

NUMBERS

It's a pity that this book ever came to be called "Numbers" which came from the Greek title *Arithmoi* which owed its origin to someone long ago being impressed by the censuses recorded in its pages. The original Hebrew title is "*in the Wilderness*" It's the fourth book in the Torah, or Pentateuch, meaning "*five scrolls*" or the five books of the law. Numbers was written during the fifteenth century and is clearly written by Moses (Chapter 1:1)

Summary

The book of Numbers demonstrates that God's covenant plan stays on track even when His people don't. The instances of sinful complaining and rebellion and the resultant judgment are so pronounced and widespread, that it seems like they will never make it. But even their refusal to enter the land could not prevent God from accomplishing His plan through the next generation.

There were two censuses, two generations of Israelites, the first generation that left Egypt, and the one that made it to the Promised Land. It was an eleven day journey from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land at Kadesh Barnea, but it took Israel almost forty years. The story could be summarised by describing it as a two week journey which turned into a forty year trial.

Chapters 1-4

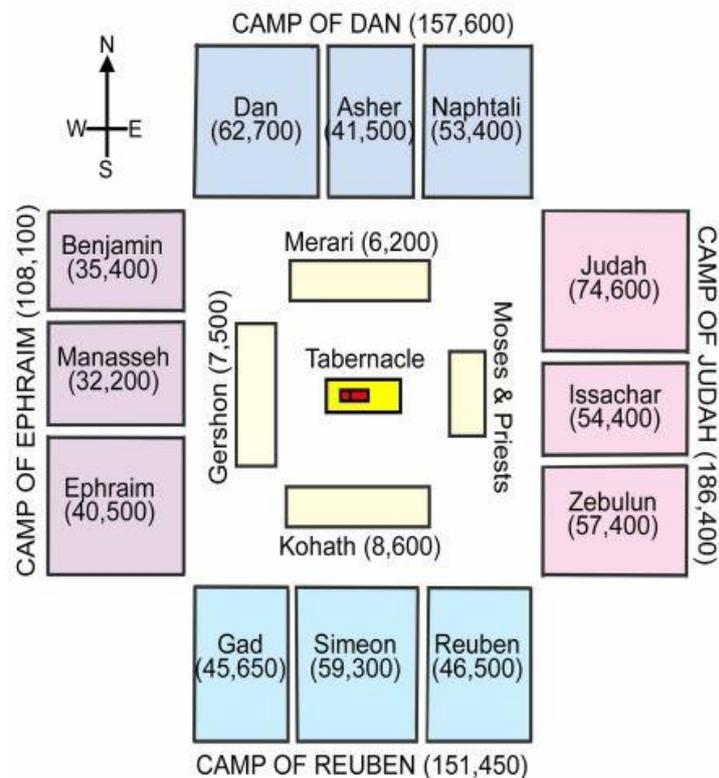
Now the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of meeting, on the first *day* of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: ² "Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male individually, ³ from twenty years old and above—all who *are able to go to war* in Israel. You and Aaron shall number them by their armies. ⁴ And with you there shall be a man from every tribe, each one the head of his father's house (Chapter 1:1-4)

Moses organised a census of all the males above the age of twenty in order to create a draft for military service. Then follows a great list of names who hitherto in Egypt had

almost been a group of nameless slaves. God loved each one and knew each name as he knows yours and mine and indeed numbers every hair of our heads. He loves and values each of us (Luke 12:7)

Four camps

The twelve tribes are divided into four camps, three tribes on each side of the tabernacle.



Arrangement of the Camp of Israel Numbers 2:1-3:39

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Each camp had a standard, a banner, featuring the tribe's emblem. Each group of three tribes had a lead tribe.

1. To the east **Judah's flag featured a lion**
2. To the west **Ephraim's flag featured an ox**
3. To the south **Reuben's flag featured a man**
4. To the North **Dan's flag featured an eagle**

The Levites were in the centre of the camp surrounded by the other camps

You may recall that the prophet Ezekiel saw in a vision four living creatures?

