

Deuteronomy 24:16 states a positive law of God for Israel: "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin." However, while sparing David after his terrible sin, God promised him that the child of his and Bathsheba's adultery would surely die, and God struck the child when it was born so that it died on the seventh day (2 Sam. 12:13-18). Did God violate and contradict His own law in taking this innocent infant's life because of the sin of its father?

It was not uncommon for heathen nations to execute a man's entire family for his crimes. The law of Deuteronomy 24 was given to prevent Israel from this unjust and unholy practice. We must remember that men are finite and limited in their vision, their knowledge, and thus their judgments, and with such limitations God does not give them the right to bring retribution upon the family of the offender. However, God actually warned no fewer than four times (Exo. 20:5; 34:7; Num. 14:18; Deu. 5:9) that He visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children. Alexander said it well: "Though God, in the exercise of his absolute sovereignty, might visit the sins of the parent upon the children (Exo. 20:5), earthly judges were not to assume this power."<sup>28</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Bible has numerous statements that challenge our thought and comprehension. There are great rewards of deeper faith in and of greater knowledge of God and His Word when we earnestly apply ourselves to these challenging passages. We also come away from such a study with a stronger than ever conviction that those who believe the Bible to be God's verbally inspired, inerrant Word have nothing to fear from the miserable murmuring critics of this Volume of all volumes.

## **Endnotes**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. F C. Cook, ed., *The Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, rep. 1981), 1:545.
3. Jerry Moffitt, "Clean and Unclean Foods" in *The Books of Leviticus and Numbers*, ed. David Brown (Austin, TX: Southwest Pub., 1992), p. 98.



4. W. Arndt, *Bible Difficulties* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, rep. 1962), p. 120.
5. S.I. McMillen, *None of These Diseases* (Westwood, NJ: Pyramid Pub., Inc., rep. 1968), pp. 10–11.
6. McMillen, p. 12.
7. John Brown, *A Dictionary of the Holy Bible* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1835), p. 317.
8. Cook, p. 581.
9. H.B. Hackett, ed., Dr. William Smith's *Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, rep. 1981), 2:1633–34.
10. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., rep. 1981), 1:384.
11. F. Meyrick, *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls Co., rep. 1950), 2:210, 227.
12. Meyrick, p. 240.
13. Meyrick, p. 240.
14. David P. Brown, "Duties of the Levites" in *The Books of Leviticus and Numbers*, ed. David P. Brown (Austin, TX: Southwest Pub., 1992), p. 263.
15. Quoted without documentation by Keil and Delitzsch, 1:91
16. Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Hartford, CT: S.S. Scranton Co., n.d.), p. 105.
17. Keil and Delitzsch, 1:91.
18. Elmer Smick, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Nashville, TN: The Southwestern Co., rep. 1968), p. 131.
19. Meredith G. Kline, "Deuteronomy" in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer (Nashville, TN: The Southwestern Co., 1962), pp. 158–59.
20. George W. DeHoff, *Alleged Bible Contradictions Explained* (Murfreesboro, TN: DeHoff Pub., 1950), p. 258.
21. Cook, p. 734.
22. Keil and Delitzsch made an unusual application of the angel's words about the perverseness of his way (v. 32), applying them to the way or the road on which Balaam travelled. That is, the road he was traveling was leading him "headlong into destruction" and the angel was trying to preserve him by preventing his progress toward that end. However, it seems difficult to harmonize this with the angel's immediate pronouncement that he would have killed Balaam had his terrified ass not turned aside from the way and finally stopped (v. 33) and with the fact that the angel told him to continue his journey with the messengers of Balak (v. 35).
23. James Strong, "A Concise Dictionary in the Words of the Hebrew Bible" in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (New York, NY: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1979), p. 61 (entry no. 4046).
24. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A Briggs, ed., *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Lafayette, IN: Associated Pub. & Auth., rep. 1981), p. 620 (entry no. 4046).
25. Adam Clarke, *A Commentary and Critical Notes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, rep. n.d.), 1:703.
26. DeHoff, p. 216.

27. W.L. Alexander, "Deuteronomy" in *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls Co., rep. 1950), 3:254.

28. Alexander, 3:382.

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