

Numbers 1 - 4  
Moses and Aaron Number the People  
January 20, 2019

Next Week. Numbers 5-9

Proverbs 28:11. “A rich man may be wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has discernment sees through him.”

Wesley's Questions for Class Meetings. Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?”

What Does the Bible Mean?

Introduction to the Book of Numbers

The authorship is ascribed to Moses. The conclusion is based on statements concerning Moses' writing in 33:1,2; Exodus 17:14; 24:4; 34:27. The conclusion is not a claim that the final form of the book is from Moses' hand. Later editors likely added and edited portions. For example, 12:3 is a statement of Moses' humility. We can assume that those words are not written by Moses.

Numbers is unique among the five books of the Pentateuch (“five scrolls”) in that it is not known by a Greek title. The title, Numbers, comes from the Latin Vulgate Bible which is “*Arithmi*”. The modern title in Hebrew Bibles is always “*In the Desert*” for the location. Neither title is really accurate. The numbering of people is not characteristic and represents only a small part of the book. The desert is merely an indication of the setting of the book. It is really a chronicle of Moses and Aaron leading Israel in the desert through dangers, trials and blessings. It is a bridge between Genesis and Exodus and the entrance of the people into the Promised Land. In very ancient times a third title was “*The Lord Spoke*” which is the opening phrase of the book.

The book is historical in that it accounts for the change in generations over 40 years. The generation delivered from Egypt at first obeyed every command of Moses and the Lord. But they soon changed and disobeyed and began to rebel. God became angry and condemned the older generation that they would not enter the Promised Land. A new generation would replace the old. The new generation born during the wandering would inherit the land. The census (of males capable of going to war) in the first chapters documents the old generation and a census in Chapter 26 documents the new.

Numbers is consistent in religious value with the rest of the Pentateuch. In spite of man's rebellion he accomplishes his good purposes toward his people and releases them from bondage – here from Egypt. The book could be called “rebellions.” Israel breaks the covenant, loses faith and even seeks to return to Egypt. There is an interplay between God's determination to bless Israel and human free will. John Wesley wrote, “An abstract of much of this book we have in a few words, Ps 95:10: Forty years long was I grieved with this generation.”

Moses is a more attractive personality here than elsewhere. He is still the strong-willed hero, but he is compassionate and even acts as an intercessor for the people. In 12:3 Moses is described as “... a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the ace of the earth.” We'll see more later, but meek does not mean weak. It only means that he *did not pursue his status* among men.

The fact that there is historical value in Numbers is another evidence of religious value. The basic scriptures of Christianity are historical documents. They are not dead history though. They witness that we cannot meet God outside history when we are a part of history. We cannot separate God from events where truth is revealed. We learn how God acts through history. Even when the Bible isn't directly applicable to our own lives, God can be revealed through eternal truths. We must seek to live by the basic beliefs that the scriptures exhibit.

We will find many memorable and important texts in Numbers. There are familiar characters – Moses, Miriam, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb. There is the priestly benediction or blessing (“The Lord bless you and keep you ....”), the manna from heaven, leprosy that strikes Miriam, the miraculous water from the rock, the healing power of the bronze serpent, Balaam's talking donkey, and the narrative of the spies being sent out to see what awaits the people in the Promised Land. We'll look forward to a living adventure through this ancient book!

### What does the Bible Mean?

Read. Numbers 1:1-4

Numbers begins at a time one month after the Tabernacle had been finished. The text begins, “The Lord spoke to Moses ....” The life of the people is not ordered by social or governmental issues or even by priests or religious people, but by God himself.

It may seem strange to take four chapters to report on the details of taking the census and the results. But isn't that what is done today? The church is obsessed with numbers. We compare the success of services and churches and denominations by numbers. Too often size represents success.

Here God wants the people numbered by tribe. Moses is to take a representative of each tribe to make the count. The count was assembled by tribe and in total, but was taken by tribe, clan and ancestral houses within the tribes. Only males of twenty years and over were counted. They could serve the nation in battle.

The counters are identified by name of the counter and his father. The names almost all embodied some reference to God – a sign that God was present in the pilgrimage. Some of the names are Elizier (“My God is a rock.”), Shelumiel (“My friend is God”), Nethanel (“God gave.”), Eliab (“God is father.”) and so forth. Nahshon (“Serpent”) and Amminadab (“The divine kinsman is beautiful.”) are of the tribe of Judah and are ancestors of Jesus.