And in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, ⁶ but each of them had four faces and four wings. ⁷ Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. ⁸ Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. All four of them had faces and wings, ⁹ and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved. ¹⁰ Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. (Ezekiel 1:5-10)

Later John in Revelation 4:6-8 described his vision of Gods throne in heaven thus

“Before the throne *there was* a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, *were* four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back. ⁷ The first living creature *was* like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature *was* like a flying eagle. ⁸ *The* four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!”

Similarly each of the four gospels have such a focus

1. **Matthew** shows Jesus fulfilling Hebrew prophecy. **The Lion of the tribe of Judah** (Genesis 49:9-10) the Jewish Messiah
2. **Mark** depicts Jesus as a servant just as **an ox**, the ancient beasts of service
3. **Luke** the doctor highlights Jesus as the **Son of Man** focussing more on His humanity than the other gospel writers
4. **John** portrays the deity of Jesus, the Creator and sustainer of everything a symbol of the ascending flight and power of **the eagle**

The tribe of Levi (Chapters 3 and 4)

Led by Aeron, were not counted in the first census. They had their own numbering system which Moses attended to. The Levites were organised by families

- **Gershon.** The Gershohites camped on the west side of the tabernacle and maintained everything to do with the tent coverings
- **Kohath.** The Kohathites camped to the south and tended to the articles of furniture , the Ark of the Covenant, the altar of incense, the golden lampstand , the table of showbread and all the holy instruments used in the service of the tabernacle
- **Merari.** The Merarihites camped to the north and looked after the tabernacles infrastructure, poles, bases, and stands that held the curtains around the courtyard
- **Moses and Aeron** and his sons camped on the east of the tabernacles as overseers

God consecrates the community (Chapter 5)

God imposes rules of holy cleanliness which seem a bit hard. People are put out of the camp having various diseases or having touched a corpse. We might see this as rather unfair and harsh, but God is quarantining those who might have disease to prevent it spreading to the rest. God's love is practical as well as personal

The Nazarites Chapter 6

These were ordinary Old Testament believers who decided to take a special vow to dedicate themselves to the Lord. This was entirely voluntary and was for a specified period of time at the discretion of the individual. The Hebrew word "*nazir*" means separate, and so it involved practices that made the separation obvious to the community. The most famous Nazarites were Sampson and Samuel. Paul may himself have taken a Nazarite vow (Acts 18:18).

There were three things the Nazarites were not to do

1. They could have nothing from the grapevine, whether alcoholic wine, grape juice, grapes or even raisins. We are not told why but perhaps because of the

association of the fruit of the grape (especially fermented) with excess and sensuality

2. They could not have their hair cut
3. They could not have contact with a dead body or attend funerals

These were what they were to do

1. Called to general personal Godliness
2. Given to the worship of God and the study of His Word
3. Actively involved in the community (Note not hermits or part of a monastic life)

How are we as Christians to live in the New Covenant? Well this can be best expressed in Romans 12:1-2 **“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service.*”** ² **And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God”**

Chapters 7-8

Moses anoints and sanctifies the temple and gives to the prominent Levite families the things they need to carry out their offices. Priestly representatives from each tribe make a series of offerings. Moses and Aeron purify the sons of Levi through a sin offering and a burnt offering. The years of active service of the Levites are from 25 to 50.

The seven lampstands (Hebrew word “menorah”) appears first in Genesis 1:14 to describe the sun, moon and stars. These are Light-holders. This light stand stood in the Holy Place right opposite the table of show-bread. The light illuminated the loaves of bread and were a symbol of fellowship with God. We now have fellowship through Christ, but only if we live in the light of the indwelling Holy Spirit, though we are responsible to make Him welcome by keeping our lamps trimmed.

