

NUMBERS 1-4 THE TITLE; NUMBERING ISRAEL; ORGANIZATION

We are now beginning the fourth book in the Bible—the book of Numbers. How did it get this name? It is an interesting story.

Originally, the first five books of the Bible didn't have titles and actually are one whole book divided into five scrolls because of their length. A typical scroll, made of papyrus or leather, was made of about thirty sheets, usually written on one side. So the first five books (really scrolls) of the Bible are actually one book on five scrolls, called the Pentateuch (literally, *the five scrolls*).

Since each scroll didn't have a title, the Jews used the first few words of each scroll as the title. Hence, the first book was called, "*Bereshith*" or "In the beginning." The second was called—"And these are the names of"—"*Shemoth*" for short. The third scroll was, "And he called,"—"*Wayyiqra*." The fourth scroll, which we are studying today, was called by the first few words, "*wayedabber*"—"And God spoke to Moses."

How did we get the current titles? It was only about a thousand years later, around 270 B.C. that the Greek king in Egypt, Ptolemy Philadelphus, asked that the Hebrew Bible be translated into Greek. When it was, called *the Septuagint*, the translators created titles in each of the books according to the *subject matter* and not by the first few words of each scroll, and so we have the terms now known to us: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

They arrived at the name of "Numbers" because the children of Israel were "numbered" or were counted in a census, twice in this book, at the beginning and at the end. Unger mentions: "Numbers is a wilderness book covering the time span from the second month of the second year after the exodus from Egypt to the tenth month of the fortieth year. But the years of unbelief and wandering are mostly passed over in silence" (*Bible Handbook*, p. 121).

Timewise, we are around the year 1440 B.C., according to 1 Kings 6:1, that says, "And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel..." Solomon's fourth year of reign is quite well known historically and archaeologically as around the year 960 B.C. There are some important dates in the

Bible that are simple to learn in round numbers, although they are approximations: Moses was born 1520 B.C.; the Exodus took place around 1440 B.C., the children of Israel entered the Promised land around 1400 B.C. David reigned around 1000 B.C. and Solomon around 960 B.C.

Israel has left Egypt for a year and two months (Numbers 1:1). Before departing from Mt. Sinai, God organizes the tribes of Israel so they will travel in an orderly fashion, for "God is not the author of confusion...and let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40). He said to Moses, "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, from twenty years old and above" (Num. 1:2-3). Only the tribe of Levi was left out.

This first census had several purposes—not all apparent at first glance. Besides the physical advantages of knowing how many were in each tribe for the purpose of better organizing the camps and knowing how many males there were to defend them, there is another purpose. It shows this was not a fictional account. Some Bible critics claim this book was written much later, around 500 B.C. by Jewish scribes after they returned to Judah after the Babylonian captivity. They claim these were stories made up by the scribes stemming from their folklore. This mean they would have had to make up all of these family names, along with the children's names.

Genealogies such as the ones in Numbers are a powerful witness that these were not fictional stories. Who would have taken the trouble to have invented a fictional account of a census, along with hundreds of names? It would have been so easy to have disproved it later by showing these families never existed. Yet, the official genealogical records of the Israelites were brought back from Babylon, and were placed in the Temple until they perished in the fire of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. So these genealogical tables of Numbers were the basis to determine who was an Israelite or not, and especially a Levite (Nehemiah 7:61-64). If these were fictional accounts, it would have been very easy to disprove the existence of the these families—but it has never been done. Until today,

though unofficially because the master records were lost, the Jewish people trace their ancestry back to Abraham and through these genealogical tables of Numbers. It is a powerful proof of the authenticity of the biblical record! So, although this might appear to be a boring part of the Bible, let's not belittle their importance as historical evidence.

Besides the "mixed multitude" that came with the Israelites (Ex. 12:38) that were not considered part of Israel until they formally converted to the faith, the tribe of Levi was intentionally left out of the census until later. Why?

God explains, "Only the tribe of Levi you shall not number, nor take a census of them among the children of Israel; but you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the Testimony...they shall attend to it and camp around the tabernacle" (1:49-50). They were separated for a holy purpose, and would serve as God's ministers for Israel.

The census yielded the following results: 603,550 men 20 years or older. Adding the tribe of Levi, the number comes out to 623,823 males, and according to statistical demographics, they would have numbered a total of two and a half million. Most of these names are theophoric, that is, they include within them one of God's names: *El*, *Shaddai*, *Yahweh*, *Ammi*, *Zur* and *Ab*, showing it is a banner of faith in the person and work of God.

Once the numbers are known, now the tribes can be organized according to size. "There is a sense," says *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, "in which the orderliness of these early chapters of Numbers is akin to the orderliness of Genesis 1. As God has created the heavens and the earth and all that fills them with order, beauty, purpose, and wonder, so he constitutes his people with order, beauty, purpose, and wonder."

God instructs them to have flags to identify each tribe, sort of like huge parking lots have numbers and letters to find where a car is parked. God says, "Everyone of the children of Israel shall camp by his own standard, beside the emblems of his father's house; they shall camp some distance from the tabernacle of meeting" (Num. 2:2). Archaeologists have discovered three of the metal standards of Israel.