The total count was 603,550. The number of fighting men suggests a total population of about two million. Only 70 entered Egypt some 400 years before. The number is testimony to God's great blessing and his honoring of his covenant with Abraham. The number was so large that in Exodus we learned that it had become a concern to the Egyptians for their security. The number also instilled confidence in the people as they considered fighting the Canaanites for the Promised Land. All of these counted in the census died in the wilderness except for Joshua and Caleb.

The Levites were not counted in the main census. They were appointed to be custodians of the Tabernacle and all that belonged to it. They were to protect the Tabernacle, care for it and carry it when they traveled.

The various tribes camped three tribes to each side of a square surrounding the camps of the Levites and priests. The center of the square was the Tabernacle. God lived in their midst and was the center of the nation's life.

Read. Numbers 1:5-19; 20-46; 47-53. Part of our purpose is to read the entire Bible in class. It is OK with me if I summarize these sections. The “commentary” was included in the one for verses 1-4.

Read. Numbers 1:54.

“The Israelites *did all this just as the Lord commanded Moses.*” In the light of the disobedience to come, at least the people began with complete obedience to the Lord's directions.

Read. Numbers 2:1-54. Summarize?

The chapter is almost a duplicate of Chapter 1. The numbers are accurate and arrived at in two ways. First the numbers from each tribe were added and the total reached. Next the numbers were counted from the numbers in each of group and the same total was reached.

Read. Numbers 3:1-4

The verses remind us of Aaron's family who were the priests. Aaron had four sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. Aaron and his sons were ordained or anointed. Later the kings were also anointed in a special way. Nadab and Abihu however died for an unauthorized act as recorded in Leviticus 10:1. Only Eleazar and Ithamar served with Aaron in the desert.

Read. Numbers 3:5-10

The Levites were to serve or assist the priests in the tabernacle but were not to perform priestly duties. They were also to care for the furnishings in the Tent of the Meeting. In Exodus and Judges there were mentions of times when there were no restrictions to members of the various tribes performing priestly duties. “Anyone” (unauthorized) who approached the sanctuary was to be put to death. In Deuteronomy the priesthood was limited only to those of descendants of the tribe of Levi.

Read. Numbers 3:11-13

The Levites were to become a substitute for every firstborn male. Every firstborn was to be dedicated for the service of God. Jesus was brought to the Temple for dedication.

As said previously, the Levites were to encamp inside the square formed by the other tribes and on three sides of the tabernacle. One family (large group, about one-third of the tribe) was in charge of the tent itself and all of the fabrics and hangings. A second family cared for the furniture – the ark, altar, screens and so forth. A third family was in charge of the frames of the tent, the pillars, bases, pegs and cords.

Read. Numbers 3:14-39. Summarize?

Again the Lord asked Moses for a count. This time it was of the Levite males a month old or more. The total was 22,000. The Levites were counted for special service, not war.

Read. Numbers 3:40-42

Again the Lord asks Moses for a count. This time it is of the firstborn Israelite males who are a month old or more. The total was 22,273.

Read. Numbers 3:43-51

The Levites now became substitutes for the firstborn of all the other tribes. There were more firstborn males of all the other tribes than of the total males over one month old of the Levites. A five-shekel offering was made to redeem each firstborn male from service to the Lord. Therefore a five-shekel offering was collected on the difference between the counts and paid to Aaron.

Read. Numbers 4:1-33. Summarize?

There was a census taken of the Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites males (clans of the Levites) from thirty to fifty years who would serve in the sanctuary. Each clan was assigned what duties they were to perform with the sanctuary. The Kohathites were assigned the care of the furnishings and articles of the sanctuary. The Gershonites were to carry the curtains and coverings of the tabernacle and the equipment used for those pieces. The Merarites were to carry the frames and posts and related equipment. The Kohathites work was hazardous. Some of the furnishings were in the most sacred part of the sanctuary. To even see the articles was to bring sudden death. So the priests were given responsible for the safety of the Kohathites. The priests had to properly cover and wrap the sacred articles to protect the articles to protect the Kohathites (see verses 17-20).

Read. Numbers 4:34-49. Summarize?

The census of the Levites was completed according to the Lord's command. There were 8,570 in all.

What does the Bible mean to me?

- Israel was in a holding pattern for 13 months following the major crossroads event of all time, the Exodus. Are you ...we ...our church in a holding pattern?
- Is God preparing us for a spiritual journey?
- God promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with descendants more numerous than the stars and grains of sand. Is Israel's numerical growth related to God's promises to us?
- Does the organization of the Israelite encampment teach us about human nature and our need for organization from on high?
- Does God use principles of the redemption price today?
- How do we respect the "holy things" of our church?
- Do we have full appreciation and respect for those who take care of our "holy things?"
- How many people are involved in making our church services worshipful?