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Numbers

Scripture: Numbers

Code: MSB04

Title

The English title “Numbers” comes from the Greek (LXX) and Latin (Vg.) versions.¹ This designation is based on the numberings that are a major focus of chaps. 1–4 and 26. The most common Hebrew title comes from the fifth word in the Hebrew text of 1:1, “in the wilderness [of].” This name is much more descriptive of the total contents of the book, which recount the history of Israel during almost 39 years of wandering in the wilderness. Another Hebrew title, favored by some early church Fathers, is based on the first word of the Hebrew text of 1:1, “and He spoke.” This designation emphasizes that the book records the Word of God to Israel.

Author and Date

The first 5 books of the Bible, called the Law, of which Numbers is the fourth, are ascribed to Moses throughout Scripture (Josh. 8:31; 2 Kin. 14:6; Neh. 8:1; Mark 12:26; John 7:19). The book of Numbers itself refers to the writing of Moses in 33:2 and 36:13.

Numbers was written in the final year of Moses’ life. The events from 20:1 to the end occur in the 40th year after the Exodus. The account ends with Israel poised on the eastern side of the Jordan River across from Jericho (36:13), which is where the conquest of the land of Canaan began (Josh. 3–6). The book of Numbers must be dated ca. 1405 B.C., since it is foundational to the book of Deuteronomy, and Deuteronomy is dated in the 11th month of the 40th year after the Exodus (Deut. 1:3).

Background and Setting

Most of the events of the book are set “in the wilderness.” The word “wilderness” is used 48 times in Numbers. This term refers to land that contains little vegetation or trees, and because of a sparsity of rainfall, it cannot be cultivated. This land is best used for tending flocks of animals. In 1:1–10:10, Israel encamped in “the wilderness in Sinai.” It was at Sinai that the Lord had entered into the Mosaic Covenant with them (Ex. 19–24). From 10:11–12:16, Israel traveled from Sinai to Kadesh. In 13:1–20:13, the events took place in and around Kadesh, which was located in “the wilderness of Paran” (12:16; 13:3, 26), “the wilderness of Zin” (13:21; 20:1). From 20:14–22:1, Israel traveled from Kadesh to the “plains of Moab.” All the events of 22:2–36:13 occurred while Israel was encamped in the plain to the N of Moab. That plain was a flat and fertile piece of land in the middle of the wasteland (21:20; 23:28; 24:1).

The book of Numbers concentrates on events that take place in the second and fortieth years after the Exodus. All incidents recorded in 1:1–14:45 occur in 1444 B.C., the year after the Exodus. Everything referred to after 20:1 is dated ca. 1406/1405 B.C., the 40th year after the Exodus. The laws and events found in 15:1–19:22 are undated, but probably all should be dated ca. 1443 to 1407

B.C. The lack of material devoted to this 37 year period, in comparison with the other years of the journey from Egypt to Canaan, communicates how wasted these years were because of Israel's rebellion against the Lord and His consequent judgment.

Historical and Theological Themes

Numbers chronicles the experiences of two generations of the nation of Israel. The first generation participated in the Exodus from Egypt. Their story begins in Ex. 2:23 and continues through Leviticus and into the first 14 chapters of Numbers. This generation was numbered for the war of conquest in Canaan (1:1–46). However, when the people arrived at the southern edge of Canaan, they refused to enter the Land (14:1–10). Because of their rebellion against the Lord, all the adults 20 and over (except Caleb and Joshua) were sentenced to die in the wilderness (14:26–38). In chaps. 15–25, the first and second generations overlap; the first died out as the second grew to adulthood. A second numbering of the people commenced the history of this second generation (26:1–56). These Israelites did go to war (26:2) and inherited the land (26:52–56). The story of this second generation, beginning in Numbers 26:1, continues through the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua.

