

LECTURE 5
NUMBERS OVERVIEW
CHASTISEMENT OF A COVENANT PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION

1. Name

A translation of the Septuagint's *Arithmoi*, "Numbers" is an accurate title in light of all the lists and figures given in the book. In addition to the census figures for the twelve tribes and the Levites, the book contains a detailed list of the tribal offerings at the dedication of the Tabernacle in chapter 7. Totals are also given for the weekly and monthly sacrifices and for the number of animals offered in the yearly festivals (chaps.28–29). In two of the most discouraging chapters of the book we are told of the death of 14,700 and 24,000 Israelites as plagues broke out because of sin (16:49; 25:9). Toward the end of the book there is a detailed list of the plunder taken from the Midianites (31:32–47) and a description of the number and size of the Levitical cities in chapter 35.¹

2. Theme

3. Purpose

4. Key verse

5. Key truths

- God fully prepared his people to serve him and to succeed in the conquest of Promised Land.
- The members of the first generation failed to succeed because they were ungrateful for the grace God had shown them and feared the power of the Canaanites.
- God raised up another generation for the conquest of the promised land, but they also had to remain faithful to the Lord in order to succeed.²

I. AUTHOR

See "Lecture 1: Pentateuch Overview" regarding overall Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. In addition, we can note the following points which are specific to Numbers.

¹ H Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), Electronic Edition

² *Ibid.*, 200.

1. Standard critical viewpoint

The liberal critics theories lead them to attribute parts of Numbers to different redactors. For example, they attribute Numbers 11-12 and 21-24 to the "Yahwist" writer "J," who allegedly wrote in the 10th Century BC to support the Davidic monarchy. Further, they attribute Numbers 1-9, 17-19, 26-31 and other parts to the "Priestly" writer "P" who allegedly wrote in the 6th Century BC, and was concerned with returning to the land and restoring the Temple.

2. Mosaic authorship

Within Numbers itself there is only a single reference to Mosaic writing activity (33:1-2). However, there are over eighty references in the book to Moses receiving the divine revelation that forms the substance of the book (eg., 1:1; 2:1; 4:1). The fact that the book refers to Moses in the third person simply reflects customary writing style in ancient times. Apart from direct divine revelation (1:1) he may have been inspired to use reports (22-24), memories, written records (33:2), the "Book of the wars of Yahweh" (21:14). There may have been later inspired revisions of the Hebrew and inspired historical additions. For example, Numbers 32:34-42 describes the building activity on the part of the two and one-half tribes that settled in the Transjordan after the conquest.

Documentary critics often point to the "Meekness of Moses" text in Num.12:3 to disprove Mosaic authorship. It is argued that if he was the meekest man in the world, he would never have written this concerning himself. Again, this may be an inspired post-Mosaic addition. However, it is also possible that the Spirit of God inspired him to record this contextually important virtue, just as elsewhere the Spirit inspired him to honestly record his faults.

This analysis of Numbers is in keeping with our characterization of the Pentateuch as a whole. That is, it is essentially Mosaic but includes source material and glosses. After all this is said, we must remember that we cannot be precise or certain about our reconstruction of the composition of Pentateuchal books. It is fruitless to speculate about it more carefully in the manner of most source criticism.³

II. DATE

The book's final composition was most likely when Moses was older and Israel's period of wilderness wandering was coming to an end. "Across from Jericho" is mentioned 9 times (22:1; 26:3; 26:63; 31:12; 33:48; 33:50; 34:15; 35:1; 36:13). Israel, therefore, had arrived in Moab and were preparing to enter the Promised Land (approx 1406 BC).

III. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

1. Geography

The book of Numbers naturally follows the Levitical legislation. The priestly laws have been revealed, and the nation is now ready to continue its march to the Promised Land. So, Numbers first relates the preparations which were made for the departure from Sinai. It then describes the departure of the Israelites from Sinai and their travelling to the plains of Moab. The book closes with the recital of certain events which occurred there together with instructions for the conquest and division of the land.

a. Three Movements

Numbers has three geographical movements:

³ R Dillard and T Longman III, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 76

b. A map of their journey

While many of the places Israel camped at are uncertain, the map below gives a rough idea of the general directions of their journey.



- (1). Upon their release, the Israelites departed from the Land of Goshen, miraculously crossed the Red Sea and arrived at Sinai where they stayed for over a year (Ex.19-Num.10)
- (2). Departing from Sinai (Num.10:10), they followed a route northward to Kadesh–barnea (10:11-12:16) which ended in the disastrous attempt to invade Canaan without God’s assistance (13:1-20:21)
- (3). The next 38 years were spent wandering in the wilderness, an area generally believed to have included Moses’ previous homeland of Midian. It is thought that the Tabernacle may have stayed at Kadesh during this time.
- (4). Under God’s direction, the Israelites travelled to Moab (20:22-21:20) where they camped for months before successfully advancing into Canaan.