Guidance chapter 9:15-18

⁵ **Now on the day that the tabernacle was raised up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the Testimony; from evening until morning it was above the tabernacle like the appearance of fire.** ¹⁶ **So it was always: the cloud covered**

it *by day*, and the appearance of fire by night. ¹⁷ Whenever the cloud was ^[b]taken up from above the tabernacle, after that the children of Israel would journey; and in the place where the cloud settled, there the children of Israel would pitch their tents. ¹⁸ At the command of the LORD the children of Israel would journey, and at the command of the LORD they would camp; as long as the cloud stayed above the tabernacle they remained encamped

The first time this cloud appeared was at the time of the exodus and from then on was the symbol of God's presence and guiding. The people must only move in obedience to the movement of the cloud. They must rely alone on God's guiding to stay put or to move on. We have no such visible means of guidance, but instead we are to maintain fellowship with the Father through the Son and by the Holy Spirit

The complaining begins

Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: "Who will give us meat to eat? ⁵ We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶ but now our whole being *is* dried up; *there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!*" (Chapter 11:4-6).

Just think what they had seen, the opening up of the Red Sea, manna appearing daily and water gushing from a rock. Their faith should have been rock solid, but instead they just got used to it, and God's provision became old hat to them

The "*mixed multitude*" was a constant problem for Israel, and we must go back to Exodus chapter 12:38 to identify them "A mixed multitude went up with them also, and flocks and herds—a great deal of livestock. Although these people accompanied the people of God on the journey, they were evidently just hangers-on. These people influenced the Israelites to feel dissatisfied with God's provisions of food and pined for the foods they had in Egypt. Evidently from the verse quoted above the "mixed multitude" were wealthy folks. There will always be "hangers-on" who pretend to journey with the people of God, and those who truly want to follow Jesus Christ must beware of their influence.

God's response was instantaneous, fire fell from heaven; clearly God hates grumbling. In the words of Proverbs 6:16-19 **"These six things the LORD hates, Yes, seven are an abomination to Him:¹⁷ A proud look, A lying tongue, Hands that shed innocent blood,¹⁸ A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that are swift in running to evil,¹⁹ A false witness who speaks lies, And one who sows discord among brethren.** We do well to take notice! There was also the occasion in chapter 12 when Miriam and Aeron spoke against Moses and the anger of the Lord was aroused with alarming consequences (Chapter 12)

Spies to Canaan (Chapter 13 and 14)

God had Moses send spies to Canaan to survey the land He had given to His people. They were to spy out the land, inspect its inhabitants for numbers, strengths, and weaknesses. After forty days the spies return with a mixed report **"We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.²⁸ Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak (a race of gigantic warriors) there.** (Vs 27-28).

They panicked but one of the scouts Caleb a man of faith and courage **"quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it."**(Vs 30). The other spies except Joshua replied **"But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we."³² And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature.³³ There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."** (Vs 31-33)

The complaining continued **"If only we had died in the land of Egypt or if we had died in the wilderness"**. The people even threatened to replace Moses and go back to Egypt. At that point Caleb stood up with Joshua who would eventually become the leader of Israel, and pleaded with the people to trust God. Their courageous faith fell on deaf ears, and the congregation said to stone them.

God steps in ready to wipe them all out, but Moses interceded begging God for mercy. God did spare them, but would not allow them to enter the Promised Land. **“But your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised. ³² But as for you, your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness.** (Chapter 14:31-32) Except for Caleb and Joshua that whole generation would die in the wilderness and their children would inherit the Promised Land.

Rebellion

A prominent Levi, Korah lead a group of 250 other leaders in rebellion against the leadership of Moses. Their complaint was that Moses had too much power for one person. God would settle this matter and Moses laid out the terms (Chapter 16:28-30) **“ And Moses said: “By this you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works, for *I have not done them* of my own will. ²⁹ If these men die naturally like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, *then* the LORD has not sent me. ³⁰ But if the LORD creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the LORD.”** Gods reply came immediately, the ground opened and swallowed up all the complainants, and closed up again.

After dealing with Korah and his cohort, God confirmed the priesthood through Aeron and his sons and causes Aarons rod to bud overnight, His choice among the staffs from the tribal leaders (Chapter 17:2-8). Could this be a picture of the resurrection, something dead coming to life at Gods touch, and point towards its full fruition in the ministry of Jesus.