"Each tribe had its banner" says *Expositors*, "and each triad (group of three) of tribes had its standard. Jewish tradition suggests that the tribal banners corresponded in color to the twelve stones

in the breastpiece of the high priest (Exod 28:15-21). Further, this tradition holds that the standard of the triad led by Judah had the figure of a lion, that of Reuben the figure of a man, that of Ephraim the figure of an ox, and that of Dan the figure of an eagle...Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun were the fourth, fifth, and sixth of the six sons born to Jacob by Leah. It is somewhat surprising to have these three tribes first in the order of march since Reuben is regularly noted as Jacob's firstborn son (1:20). However, because of the perfidy of the older brothers (Reuben, Simeon, and Levi; see Gen 49:3-7), Judah is ascendant and is granted pride of place among his brothers (Gen 49:8). Judah becomes the royal line in which the Messiah is born (Gen 49:10; Ruth 4:18-21; Matt 1:1-16).

"The relatedness of the people round about the central shrine was the essence of their meaning as a people. Without this pattern, apart from this order, the Hebrews would have remained a mob--large, disorganized, unruly, and bound for disaster. With this pattern, and the discipline and devotion it implied, was the opportunity for grand victory. The order of the chapter is a promise of the fulfillment of the working of God in their midst. That Israel in fact did fail God is the sadder story because he had given to them the means for full success.

"The people of Israel were a community that had their essential meaning in relationship to God and to one another. But ever in the community was the continuing stress on the individual to know where he belonged in the larger grouping. Corporate solidarity in ancient Israel was a reality of daily life; but the individual was also very important...The text stresses, not just the relationship each person and each tribe was to have to the central shrine, but that none was to approach the shrine too casually. The dwelling of the tribes was in a circuit about the shrine but at some distance from it...the protective grace of God, demanding a sufficient distance to serve as a protective barrier from untoward approach to the shrine of the Divine Presence and the judgment of God such an approach might provoke. Here we sense anew a recurring theme in the Torah. God's holiness may not be forgotten by his people, but his grace is protective for them. His desire is not to destroy the unwary but to protect such from their own folly--and to demonstrate the wonder of his person in the midst of their camp.

“Moses and Aaron had the most honored location, as we would expect. They guarded the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, and they did so facing the sun. There is a sense in which the opening of the tent best faces the east, for this is the direction of the encampment of the people. Later on Solomon was to build the holy temple in Jerusalem. Its entrance also would face east. The morning sun would shine first on the entrance of the Holy Place, as a symbol of the life-giving light of God that illumines the place of his presence.

“Moses and Aaron were not placed in the posture of arrogance on the east side of the tabernacle; they were placed there for a representational ministry (“on behalf of the Israelites”). Theirs was an exclusive work but beneficent to the community. Service in the tabernacle was an act of mercy, a means for the people to come before God. Yet it was marked by severity--it had to be done in God's way! Worship to God is acceptable only because of his mercy. The sovereignty of God was evident in his limitations on the means to approach him.”

After organizing Israel into an orderly camp (as God expects to have an orderly church), He now focuses in His ministry, made up of the Aaron's family and the rest of the Levites, numbering 22,000 males: “And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons...Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be mine” (Num. 3:11-12). The rest of the tribes had to pay a certain amount as a price to be substituted by the Levites.

Now, while the descendants of Gershon and Merari are given different Levitical responsibilities, the Lord gives the charge of the ark, the table of showbread, the menorah, the altars, the veil, the utensils of the sanctuary, the screen and all the work related to them to the sons of Kohath (3:30-31).

In reading through this section of Scripture, we again see some of the artful creations and beautiful objects associated with the service of the tabernacle: the blue and purple coverings, the badger skins, the golden instruments and the golden menorah must have been magnificent to behold. Yet most of the sons of Kohath, though they were responsible for carrying these things, were not allowed to actually touch them or look upon them (verse 15; 1

Chronicles 13:9). Only one group of Kohathites was allowed to do that—the family of Aaron! Yes, the priests were descendants of Kohath. Perhaps this is even one of the reasons that the Kohathites were given charge of the sacred articles.

The age range of those in this service to be counted in the census was 30 to 50 years of age, a span of 20 years. The taking down, transporting and setting up of the tabernacle was difficult work. It demanded concentration and precision. Part of the reason for starting their official duties at 30 years of age, then, seems to be that the work of this office took not just strength but, more importantly, training and maturity. Interestingly, God later selected this age for certain ministerial careers to commence. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ both began their ministries at around this same age.

One thing we can learn from this section is how detailed God is about organizing and ordering His people. They were to be a light to the rest of the world, and this included their orderly ways. “Nothing in the holy things of God,” says *Expositor's*, “was to be left to chance or to improvisation. None of the sacred persons who ministered in his presence was to be unprepared or untaught. All the preparation suggests a rigorous training schedule before actual work would be done by a given priest. This call for preparation may account for the distinction of twenty-five years of age in 8:24 and thirty years in 4:3. That intervening five-year period may have been a time of intense internship.”

Later, some Gentiles such as Balaam, although he was against Israel, had to admire their orderliness. He said, “How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!” (Num 24:5).