Israel had everything going her way. God had worked a spectacular miracle in redeeming her from Egypt. Now she had a new and unique relationship with God. The Sinai covenant came complete with a tabernacle, a worship programme, and an elaborate legal system. This was Israel's blueprint for the future. Like no other nation in history before or since, Israel had everything she needed for a complete success. But Israel's is not a story of success, at least not in immediate success. The book of Numbers relates her struggles with obedience and the consequences of her disobedience. Numbers describes events that occurred during the nearly 40 years Israel wandered in the desert between Mount Sinai and the plains of Moab.⁵

⁴ Logos Maps, Electronic Edition.

⁵ B Arnold and B Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 128.

2. Chronology

The chronological setting of Numbers is about 1445 BC. The book opens with Israel still at Sinai, one month after the erection of the Tabernacle and 13 months after the Exodus. The chronology of the first ten chapters is set out below.

Second Year out of Egypt			
Occasion	Day	Month	Reference
Tabernacle erected	1	1	Ex.40:2,17
Passover celebrated	14	1	Num.9:2-3, 5
Census ordered	1	2	Num.1:1-2
Tabernacle dismantled	20	2	Num.10:11

3. Numbers/Numerology

The numbers of fighting men recorded in chapters 1 and 26 would indicate a total population of over 2 million.

a. Difficulties

- (i). Some scholars find it impossible to see how the 70 families which came into Egypt multiplied so rapidly during the time of their oppression. This difficulty has been dealt with in the Exodus lectures.
- (ii). It has been suggested that a group this size would more than fill north-eastern Egypt (the land of Goshen) creating huge logistical problems.

It has been argued by some that it would have taken the entire day for a multitude of two and a half million to get into formation for a line of march, and thus would have been unable to progress a single mile before night closed in upon them. Hence they could not have performed the journeys attributed to them in Numbers 33 and elsewhere. But actually the length of time required to fall into marching formation depends entirely upon the width and disposition of the columns themselves. It is not necessary to assume that they kept within the limits of a highway, for example, since they were moving over largely uninhabited range land. The four main divisions of approximately 500,000 each (cf. Num. 10:14–20) might just as well have formed their ranks simultaneously and completed preparations to march within four hours (from 6:00 to 10:00 A.M. , for example) and then have completed a good ten miles in four hours before setting up camp again (which in turn might have occupied four hours between 2:00 and 6:00 P.M.).⁶

- (iii). 2 million Israelites would have had nothing to fear from the 20,000 strong Egyptian army.
- (iv). Some estimate the entire population of Canaan at well below 3 million at this time. Yet the Israelites were said to have been much smaller in number than the Canaanites – too few in fact to occupy the land (Dt.7:6,7,17).

b. Five “Evangelical” solutions

There are five approaches to this view from an evangelical perspective:

- (i) The numbers in our Hebrew Bible are the result of textual corruption during transmission. Advocates of this “solution” believe that these passages in Numbers were taken from ancient records of an old census, misunderstood and then erroneously entered into the text by later redactors. This method is used to argue for a much smaller fighting male population of anything from 3,000 to 30,000.

However the wider biblical context would seem to support a figure nearer 600,000.

Ex. 12:37 gives the same total in round numbers as Num. 1:46 (i.e., 600,000), and the same is true of Num. 11:21. Further corroboration is given by the total amount of ransom money – at the rate of

⁶ G L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), Electronic Edition.

a half shekel apiece – recorded in Ex. 38:25 as 100 talents, 1775 shekels. Since there were 3000 shekels to the talent, this comes out to exactly 603,550 contributors. It is therefore safe to say that no objective handling of the textual evidence can possibly sustain the thesis that *'eleph* in Numbers signifies anything less than a literal thousand.⁷

(ii). The Hebrew word translated “thousand” is a technical term for clan or military units, which are made up of considerably less than a thousand members.