Here is a lesson for us today. The account taught the people, and the priests, that blessings do not come from anything inherent in themselves, but from the direct action of God Himself. All spiritual fruit comes from God. See verses 6- 7 of chapter 18 **“Behold, I Myself have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel; *they are* a gift to you, given by the LORD, to do the work of the tabernacle of meeting. ⁷ Therefore you and your sons with you shall attend to**

your priesthood for everything at the altar and behind the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood to you as a gift for service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”

Water to remove impurity

In chapter 19 we are read about a special provision for people while they are moving from place to place. When the camp was not pitched and set up, provision was made for ceremonial cleansing. This special water to remove impurity was made with the ashes that came from a solemn ceremony during which a red heifer was sacrificed. The whole of it had to be burned, and as it burned, cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet were mingled with it. The water to remove impurity symbolised the need for constant cleansing when the duly appointed place and method were not available. Surely this points to the wonder of God fulfilment in Christ, as His infinite worth and merit are available to us at all time and in all places

Moses' mistake

When the people arrived again at Kadesh, where they had entered the wilderness all those years ago, how Moses must have felt. It had been thirty seven years since he sent out the spies from Kadesh, and here they are again with little more than faithless wanderings in between. The people were complaining again, this time about a lack of water. They weren't going to enter The Promised Land but still expected God to provide their needs at their beck and call.

God told Moses to take his staff, speak to the rock in front of the whole group, and He would make water come from it. Moses and Aeron gathered people together but rather than speaking to the rock Moses addressed the crowd. **“And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?”¹¹ Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank”** (Chapter 20:10-11)

The consequence of this action was that God would not allow Moses and Aeron to enter the Promised Land (Chapter 20:12)

Below is a quote from Campbell Morgan, a favourite teacher of mine

“Perhaps there is no story in all the Old Testament more searching for all who are called to lead the people of God than this of the failure of Moses. What he did was most natural, but that is where the wrong came in. If that sounds a hard thing to say, consider the story: the people grumbled against Moses again because they were temporarily without water, despite all the evidences of God's faithfulness to provide. Moses and Aaron went to the Lord and received instructions on what to do. Those instructions had in them no note of rebuke from God, but Moses added a harsh rebuke of his own to the people, speaking "rashly with his lips" (Psalm 106:33) with ugly actions to match. By this understandable manifestation of anger, the servant of God misrepresented God to the people. His failure was that his faith failed to reach the high degree that the situation required: Moses still believed in God and in His power, but not to the degree of treating Him as holy in the sight of His people. Right things may be done in so wrong a way as to produce evil results. As important as it is to deliver the Lord's message, we must do so in His tone, with His temper. That is where Moses failed, and for this failure both he and Aaron were excluded from the Promised Land”

A bronze Serpent

The complaining continued, and so God sent venomous snakes into the camp to bite and kill. The people came to Moses pleading with him to plead with God on their behalf. Moses prayed, and God's response was to have a metal snake fastened to a pole and provide healing for all who looked at it (Chapter 21:8-9). Jesus Himself used this very incident to refer to His crucifixion (John 3:14). All the Israelites had to do was admit their guilt, and look at the serpent. Likewise salvation involves repentance and trust

the finished work of Jesus Christ accomplished at the cross



Balaam and a talking donkey

As Israel travelled through the wilderness they were gaining something of a reputation, for God had given them victories over nations stronger and better established than themselves. They had victories over the Canaanites (Chapter 21:1-3), the Amorites (Chapter 21:21-32) and Og the king of Bashan (Chapter 21:33-35). The next in line in Israel's path was Moab and their king Balak the son of Zippor was fearful (Chapter 22:2-3).

