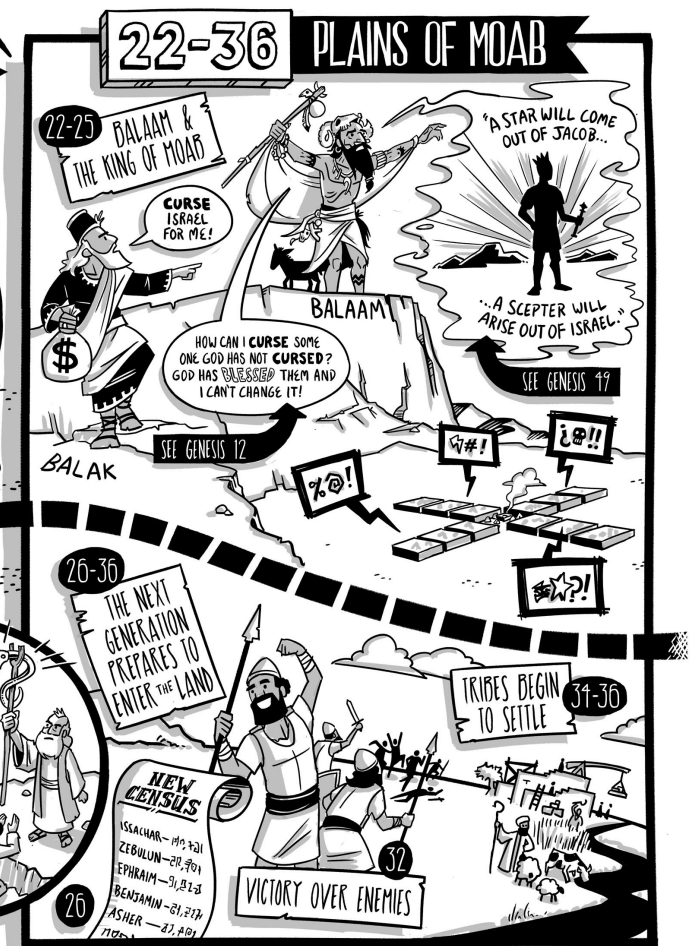
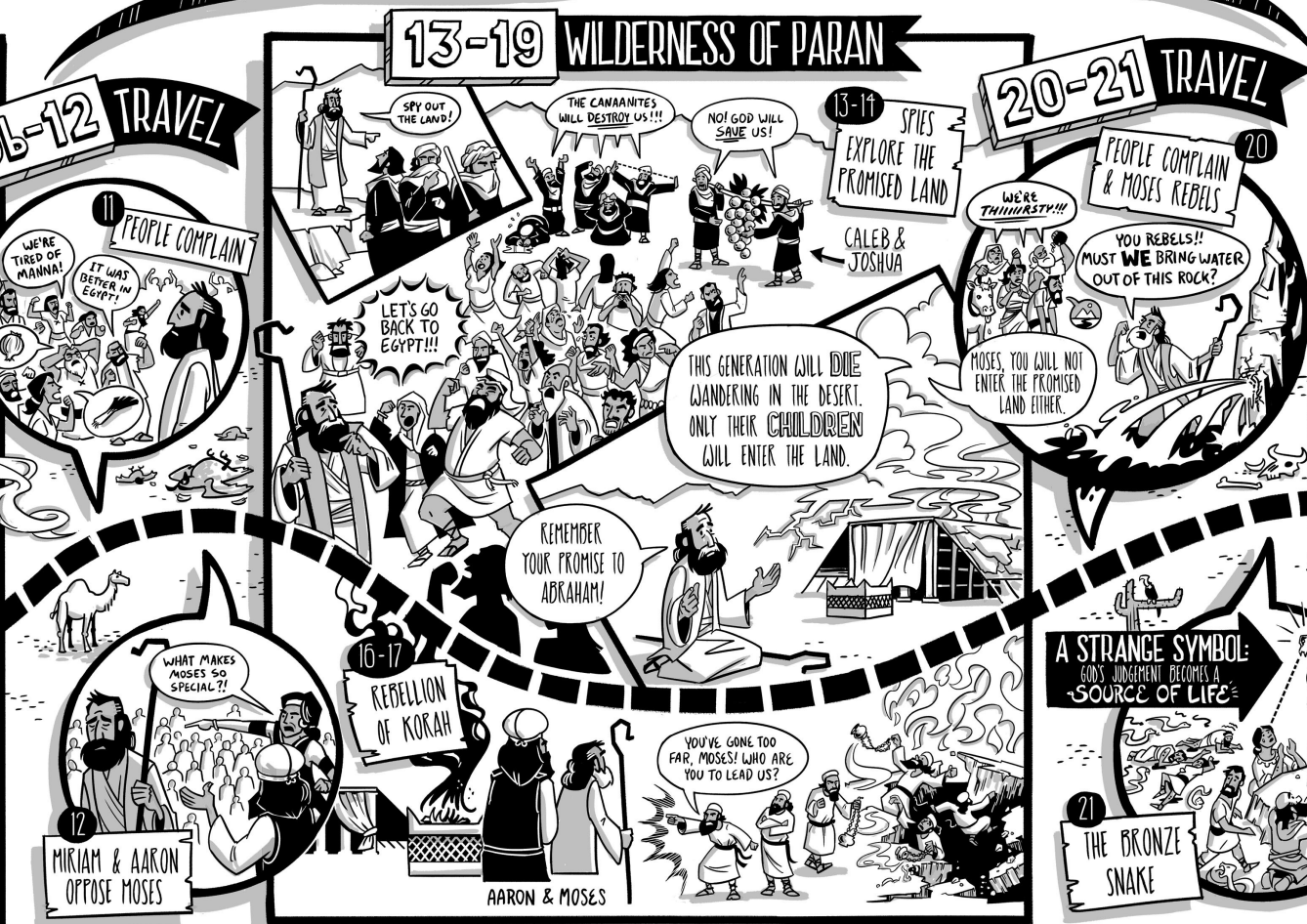
