

Old Testament Survey—Numbers

Is God interested in *numbers*? There is certainly a great danger when it comes to counting numbers in ministry—the number of people attending church, the number of dollars given, etc. These numbers can become idols and occasions for pride.

Yet are numbers all bad? Apparently not, for God gave us a book in His Word full of numbers, the book of *Numbers*.

Read Numbers 1:1-4

Discuss: What do you know about the book of Numbers?

### **Who wrote the book?**

This is the fourth volume in the Pentateuch. Although there is no mention that Moses wrote the entire book, 33:2 says, "Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the Lord." Apparently, Moses kept notes throughout the traveling of the Israelites. Moses (or perhaps Joshua) used those notes to write the book (LHB, 165).

### **When was the book written?**

15th century B.C.

Notice the setting given at the beginning of the book, in 1:1--the Lord spoke to Moses in the Tent of Meeting in the desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month in the second year after the Israelites left Egypt. The setting at the end of the book was at the Trans-Jordan region (36:13).

### **Why was the book written?**

The translators of the LXX gave the book this name because of the lists of numbers recorded in the book. Originally the book had no title, and the earliest title occurs in the LXX (LHB, 164). In the Hebrew Bible, it takes its title from the words in the first verse, "In the wilderness of (Sinai)."

The book of Numbers is the record of how the Israelites got from Sinai to the outskirts of the Promised Land. Numbers covers a period of 38 years and 9 months, referred to as the period of wilderness wanderings.

Numbers 33 is a summary of the 39 year journey, highlighting the stopping points along the way (see map). Key stopping points:

Rameses Succoth Etham Pi Hahiroth Marah Elim By Red Sea Desert of Sin Dophkah Alush Rephidim Sinai (Law given) Kibroth Hattaavah Hezereth ... Kadesh Mount Hor (Aaron died) ... Nebo Plains of Moab

Discuss: Why did it take nearly 39 years for the Israelites to travel from Sinai to the Plains of Moab? Scholars have demonstrated that the journey from Sinai to Kadesh-barnea by way of the Gulf of Aqaba takes only 11 days (Deut 1:2). The direct route would be a few days less, and by way of Edom and Moab hardly more than a couple of weeks. Why then did the trip take 38 years? God was punishing the people for their lack of faith, so that none of the unbelieving generation would enter the land (L.H.B., 163).

### **What is the outline of the book?**

The book can be divided into five basic sections.

#### I. At Sinai (1-10)

A. First Census (1)

B. The Arrangement of the Tribes for travel (2)

C. Various Laws, duties, and instructions (3-10)

#### II. From Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea (10-14)

#### III. From Kadesh-Barnea to the Plains of Moab (15-21)

#### IV. Encounter with the Moabites and Balaam (22-25)

#### V. Preparation for entering the Promised Land (26-36)

One way to analyze the book is by tracing the "grumbling" accounts of the Israelites:

11:1 The people complained about their hardships.

Result: Fire from the Lord (11:1)

11:4 Some started complaining about the food, "If only we had meat!"

Result: God gave them quail and a plague (11:33).

12:1 Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses' Cushite wife.

Result: Miriam became a leper (10)

13:28 The spies complained about the giants in the land.

14:1-2 The whole assembly grumbled, "If only we had died in Egypt !"

Result: God rebukes their grumbling (26-29).

Judgment: Only Caleb and Joshua shall enter the Land (30).

Result: The ten spies were struck down (37).

16:1 Korah, Dathan, and Abiram attacked Moses.

Result: The ground split and swallowed them (32).

Result: Fire consumed 250 men (35).

16:41 The whole assembly grumbled against Moses and Aaron, "You have killed the Lord's people!"

Result: God sent a plague that killed 14,700 people.

20:2-3 The people grumbled about lack of water, "If only we had died! Why did you bring us out of Egypt?"