Balaks response was to hire Balaam, a Mesopotamia sorcerer and prophet who probably used astrology and divination and other means to create oracles and signs. Balak requested Balaam to place a curse on Israel, not an unusual event then, as ancient near Eastern Kings, often called upon prophets to curse their foes before battle. God spoke to Balaam audibly, telling him not to curse Israel (Chapter 22:9-13) Balaam obeyed God, but Balak tried to convince him to change his mind. Balaam replies that all Balaks gold and silver, could not persuade him to go against Israel's God.

God then sent Balaam on a mission instructing him to go to Balak but to say “**only the word which I speak to you**” (Chapter 22:20) Balaam saddled up his donkey and headed out, but it seems he went with the wrong attitude and motive, because along the way God became angry with him and sent an angel to block his path. The donkey

seeing “The Angel of the Lord” in the path on three occasions, each time stopped even though Balaam hit the donkey because he unlike his donkey had not seen the angel. The donkey speaks “**Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?”**”²⁹ And Balaam said to the donkey, “**Because you have [e]abused me. I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you!**”³⁰ So the donkey said to Balaam, “**Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden, ever since I became yours, to this day? Was I ever [f]disposed to do this to you?**” “**And he said, “No.”**” (Chapter 22:28-29)

God opens Balaam’s eyes to see the angel and he dropped down to ground and bowed.



God allowed Balaam to continue. Balak takes Balaam to three different high places so he could pronounce a curse on Israel, and each time Balaam spoke Gods message instead, offering a prophecy in praise of God and His blessings on Israel.

See Chapter 23:7-11 “**And he took up his oracle and said: “Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east. ‘Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!’**”⁸ “**How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce *whom* the LORD has not denounced?**”⁹ For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him; There! A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations.¹⁰ “**Who can count the [b]dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!**”¹¹ Then Balak said to Balaam, “What have

you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed *them* bountifully!" (See also verse 11-24 and chapter 24:3-9)

Even though Balaam could not curse the people, they brought trouble on themselves in a place called Peor. They joined the local tribes of the Moabites in their religious rituals, which involved having sex as part of Baal worship (Chapter 25:1-3). The explanation for this comes a few chapters later, when Moses fills in the rest of the story. After God had given Israel a victory over the Midianites, the army brought captive women and children back to Moses instead of killing them. Moses says this in chapter 31; 16 **Have you kept all the women alive? ¹⁶ Look, these *women* caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD".** Even though God prevented Balaam from uttering a curse, secretly he must have taken Balak aside and suggested that instead Balak send women into the Israel camp and seduce the men with their worship rituals. So although Balaam had a supernatural encounter with God, his heart remained unchanged, and the result of his deception was destruction for all those "who were joined to Baal of Peor" (Chapter 25:5) God sent a plague, resulting in 24,000 deaths (Vs 9)

Reorganisation (Chapters 26-36)

The older generation's failure had brought about death, now the new generation would bring life. God told Moses and Eleazar Aarons son, and the new high priest to take a census (Chapter 26:2). This new generation needed reminding of the offerings and the sacrifices God had ordained earlier (Chapters 28-30) Moses taught the new generation the law, and the people moved on for the first time in almost forty years. God helped them defeat the Midianites and cross the river Jordan and they finally reached the Promised Land.

Not everyone crossed the Jordan, the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh asked to stay on the east side of the river and take their inherited land there. Finally God gave Israel the boundaries of the land (Chapter 34:1-12). The land was distributed to the remaining tribes along with the locations of cities for the Levites (Chapter 35:1-8) and cities of refuge (Chapter 35:9-18)

Cities of Refuge

God provided these cities, and here we have an illustration of the mercy and justice of God. The law of God made life sacred, and the punishment for taking it was death (Genesis 9:6). Yet it was possible that in the taking of a human life there might be extenuating circumstances, such as self-defence, or war, or other situations. For premeditated murder there were no cities of refuge, but for accidental manslaughter God made such a provision. This provision was not made for people to escape justice, but that justice would be carried out. An investigation would be made of the circumstances of the killing, and in the event of the death penalty not being appropriate, the accused had to remain in the city until the death of the high priest

