

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Numbers

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The Israelites had departed from Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month and reached the wilderness of Sinai on the first day (new moon) of the third month (Exodus 19:1). On the third day, God revealed himself on the mountain (v. 16). The tabernacle was erected on the first day of the first month of the second year (40:17). The book of Numbers opens with a command from Yahweh to Moses dated the first day of the second month of the second year. On the twentieth day of that same month “the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle of the testimony, and the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai”(Numbers 10:11f.). Deuteronomy opens with a reference to the first day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year, or about thirty-eight years, eight months, and ten days after departing from Sinai. In other words, Numbers covers a period of thirty-eight years and nine months, referred to as the period of wilderness wanderings.

An obvious reason for the inclusion of this book is to fill the period from the Exodus and Sinai revelation to the preparations in Moab to enter the promised land. Numbers makes clear that the thirty-eight-year period was punishment for lack of faith, so none of the unbelieving generation would enter the land (cf. Deuteronomy 1:35f.). Numbers, therefore, is not a mere bit of history, but another recital of the acts of Yahweh. It is a complex story of unfaithfulness, rebellion, apostasy, and frustration, set against the background of God’s faithfulness and forbearance.

Name

“Numbers” is a strange name for a book of this sort. Its title in the Hebrew Bible, taken from words in the first verse, is “In the wilderness of [Sinai].” This title is quite fitting. The translators of the LXX gave it the name “Numbers” because of the lists of numbers recorded in the book, and that title was passed on through the Vulgate.

Numbers in Numbers

According to 1:45f., “the whole number of the people of Israel, by their fathers’ houses, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go forth to war in Israel,” totaled 603,550. This was at the first census, taken at Sinai on the “first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of

Egypt” (v. 1). If the men of military age are estimated as between 20 and 25 percent of the population – based on records of other peoples – the total of all Israelites would have been 2.5 to 3 million persons. By any reckoning, the number can hardly be reduced below 2 million.

Theology

Presence. In some way too marvelous for comprehension, the Lord made his presence with the Israelites visually known:

On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony; and at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. So it was continually; the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night (9:15f.).

When the cloud was taken up, the people set out; and when it settled down, they encamped. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, the people remained in camp (vv. 17-23).

Once, when Miriam and Aaron became exasperated with their brother Moses “because of the Cushite woman whom he had married” (12:1), the Lord called a meeting of the three at the “tent of meeting” (v. 4). “In a pillar of cloud,” he appeared and uttered these solemn words:

If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? (vv. 6-8)

The Providence of Yahweh. If the wilderness period was a continual object lesson of the Lord’s presence, it was also a constant demonstration of his provision for his people’s needs. He provided “manna” for the people to eat; and when they tired of this vegetarian diet, he sent quails (Exodus 16). This story is elaborated in Numbers 11, where the Lord’s providential care is seen against the background of the people’s murmurings and complaints. The provision of quails seems temporary; but the manna continued throughout the journey, ceasing only when the Israelites entered Canaan (Joshua 5:12). When Moses recounted the wilderness experiences, he mentioned more than the marvelous provision of food (Deuteronomy 8:3): “Your clothing did not wear out upon you, and your foot did not swell, these forty years” (v. 4). When the people lacked water and complained to Moses, God told Moses and Aaron to assemble the congregation and “tell the

rock before their eyes to yield its water” (Numbers 20:8). Moses was irritated by the unreasonable complaints of the people and, in a moment of anger, struck the rock twice (v. 20). For this he was told he would not enter Canaan (v. 12). Throughout the Old Testament are many reminders of God’s providential care, often illustrated by reminiscences of the wilderness period of Israel’s history.

Patience. A cardinal point of Israelite theology is that the Lord is long-suffering. Numbers provides several incidents on which this belief was founded. God was patient with Moses, both at the call in Sinai, when Moses tried to get out of the task, and later in the wilderness. Moses himself usually was patient with the people; his striking the rock at Meribah was quite out of character.

Numbers is filled with accounts of the Israelites’ grumblings and complaining. They complained about their misfortunes (11:1). They longed for the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onion, and garlic of Egypt (v. 5), as if they had forgotten the terrible hardships of slavery. When the Lord sent them quails, they complained (v. 33, cf. Exodus 16). Miriam and Aaron complained about Moses’ wife (12:1), and their anger spilled over so they were even jealous of Moses (v. 2). When the spies returned from Canaan with stories of giants and great walled cities, the people wanted to choose a captain and go back to Egypt (14:4). The Lord’s patience wore thin at that point, and he declared that none of that generation would enter the land except Caleb and Joshua, the two spies who had encouraged the people to go in and possess the land. But even in that situation, God’s great redemptive plan prevailed, and he extended his promise to include the children of those who refused to trust him. And in spite of the rebellions, he continued to provide food and water.

Intercession. In Leviticus, Yahweh’s holiness was stressed, prompting the question: “How can a sinful people have fellowship with a holy God?” The biblical answer involves someone to intercede between them. As seen in Leviticus, the priesthood and sacrificial system provided one means of intercession. Numbers contains several examples of personal intercession.

One of the numerous Old Testament statements where God is portrayed in human terms concerns Miriam’s and Aaron’s jealousy toward their brother Moses: “The anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and he departed.” Miriam was stricken with leprosy, and Aaron cried to Moses: “Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned.” Moses then interceded: “Heal her, O God, I beseech thee.” God did heal her, but only after a token punishment of seven days’ banishment from the camp (12:9-15).

When the people rebelled at the spies' report and wanted to overthrow Moses and return to Egypt, God threatened to smite them with the pestilence and disinherit them (14:4-12). Moses argued that the Egyptians might hear of it and say: "Because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land which he swore to give them, therefore he has slain them in the wilderness" (vv. 13-16). Arguing from his faith that the Lord is "slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression," Moses prayed that he would pardon the iniquity of the people. The Lord did, but refused to let that faithless generation enter Canaan (vv. 20-23). From such experiences, the Israelites developed a strong belief in the power of a righteous person to intercede on behalf of sinners. Like so many other points in their belief, this was based on the historic acts of Yahweh, not simply on a theological concept. Such intercession was not reserved to the priestly office, but was part of Moses' ministry as prophet (cf. Genesis 20:7; Amos 7:2-5).

Yahweh and the Nations. The belief that the Lord was ruler of all nations is not fully expressed until the latter part of Isaiah; but, like other points in Old Testament theology, it was built on experience. The Lord had demonstrated in the Exodus that he was stronger than the gods of the Egyptians. When the people refused to accept the minority report of the twelve spies, they lost an opportunity to learn that Yahweh was stronger than the gods of Canaan. Probably the most graphic lesson, though, is found in the story of Balak and Balaam.

The Israelites had been forbidden to pass through Edom, so they had traveled around it (21:4). They had to pass through Amorite territory and requested permission to do so peaceably, but Sihon, king of the Amorites, refused. The Israelites defeated him and his people and took his land (vv. 21-25). Then they entered Moab, the last region to be traversed on their way to Canaan. Concerned, Balak, the king of Moab, sought aid from Balaam, a Mesopotamian prophet renowned for his power to pronounce effective curses (22:6). The story includes an episode in which God persuades Balaam not to curse Israel. When Balak puts pressure on Balaam, God warns Balaam to say only what he tells him to say. Balaam saddles his donkey and rides off with the princes of Moab. The angel of the Lord blocks the road, and when Balaam strikes his donkey for refusing to go further, the donkey speaks to him. The angel then prevails on Balaam to go with the Moabites, but instead of cursing Israel, to bless them. Balaam does so, three times. The story is delightfully told, and must have been a great favorite in the tents and around the campfires. But more than the story of a talking donkey, it contains a deep truth. The Lord of Israel is the one who controls people; even a

Mesopotamian prophet, when confronted by Yahweh, can speak only what the Lord puts in his mouth.

Star-and-Scepter Prophecy. After Balaam had blessed Israel a second time, the Spirit of God came upon him, and he uttered an oracle containing an often-quoted prophecy:

The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,
the oracle of him who hears the words of God,
and knows the knowledge of the Most High,
who sees the vision of the Almighty,
falling down, but having his eyes uncovered;
I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not nigh;
A star shall come forth out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;
It shall crush the forehead of Moab,
and break down all the sons of Sheth.
Edom shall be disposed,
Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed,
while Israel does valiantly.
By Jacob shall dominion be exercised,
and the survivors of cities by destroyed.

24:15-19

The prophecy is remarkable for its reference to the dominion of Jacob, but most frequently quoted is that passage which speaks of the star and scepter. Many have taken it as a messianic prophecy. It was understood in some such sense at Qumran, where it is quoted in the Dead Sea scrolls. In its context, the prophecy says nothing about a Messiah, and there is not even a vague suggestion of the beginning of the messianic age. “Star” and “scepter” are symbolic of rule, so the prophecy speaks of a ruler that shall come forth from Israel to vanquish their nearby enemies. From such a small spark ultimately developed the burning fire of hope in a Messiah who would rule all nations with righteousness and peace.

Outline of Numbers

The book can be divided conveniently into three main portions, separated by accounts of the Israelite journeys. An assortment of material not closely related is added at the end.

At Sinai: Preparations for departure (1:1-10:10)

First census (1:1-54)

- Tribal camps and leaders (2:1-34)
- Number and duties of the Levites (3:1-4:49)
- Miscellaneous laws (5:1-31)
- Nazirite vow (6:1-27)
- Dedicatory offerings (7:1-8:26)
- Supplementary Passover (9:1-14)
- Cloud to guide the people (9:15-10:10)
- Journey from Sinai to Kadesh (10:11-12:16)
 - Departure from Sinai (10:11-36)
 - Incidents along the way (11:1-12:16)
- At Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran (13:1-20:13)
 - Spies' mission and report (13:1-33)
 - People's decision and God's judgment (14:1-45)
 - Miscellaneous laws (15:1-41)
 - Korah's rebellion (16:1-50)
 - Story of Aaron's rod (17:1-13)
 - Priestly portions (18:1-32)
 - Purification of the unclean (19:1-22)
 - Closing events at Kadesh (20:1-13)
- Journey from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab (20:14-22:1)
 - Edom's opposition (20:14-21)
 - Death of Aaron; victory over opponents (20:22-22:1)
- On the Plains of Moab (22:2-32:42)
 - Balaam and Balak (22:2-24:25)
 - Apostasy at Peor and the plague (25:1-18)
 - Second census (26:1-65)
 - Daughters of Zelophehad, women's rights (27:1-11)
 - Joshua appointed to succeed Moses (27:12-23)
 - Offerings at the feasts (28:1-30:16)
 - Vengeance on Midian (31:1-54)
 - Portions of the Transjordan tribes (32:1-42)
- Miscellaneous matters (33:1-36:13)
 - Review of the journey from Egypt (33:1-56)
 - Boundaries of Israel in the land (34:1-29)
 - Cities of the Levites (35:1-34)
 - Daughters of Zelophehad and women's inheritance (36:1-13)

Lasor, William S., David A. Hubbard, and Frederic W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982)