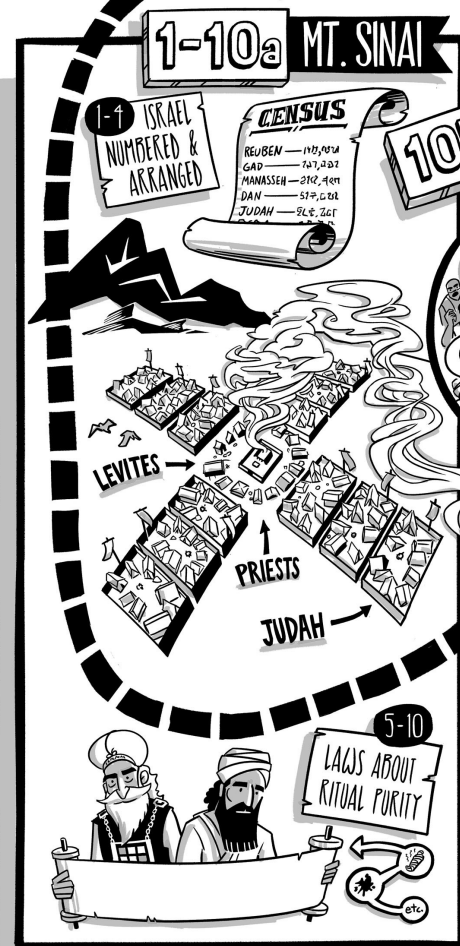
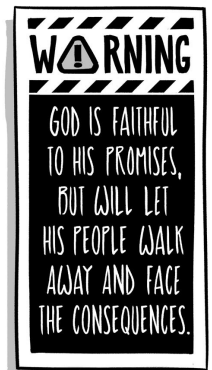




NUMBERS

REBELLION IN THE WILDERNESS
GOD BRINGS JUDGEMENT... AND SHOWS MERCY.



Israel's rebellion & lack of trust contrast with God's continuous grace and protection as they wonder through the wilderness.

Numbers 1-10a: God's Presence With Israel

The first section (Num. 1-4) opens with a census where the people are numbered. The section continues with laws about how the tribes of Israel were to be arranged in their camp. The tabernacle was at the center, surrounded by the priests and Levites, and then the twelve tribes were neatly arranged with Judah at the head. This is all an elaborate symbol of how God's holy presence was at the center of their existence as a people. This is followed by a series of laws that further develop the ritual purity laws found in Leviticus.

Numbers 10b-19: Rebellion in the Wilderness

The cloud of God's presence lifts from the tabernacle and guides Israel away from Sinai into the wilderness (chpt. 10). Immediately things go terribly wrong. The people complain about hunger and long to go back to Egypt (chpt. 11). Moses' own brother and sister oppose and badmouth him in front of all the people. Things are not off to a good start (chpt. 12). Next, the people arrive in the desert of Paran, about halfway to the promised land. God tells Moses to send out twelve spies, one for each tribe, to investigate the land (Num. 13-14). When they return, ten of them say that there is no chance Israel can survive because the Canaanites will annihilate them. And even though two spies, Caleb and Joshua, say God can save them, the people are whipped up into a fearful rage and start planning a mutiny to appoint a new leader and go back to Egypt. God is understandably angry, and Moses intercedes once again and calls upon God to be faithful to his promises to Abraham. God agrees, but not at the expense of justice. He gives the Israelites what they want—to not enter the land—and sentences that generation to wander in the wilderness for forty years until they die. Only their children will get to enter the land. You'd think such a severe consequence would jolt the Israelites into awareness, but the rebellion gets worse. In the next story, a whole group of Levites begins a rebellion, challenging Moses and Aaron's leadership. God deals severely with them and then renews his commitment to Moses and Aaron as Israel's leaders.

Numbers 20–36: God's Mercy on Israel

As they leave the region of Paran, things do not improve for the Israelites. They complain about their thirst and ask why Moses ever brought them out of Egypt. God tells Moses to speak to a rock and bring out water for the people, but Moses rebels and oversteps his bounds (Num. 20:10). He hits the rock twice and says, "You rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Moses dishonors God by putting himself in God's place, receiving the same fate as the wilderness generation—he'll die in the desert and never enter the promised land. The Israelites rebel yet again (Num. 21), and God brings a strange judgment upon them—venomous snakes to bite the people. Moses yet again intercedes for the people, and God tells Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole so that whoever looks at it will be healed of the poison. It's a strange symbol that speaks to the challenge of God's covenant faithfulness. He's right to bring his justice on the people's evil and sin, but even his judgment is transformed into a source of life for those who look to him for healing. From here, the people head into the plains of Moab (Num. 22-36). The first main part of this section focuses on the strange figure of Balaam. The king of Moab is disturbed by this huge group of people traveling through his land, so he hires a sorcerer named Balaam to curse Israel. But Balaam finds that he can't curse them. Three times he tries, yet he can utter only blessings on Israel. Balaam fails to curse Israel, and then God gives him a vision of a future Israelite king who will one day bring God's justice to the nations, recalling Jacob's promise to Judah in Genesis 49. Now it's worth stopping to reflect on the flow of the book so far. The stories of rebellion in the wilderness have been heaping up and getting worse and worse. While God did bring a partial and momentary act of justice upon Israel, he has also shown mercy by providing food and water along the way. Then the Balaam story shows God's grace in vivid colors. Israel is down in the camp grumbling and rebelling, while up in the hills, God is protecting and even blessing them. It's this contrast between Israel's rebellion and God's faithfulness in the wilderness that make these stories so important for later generations of Israel. The wilderness stories were retold time and time again by later biblical prophets (Isa. 63; Ezek. 20; Jer. 7), poets (Ps. 78; Ps. 95; Ps. 106), and apostles in the New Testament (1 Cor. 10; Heb. 3-4). They saw these stories as a warning. God will forever remain faithful to his covenant promises, but he will also allow his people to walk away in rebellion and face the consequences of their actions. The rest of the book of Numbers focuses on the children of the wilderness generation who are preparing to inherit the promised land. After another census is taken of this new generation (Num. 26), they win a number of battles with people groups on the edge of the promised land. These battles enable a few tribes of Israel to settle on the far side of the land (Num. 34-36). The book concludes with a new generation of Israel ready to enter into the land. A moment of rest allows Moses to deliver his final words of wisdom and warning, which is what we find in the next book of the Torah.



A map through the book of
Numbers