The best solution is that the Hebrew terms used in these lists have incorrectly been limited to a numerical designation. The terms “thousand” and “hundred” may originally have referred to social units (families, clans, tent groups) or to military units (captains of thousands or hundreds). For example, if we assume “hundred” designated a military contingent and “thousand” a captain, we could calculate an estimate of the total Israelite population at the time of the Exodus at approximately 72,000. But the solution is tentative, and a conclusive answer to this problem remains elusive.⁸

In answer to this G L Archer states:

It is true that there is an *'eleph* which means family or clan (Judg.6:15; 1 Sam. 10:19 , etc.); but it is very clear from the numeration chapters (Num. 1–4; 26) that *'eleph* is intended in the sense of “thousand,” for the smaller unit below this *'eleph* is *mē'āt*, “hundreds” (so Num. 1:21 , 23 , 25 , etc.). The most that a “family” could contribute to the national army would be four or five men on the average, and it would be absurd to suppose that “hundreds”⁹ would be mentioned as the next lower numerical unit after an average contingent of five men each.

W J Dumbrell accepts that the figure of 600,000 presupposes a population of more than two million. He wrote:

Many ingenious proposals have been made to reduce the figure. But the present text clearly assumes that the disputed Hebrew (*'elef*) means one thousand. That the lists represent an actual census cannot be denied. It seems that the figure of six hundred thousand is legitimate, and we may compare the large numbers in Chronicles.¹⁰

The biblical context makes clear that the population was huge

(iii). The numbers are inspired hyperboles. They are intentional and well-understood exaggerations to highlight the grace of God to the nation. This is dangerous ground for any evangelical to walk on and begins to undermine the veracity and truthfulness of God.

(iv). The numbers are accepted despite seeming difficulties. The whole narrative concedes the physical impossibility of the logistics and emphasizes the supernatural provision of God.

The wilderness of Sinai, it is claimed, could not have sustained so great a group of people. But if the people were encamped in the plain of Er-Rahah before Jebel es-Safsaf, they were in a plain about 4 miles in length and quite wide, with which several wide, lateral valleys join. Further, the sustenance of the people was not the natural produce of Sinai but the miraculous gift of manna. The order of march is said to be impossible, as described in ch. 2 and 10:14-20. But if the account is so impossible, surely no writer would have devised such an impossible scheme. The very difficulty involved is but an indication of historicity. Since so little is said about the details of the march, we are in no position to question the historicity and accuracy of the statements made.¹¹

(v) The census depicted the army as great in number in order to display the blessings God had shown the nation. Also it is to show that Israel is not an unorganized mob. They are a distinct people, whose names and

⁷ G L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), Electronic Edition.

⁸ B Arnold and B Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 129-130.

⁹ G L Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), Electronic Edition.

¹⁰ W J Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 52.

¹¹ E J Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1953), 89.

ages and tribal relationships are definitely known. The census was a designed to demonstrate how God had blessed his people and prepared them for the conquest of the land

IV. LITERARY ANALYSIS

1. Comparative Outlines

Wenham	Harrison	Pratt	Murray
Preparations to enter land (1:10-10:10)	Preparations for leaving Sinai (1:1-10:10)	Constituting first army (1:1-10:10)	Preparation of the first army (1-21)
From Sinai-Kadesh (10:11-12:16)	From Sinai to Plains of Moab (10:11-21:35)	Failures in the march (10:11-25:18)	
Forty years near Kadesh (13:1-19:22)			
From Kadesh to Moab (20:1-22:1)	Events in Moabite Plains (22:1-36:13)	Constituting second army (26:1-36:13)	Preparation of the second army (22-36)
Israel in Moab (22:2-36:13)			

J E Smith offers this analysis:

STRUCTURE OF NUMBERS ("The Discipline of the Nation")		
PREPARATION FOR THE MARCH	THE MARCH TO CANAAN	COMPLETION OF THE MARCH
Nm 1:1–10:10	Nm 10:11–21:35	Nm 22–36
Organization at Sinai	Disorganization <i>en route</i> to Sinai	Reorganization in the Plains of Moab
THE OLD GENERATION	THE NEW GENERATION Num.21:10; Dt.2:14	

2. Original Audience/Meaning

a **First generation army (1:1-10:10)**

b **First generation failures (10:11-21:35)**

a' **Second generation army (22:1-36:13)**

¹² J E Smith, *The Pentateuch* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 1993), Electronic Edition.

This second generation, however, repeats the curious and continual paradox of the OT. Once it enters the land, Israel shows the same tendencies and behavior patterns as the first generation, raising the prospect of another wilderness situation, which finally led to exile. The Book of Numbers is, in essence, two-sided. The somber side is the side of judgment. After the wonderful experience of exodus and Sinai, the book records many lost opportunities. Positively, however, Numbers is concerned, like Leviticus, with establishing for Israel the sharp contrast between the sacred and the profane. The message of the book is that if Israel wishes to enjoy the blessings of the Land of Promise, it must follow God's unfailing guidance and keep itself unspotted.¹³

3. Genre

There is a great generic variability in Numbers. For example: narrative (4:1-3), poetry (21:17-18), prophecy (24:3-9), victory song (21:27-30), prayer (12:13), blessing (6:24-26), diplomatic letter (21:14-19), civil law (27:1-11), cultic law (15:7-21), oracular decision (15:32-36), census list (26:1-51), temple archive (7:10-88), itinerary (33:1-49). However, when we view these parts in the context of the whole book and the book in the wider context of the Pentateuch, it is best to identify the genre of Numbers as instructional history writing.