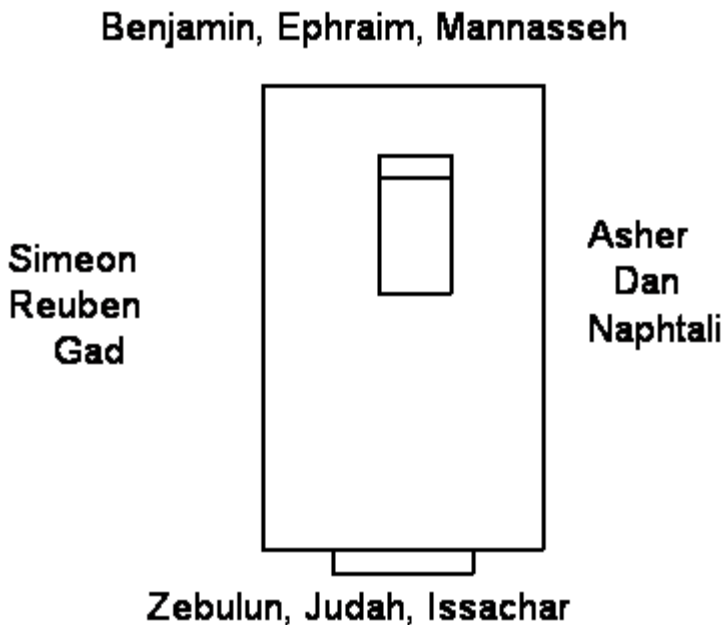
Result: Led to Moses' disobedience and disqualification (12).

21:4-5 The people grew impatient, and complained about lack of bread and water.

Result: God sent venomous snakes (6).

-  
-  
-

### Diagram of the Tabernacle with Position of Tribes



[Note: This drawing is misleading. In order for *north* to be at the top, the tribes need to be rotated one-quarter turn counter clockwise, so Asher, Dan, and Naphtali are at the top. The leading tribes in each of the four groups are: Judah, Reuben, Ephraim, & Dan. See *NIV Study Bible*, p. 189.]

### **What is the message of the book in one sentence?**

Numbers is the record of the 38 and 1/2 years of wilderness wanderings of the Israelites.

### **What contribution does the book make to biblical theology (that is, how does this book relate to the rest of the Bible)?**

Discuss: What major themes are stressed in Numbers?

#### *1. God dwells with His people.*

The God of the Bible is a God Who makes His presence known to His people.

See: 9:15

Other texts:

Acts 7:48 "Nevertheless, the Most High dwells not in temples made with hands."

Col 2:9 "In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead."

1 John 4:12 "God dwells in us."

Discuss: Why does God want His people to know that He lives among them?

#### *2. God is holy.*

Like the book of Leviticus, Numbers underscores the theme of holiness. The word "holy" appears 29 times here.

Discuss: What events in Numbers highlight the holiness of God? Kadesh Barnea—because of disobedience, the people can't enter the Land; Also, what happened to Korah, what happened to Miriam and Aaron when they challenged Moses, what happened to Moses when he struck the rock—he too couldn't enter the Land.

Other texts: 1 Pet 1:15-16

#### *3. God is patient.*

The Lord is longsuffering, as we see verified time and time again in Numbers. He does not give His people what they deserve.

Other texts: 2 Pet 3:9

Discuss: What kind of effect should reading Numbers have on us?

4. *Someone must intercede between sinful people and a holy God.*

Numbers contains several examples of personal intercession (*LHB*, 172) Moses interceded in behalf of Miriam (12:9-15). Moses interceded in behalf of the Israelites after they refused to enter the Promised Land and God threatened to smite them (14:4-12).

What did this teach the people? "From such experiences, the Israelites developed a strong belief in the power of a righteous person to intercede on behalf of sinners (*LHB*, 172)."

Other texts: Amos 7:2-5; Isa 53:12; Rom 8:26; Heb 7:25

5. *The Messiah is coming.*

See: 24:15-19 "...there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel ... (17)." In its context, this prophecy says nothing about a Messiah per se. "Star" and "scepter" are symbolic of "rule" and this prophecy speaks of a coming ruler that will come forth from Israel to vanquish their nearby enemies. This small spark will later be fanned into flame by the later prophets who will announce that One is coming out of Israel to rule all nations with a righteousness and peace (*LHB*, 174).

Other texts: Isa 9:6; Micah 5:2; Matt 1-2

Discuss: In what ways would we be deficient if we did not have the book of Numbers?