In Num. xv 22-23 it is written “But if you err, and do not observe all these commandments which the Lord has spoken to Moses, all that the Lord has commanded you by Moses from the day the Lord gave commandment and onward (עֶתֶלֶדֶה’א)”. This passage speaks about a time in the future when Israel may err and sin against God’s laws. The description of that time is very abstractly given and its aim is to include all the time from the giving of the law until the “end” of all generations (עֶתֶלֶדֶה’א). In my opinion, this usage provides the widest and most comprehensive abstract description among the verses which contain the formula “from x and upward (onward)” 1).

I have mentioned here the interpretation that the duration of time is intended to include all the periods during which Israel is liable to sin in these ways, but the formula in question might be interpreted differently.

First of all, it should be noted that the language of these two verses is jumbled, and its form may be constructed from several formulae. One must take into account the following expressions: 1 “all these commandments which the Lord has spoken to Moses”; 2 “all that the Lord has commanded you by Moses”. Expression 2 is clearly a doublet of 1. From this we deduce that the passage has been composed through a long history of transmission.

Let us discuss the contents of the passage in detail.

The law of Num. xv 22-23 deals with a case of a sin which is liable to be committed some time in the future after the law was given by Moses and forever after. Thus the specific wording of the law speaks of a concept which can be found many times in the Pentateuch in other formulae such as לוּדוֺרֵיָךְem שֶׁתֵּחָספְּד “throughout your generations”, as in Gen. xvii 12: “He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male throughout your generations”, etc. Thus, phrasing it this way implies that the law concerning circumcision will not be an injunction only for Abraham’s time, but an eternal law. The same holds true of the law of the passover (Ex. xii 14, 17), the law of the daily offering (Ex. xxix 42), the incense (Ex. xxx 8), clean-
sing the altar on the day of atonement (Ex. xxx 10), etc. Another formula serving the same purpose is haggat 'olam bedorotekem (Lev. iii 17): “a perpetual statute throughout your generations”; cf. Lev. vi 9, xiii 14, etc.).

This interpretation of Numbers xv is very widespread and several explanations of the duration of time which is described here have been offered. S. D. Luzzatto explains the verses as referring not to the time of the giving of the laws by Moses, but to the time when they are in effect (when Israel should enter the Land of Canaan). In his opinion, the formula “from the day and onward” applies to the time they are in force because some of the laws are to come into effect only after the people enter the land ²). This and similar interpretations have been suggested by scholars. See the various exegetical books on Numbers ³). Lastly, in his article “A Halakhic Midrash on Num XV: 22-31” Tarbiz 43 (1974), pp. 1-20 (Hebrew), the late Dr. A. Toeg wrote that the formula refers here to all the Lord’s laws from the day of the giving of the laws on Sinai onward (p. 13). He argued (p. 16) that v. 23b was meant to widen to the maximum the time of the force of the law for the sinner against all the laws. But he did not say which time it was speaking about, and we have seen that the verse may refer to various periods ⁴).

The explanation of this verse in the Sifre is brilliant, in our opinion. H. S. Horovitz (ed.), Siphre d’be Rab 1 (Leipzig, 111, p. 116: From where do you learn that whoever acknowledges idolatry denies the Ten Commandments? For it is written “Which the Lord has spoken to Moses” ... And how (do we know) that (he denies) also what Moses was commanded? For it is written “all that the Lord God has commanded you by Moses”. And how (do we know) that (he denies) also what the Prophets were commanded? For it is written “From the day that the Lord gave commandment”. And how (do we know) that (he denies) also what the forefathers were commanded? For it is written “and onward throughout your generations”.

Rashi, adapting this solution in his interpretation of the verse in question, says:

This tells us that he who acknowledges the divinity of an idol is like one who denies the Torah in its entirety and all that the prophets prophesied, because it states “[and if ye have erred and not done ... all that the Lord hath commanded by Moses] from the day that the Lord commanded (Moses), and henceforth [throughout all your generations]. (Pentateuch Rashi’s Commentary, translated into English by A. M. Silbermann [London, 1933])