However, having said that, the amount and purpose of the legal materials in the books should also be noted.

The Book of Numbers describes the migration of Israel from Sinai to the plains of Moab, a journey fraught with a succession of rebellions against the Lord and his theocratic administrators and climaxed by the death of the adults of the exodus generation. There was a consequent need for at least a partial restatement of the covenant legislation appropriate to the new generation anticipating settlement in Canaan. Much of Numbers, like Exodus and Leviticus, is therefore prescriptive in nature and technically not historical narrative.¹⁴

Numbers is a narrative and a supplemental lawbook between the sacramental lawbook of Leviticus and the social lawbook of Deuteronomy. It recounts the journey of the emerging nation from Sinai to the eastern side of Jordan, where it is about to enter the Promised Land. Here the mixed form of narrative and legal material is particularly striking and elaborate. The dozen major shifts back and forth, not counting the short passages of narrative implementation within the legal sections, are almost dizzying. Jacob Milgrom identifies the major alternations between narrative (N) and law (L) as follows: 1-10:10 (L); 10:11-14:45(N); 15(L); 16-17 (N); 18-19 (L); 20-25 (N); 26-27:11(L); 27:12-23 (N); 28-30 (L); 31-33:49 (N); 33:50-56; 34-36 (L). The alternating sections entail two major topics - God's continuing elaboration of his principles and, despite his meticulous care, the sustained murmuring and rebellion of his people.¹⁵

This apparently random combination of different types of literary materials has led some scholars to view the book as hopelessly disorganized. However, this is to apply modern Western criteria to ancient Eastern texts.

A lack of such design and consistency in a book does not mean the book is confused, confusing, or without a discernible message....It is possible to discern a consistent thematic purpose in Numbers despite its literary diversity. The book contains a unified interpretation of God's will for his people by contrasting the holy with the profane. The book of Numbers portrays the holy as the presence of God, the blessing of numbers, the laws of cleanliness, the service of the Levites, atonement, and the inheritance of a clean land. On the other hand the profane consists of all sorts of uncleanness and results in the wrath of God, his plagues of judgment, lost inheritance by a dying people, and the pollution of the land...The literary nature of Numbers is unique in the Pentateuch. Genesis, Exodus,

¹³ W J Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 50.

¹⁴ E H Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books House, 1992), 24.

¹⁵ L Ryken and T Longman III (Editors), *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1993), 127-128.

and Leviticus have more unity. The written or oral sources behind Genesis, the historical nature of the Exodus materials, and the predominantly legal materials of Leviticus were unifying factors for those books. Numbers is altogether unique though the message is clear and pertinent for modern readers.¹⁶

V. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

1. Pentateuchal context

2. God's faithfulness and human unfaithfulness

3. Two preparations

4. Seven Crises

J E Smith proposes that the theme of the book is "Crisis" and that seven crises form the core of the book.

- A leadership crisis. Miriam and Aaron questioned the authority of Moses (ch.12).
- A faith crisis. At Kadesh the people believed the reports of the ten spies and refused to trust God for victory in Canaan (chs.13–14).
- A second leadership crisis. The leadership of Moses and Aaron was challenged by Dathan and Korah and their followers (ch.16).
- A personal crisis. Moses arrogantly and angrily smote a rock when he was but to speak to it. The people received water from the rock, but Moses lost the opportunity to lead his people into Canaan (ch.20).
- A program crisis. When they were not permitted to pass through the land of Edom, Israel was forced to take a detour through the desert. Poisonous snakes in the region caused havoc and death (ch.21).

¹⁶ B Arnold and B Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 129.

- A military crisis. Israelite soldiers were forced to go to war against walled cities in Transjordan for the first time (ch.21).
- A religious crisis. Balak king of Moab used beautiful temptresses to lure the men of Israel into Baal worship at Peor (ch.25).¹⁷

5. God interacts with His people

VI. NEW TESTAMENT ANALYSIS

1. Christ's holy war

2. The Christian's holy war

3. The Christian's wilderness wandering

¹⁷ J E Smith, *The Pentateuch* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 1993), Electronic Edition.

VII. THE MESSAGE OF NUMBERS

Original Message:

Present Message: