

NUMBERS – PART ONE

Preparation for Departure from the Sinai

Chapters 1:1-10:10

Note to small study groups. Read the text prior to your meeting. If studying this book with others, in addition to the questions provided, you can also ask: What spoke to you most in the particular chapter(s) that you are studying?

Pause: Can you name a “wilderness experience” in your life that made you wonder if God had abandoned you? If so, what helped you to keep trusting in God during that time of testing and pain?

Introduction

The Book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible, is so named because it contains two censuses of the Israelite tribes (chs 1 and 26), along with various other listings of items with quantities and measures, e.g., gifts brought for the dedication of the altar (7:10-83), scouts sent to explore the Promised Land (13:4-13). The book is called “Wilderness” in Hebrew which, in a sense, is a more accurate title as it describes the thirty-eight years of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

The wilderness theme is very powerful for both ancient and modern religious people. In preparing his people to welcome the Messiah, John the Baptist described himself as a “voice in the *wilderness*” (Lk 3:1-2). Jesus spent forty days in the *wilderness* where he was tested before the beginning of his public ministry. Christian monks and hermits have lived and continue to live in the *wilderness* as a way to get closer to God. Israel’s wilderness experience is a metaphor for our desert experiences as we journey through life—those times of testing and struggle, and the challenges to keep faith in God during the tough times. Numbers reminds us that God is with us during all moments of our lives—both good and painful times. People today going through a difficult time physically, emotionally or spiritually often speak of their ordeal as a “wilderness experience.” Reading the book of Numbers is a wonderful reminder that God accompanies us through the wilderness experiences of life.

The *central focus* of Numbers is God’s presence among his people as they journey through the wilderness. God walks with them and directs their lives. The challenge for the Israelites is to place their trust in God. Sadly, as we shall see, they often grumble, rebel, and lose their trust in God. But when their constant groaning eventually brings about God’s judgment and punishment, the people are brought to their senses, and they beg God’s mercy.

What is the story? No sooner is the covenant at Sinai sealed, than the people start grumbling against the Lord. God punishes some, but Moses’ prayers persuade God to spare the nation. Spies sent into the land of Canaan return with reports of giants and argue against invasion. Joshua and Caleb disagree, but the people refuse to move. Because of their lack of trust, God decides none of the generation that left Egypt will be allowed to enter the Promised Land. The “wandering” period begins and lasts until all adults who left Egypt have died in the desert (except Joshua and Caleb). God uses the pagan prophet Balaam to speak blessings on Israel as they prepare to enter the beautiful land of God’s promise.

Division of chapters. Most Catholic scholars divide this book into three parts:

- Part One: In the desert at Sinai—preparations for the journey (chs 1:1-10:10)
- Part Two: Journey from Sinai to the plains of Moab (chs 10:11-21:35)
- Part Three: Life and events in the plains of Moab—preparation for entry into the Promised Land (chs 22-36)

Many Protestant scholars divide Numbers into two parts:

- Part One: The old generation of rebellion (chs 1-25)
- Part Two: The new generation of hope (chs 26-36). This part is underlined by the two censuses of the twelve tribes of Israel in chapters 1 and 26

Numbers contains a combination of narrative and laws on a variety of issues. The main narrative is found in chapters 10:11-14, 16-17, 20-26, 31-33.

Date and author. While many of the events and traditions narrated in the book go back to the time of Moses, the final edition was probably written in the

fifth century. In her Colledgeville commentary on Numbers, Helen Kenik Mainelli writes: “*The priestly editors wrote the history specifically to give the exiled Israelites hope and comfort based on memory of God’s actions. They challenged the exiles to recall the events of old, especially the ways in which God was present among the people, led them, and provided for them in their formative years*” (p.6).

The book is mainly a product of the so-called priestly school, and its priestly character is apparent by the attention given to cultic and ritual practices, lists and genealogies. “*Lists impose order on reality and genealogies establish relationships and places in society.*” (John Collins)

COMMENTARY

PART ONE: In the Desert of Sinai—Preparations for the Journey (chs. 1:1-10:10)

In her commentary on Numbers, Helen Kenik Mainelli writes a helpful introduction to the first ten chapters of Numbers.

These beginning chapters of the Book of Numbers describe events that take place while the people are camped at Sinai. They are being readied for the great march into the Promised Land. First, a census is taken (ch. 1), and the people are organized around the Dwelling, the presence of Yahweh among them (ch. 2). Next, there is a numbering of the Levites, whose principal duty is the care of the Dwelling (ch.3), and a description of their duties (chs. 4 and 8). There follows a series of regulations that ensure the sanctity of the camp (chs. 5 and 6). There is then a listing of the offerings by the princes/leaders to serve the Dwelling in transport (ch. 7), with final preparations for the movement out of the camp: the lights are lighted in the Dwelling (8:1-4), and guidance is provided for the trek through the wilderness (9:15-23). The second Passover is celebrated to remember that a year has passed since the deliverance from Egypt (ch. 9), and the silver trumpets are blown to signal the march (10:10).

These chapters were set down by priests in the exilic period, when the community needed instructions regarding its present circumstance. It viewed itself as being once again in the wilderness and preparing for a return to the homeland. The vision of a community organized about the Dwelling encompasses at once that early first entry into the

land of promise and this new time of waiting for the return to the land (p. 10).

Chapter One: The Census

Note to the reader: The first section of this book (1:1-10:10) is a bit like Leviticus. If you want to pick up the narrative section of the book, fast forward to chapter 10:10.

“In the year following that of the Israelites’ departure from the land of Egypt, on the first day of the second month, the Lord said to Moses in the meeting tent in the desert of Sinai: “Take a census of the whole community of the Israelites, by clans and ancestral houses, registering each male individually. You and Aaron shall enroll in companies all the men in Israel of twenty years or more who are fit for military service (vv 1-3).

The Israelites’ encounter with God was rooted in their history, as evidenced by the mention of the exact *times* and *places* when the Lord spoke to Moses. The meeting tent, also called the tabernacle tent, was the great symbol of God’s presence with his people. In Exodus 29:45, God promised: “*I will dwell in the midst of the Israelites and will be their God...*”

In the meeting tent, God commands Moses to take a census of the people. (In Numbers, the phrase “God said to Moses” occurs over eighty times to emphasize the importance of his leadership role.) Moses is ordered to register the sons of Israel individually and according to their clan in their father’s line (v.2). Only males twenty years and older are to be counted, twenty being the age a male becomes an adult and is eligible for service in the military. The purpose of the first census is to determine the number of men who will be available for the military conquest of Canaan. To assist Moses and Aaron with the census, a man from each tribe is to be chosen (v.4).

According to census results, the total number of Israelite men available for military service is 603,550 (v.46). While the numbers seem exaggerated, it is a way to demonstrate that God has fulfilled his promise to Abraham that he will be the father of *innumerable descendants*. Israel is well on its way to becoming a great nation.

Levites’ omission from census (vv 47-54). Because the Levites are assigned to the care of the Sanctuary, they were not counted in the census for military service. Their duty is to carry Israel’s mobile Sanctuary, care for it and camp around it.

Pause: Have you or any of your family members ever served our country in the military? If so, what was that experience like for you?

Chapter Two: Arrangement of the Tribes

Now that the census taking is completed, the focus shifts to the arrangement of the tribes around the meeting tent. God gives Moses specific orders on how the tribes are to be positioned, i.e. three on each side around the four sides of the meeting tent. The tribe of Levi is assigned a special role as guardians in the inner circle around the tent of meeting.

Chapters Three and Four: Special Ministry of the Levites

When the Israelites entered into a covenant relationship with God at Sinai, they were called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:5-6), a people who would offer worship and allegiance to God.

Aaron and his descendants were chosen by God to serve as leaders and coordinators of the worship life of Israel. The tribe of Levi was chosen by God to be Aaron's assistants in his priestly role. In 3:5-10, we read. *"Now the Lord said to Moses: 'Summon the tribe of Levi and present them to Aaron the priest, as his assistants. They shall discharge his obligations and those of the whole community before the meeting tent by serving at the Dwelling. They shall have custody of all the furnishings of the meeting tent and discharge the duties of the Israelites in the service of the Dwelling. You shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they have been set aside from among the Israelites as dedicated to me. But only Aaron and his descendants shall you appoint to have charge of the priestly functions.'"*

Prior to the selection of the Levites for priestly service, the first-born child of each family served that function. (vv 11-13).

The rest of chapters three and four spell out in detail the duties of the Levites.

Pause: What can parishes do today to promote vocations to the priesthood and religious life?

Chapter Five: Regulations to Ensure the Sanctity of the Camp

As we saw in Leviticus 11 to 15, ritual purity is an important dimension of Israel's attempt to be a holy people before an all-holy God. Purity, in ancient Israel, meant being free from any physical, moral, or ritual contamination. Some of the ways that impurity could come about are through contact with a corpse, involuntary flow of fluids (e.g., blood or semen) the human body, certain skin diseases, or from eating prohibited foods. Impurity is not a sin and can be cleansed through various ritual washings, waiting periods and offering of sacrifices. In verses 5-10, God instructs Moses to tell the people that a person who sins against a neighbor must *"confess the wrong he has done, restore his ill-gotten goods in full, and in addition give one-fifth of their value to the one he has wronged"* (v.7). This statement makes it clear that saying, "I'm sorry, please forgive me," is not enough when it comes to the sin of stealing.

Case of suspected adultery (vv 11-31). On the subject of adultery, the punishments prescribed by God seem to be very harsh. For instance, a husband's mere suspicions can subject his wife to a humiliating ordeal—without any sanction against the husband if his suspicions are proved wrong. The case reflects the way women were treated in those times. It would be good to read these verses along with John 8:1-11, where Jesus intervenes on behalf of the woman who is accused of committing adultery.

Pause: The Bible, as the above verses show, has a double standard for men and women. As a woman, how does that make you feel? To what extent does our society or church continue to favor men over women?

Chapter Six: Nazirite Vows

The word *nazirite* means "set apart" or "dedicated." Nazirites are lay people within the community who have made a vow of dedication to the Lord (v.21) for a set period of time. The nazirite tradition was a long standing one among the Israelites e.g., Samson (Judg 13:5) and Samuel (1Sam 1:11). In that context, as a people about to leave Sinai and a people called to be a holy nation, men and women who took a nazirite vow were a constant reminder to the community of what total dedication to the Lord should be. The chapter is divided into three sections:

- I. Verses 3-8 set forth the conditions and laws for those making the nazirite vow.
- II. Verses 9-12 prescribe the required purification of persons who become unclean unintentionally.
- III. Verses 13-21 describe the ceremonies to be observed when the period of the vow is fulfilled.

The Aaronic or priestly blessing (6:22-27). These verses are probably the best known in Numbers. They express God's beautiful words of blessing or benediction for the Israelite community.

*“May the Lord bless you and keep you!
May the Lord let his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you!
May the Lord look kindly upon you
and give you peace!”*

In his commentary on Numbers, Dennis Olson writes: *“Each of the three lines in the blessing consists of two clauses. The first clause invokes God’s movement toward the people (bless, let his face shine, look kindly) and the second clause names the results of the three divine movements toward the people (keep you, be gracious to you, give you peace)”* (p.41).

In the first invocation, the priest calls down God’s continual and sustaining power and life to rest on the one being blessed, and asks God to keep the person close to him and protected from all evil. For the Israelites, this meant protection from childlessness, crop failure and threats from enemies.

In the second invocation, the priest implores God to look on the one being blessed with pleasure and favor. Light also evokes clarity, revelation and warmth.

In the third invocation, the priest asks God to bestow on the one being blessed his divine love in gestures of favor and help. The ultimate goal of God’s blessing is peace which is much more than the absence of war and conflict. It involves an inner state of well-being which belongs to those who live their lives in harmony with God.

Pause: How does the above blessing speak to you? What does it mean to you to receive God’s blessing? While growing up, did your family have any special blessing traditions?

Beautification of the Lord’s Dwelling Place

We previously read about the regulations governing life in the camp and in the community. The Israelites now prepare for their departure from Sinai. This chapter is divided into two parts.

- I. Verses 1-9 talk about the gift of six wagons and twelve oxen made by the tribal leaders of the three clans of the Levites as offering before the Dwelling.
- II. Verses 10-88 narrate the twelve-day procession in which tribal leaders, also called princes, present their offerings for the operation and beautification of the Lord’s Sanctuary. It is interesting to note the repetition of the exact same words twelve times (and a thirteenth time at the end) as the author describes in detail the offerings of each of the twelve princes during the twelve-day procession. The author wants to give equal recognition to all twelve tribes. Scholars say that the *equality* among all the twelve tribes became an issue after the exile, about the time this book was being written.

At the end, Moses enters the meeting tent with the intention of speaking to God. The “voice” is heard, but the message is lost to the reader. The inclusion of the verse is a reminder to the people that God is truly present in this holy place.

Pause: “Whenever Moses went into the meeting tent to speak with God, he heard the voice addressing him from above....” (7:89). Have you ever experienced God speaking to you? If so, in what way?

Chapter Eight: The Lampstand and the Purification of the Levites

One of the most sacred pieces of furniture in the Sanctuary, the “lampstand for the light” (now known as the *Menorah*), is set up (vv 1-4). This lamp with seven lights symbolizes the wholeness and completeness of God’s life-giving presence among his people. In John’s vision (Rev 1:12-20), the church, represented by the seven churches in Asia, is also symbolized by seven such lampstands. (See also Ex 25:31-40.)

Pause: Both children and adults love to light candles in sacred places and other places as well. What is it about lighted candles that speaks to the human spirit?

Purification of the Levites (vv 5-22). While in chapters 3 and 4 we learned about the duties of the Levites, this chapter deals with the dedication of this priestly tribe to God. The dedication involves two steps:

- In the *washing ritual*, the Levites are sprinkled with the “water of remission,” that is, water that effects the forgiveness of sins. They shave all hair from their body so that future hair growth is clean and pure, and they wash all their clothes. All of these external actions are intended to prepare the priests for their presentation to God and his people.
- The Levites are brought before the whole community for the *laying on of hands* (vv 9-10), and then presented to the Lord as a wave offering from the Israelites. The Levites, in turn, lay their hands on the heads of bullocks, which are later sacrificed. In and through the sacrificial offering, in which sin is removed or atoned for, the Levites dedicate themselves totally to God and his service. This ritual foreshadows the words of Paul in Romans 12:1-2:

*“I urge you...by the mercies of God,
to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and pleasing to God,
your spiritual worship.”*

The mandatory retiring age for the Levites was fifty. However, no mention is made on what the retirement package consisted of. Moral of the story: stay away from heavy lifting jobs!

Chapter Nine: The Second Passover

The first Passover was celebrated on the eve of the Israelites’ deliverance from Egypt (Ex 12 to 13). The second Passover was celebrated as the community was about to depart from Sinai.

Verses 6-14 deal with real-life situations that interfere with the observance of the Passover, e.g. ritual uncleanness.

Verses 15-23 speak of the cloud which was a symbol of God’s presence with his pilgrim people. Regarding the cloud of God’s presence, the author makes two points:

- The cloud determines the length of Israel’s stay in a given place (vv 19-22).
- God speaks through the cloud. Important here is learning obedience to God’s Word. *“Thus it was always at the bidding of the Lord that they encamped, and at his bidding that they set out; ever heeding the charge of the Lord, as he had bidden them through Moses”* (v.23).

Chapter 10:1-10: Blowing of the Trumpets

Our attention now turns from the cloud of the Lord’s guiding presence to the silver trumpets used to assemble and move the community (v.2) after the people enter the Promised Land.

Pause: For the Israelites, the cloud was a tangible sign of God’s presence. What are some tangible signs of God’s presence for you in the journey of life? How easy or hard is it for you to move ahead according to God’s beckoning call?