Three theological themes permeate Numbers. First, the Lord Himself communicated to Israel through Moses (1:1; 7:89; 12:6–8), so the words of Moses had divine authority. Israel's response to Moses mirrored her obedience or disobedience to the Lord. Numbers contains three distinct divisions based on Israel's response to the word of the Lord: obedience (chaps. 1–10), disobedience (chaps. 11–25), and renewed obedience (chaps. 26–36). The second theme is that the Lord is the God of judgment. Throughout Numbers, the "anger" of the Lord was aroused in response to Israel's sin (11:1, 10, 33; 12:9; 14:18; 25:3, 4; 32:10, 13, 14). Third, the faithfulness of the Lord to keep His promise to give the seed of Abraham the land of Canaan is emphasized (15:2; 26:52–56; 27:12; 33:50–56; 34:1–29).

Interpretive Challenges

Four major interpretive challenges face the reader of Numbers. First, is the book of Numbers a separate book, or is it a part of a larger literary whole, the Pentateuch? The biblical books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy form the Torah. The remainder of the Scripture always views these 5 books as a unit. The ultimate meaning of Numbers cannot be divorced from its context in the Pentateuch. The first verse of the book speaks of the Lord, Moses, the tabernacle and the Exodus from Egypt. This assumes that the reader is familiar with the 3 books that precede Numbers. Still, every Hebrew manuscript available divides the Pentateuch in exactly the same way as the present text. In them the book of Numbers is a well defined unit, with a structural integrity of its own. The book has its own beginning, middle, and ending, even as it functions within a larger whole. Thus, the book of Numbers is also to be viewed with singular identity.

The second interpretive question asks, "Is there a sense of coherence in the book of Numbers?" It is readily evident that Numbers contains a wide variety of literary materials and forms. Census lists, genealogies, laws, historical narratives, poetry, prophecy, and travel lists are found in this book. Nevertheless, they are all blended to tell the story of Israel's journey from Mt. Sinai to the Plains of Moab. The coherence of Numbers is reflected in the outline that follows.

A third issue deals with the large numbers given for the tribes of Israel in 1:46 and 26:51. These two

lists of Israel's men of war, taken 39 years apart, both put the number over 600,000. These numbers demand a total population for Israel in the wilderness of around 2.5 million at any one time. From a natural perspective, this total seems too high for the wilderness conditions to sustain. However, it must be recognized that the Lord supernaturally took care of Israel for 40 years (Deut. 8:1–5). Therefore, the large numbers must be accepted at face value

The fourth interpretive challenge concerns the heathen prophet Balaam, whose story is recorded in 22:2–24:25. Even though Balaam claimed to know the Lord (22:18), Scripture consistently refers to him as a false prophet (2 Pet. 2:15, 16, Jude 11). The Lord used Balaam as His mouthpiece to speak the true words He put in his mouth

1. LXX Septuagint—an ancient translation of the Old Testament into Greek, Vg. Vulgate—an ancient translation of the Bible into Latin, translated and edited by Jerome

Outline

I. The Experience of the First Generation of Israel in the Wilderness (1:1–25:18)

A. The Obedience of Israel toward the Lord (1:1–10:36)

1. The organization of Israel around the tabernacle of the Lord (1:1–6:27)
2. The orientation of Israel toward the tabernacle of the Lord (7:1–10:36)

B. The Disobedience of Israel toward the Lord (11:1–25:18)

1. The complaining of Israel on the journey (11:1–12:16)
2. The rebellion of Israel and its leaders at Kadesh (13:1–20:29)
 - a. The rebellion of Israel and the consequences (13:1–19:22)
 - b. The rebellion of Moses and Aaron and the consequences (20:1–29)
3. The renewed complaining of Israel on the journey (21:1–22:1)
4. The blessing of Israel by Balaam (22:2–24:25)
5. The final rebellion of Israel with Baal of Peor (25:1–18)

II. The Experience of the Second Generation of Israel in the Plains of Moab: The Renewed Obedience of Israel toward the Lord (26:1–36:13)

A. The Preparations for the Conquest of the Land (26:1–32:42)

B. The Review of the Journey in the Wilderness (33:1–49)

C. The Anticipation of the Conquest of the Land (33:50–36:13)

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