

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

Chapters 1-4

HPC Trinity Class

Jan. 12, 2025



This book is seldom taught in church. Most people today stereotype it as a hodgepodge of boring, meaningless census numbers and names, combined with a random slice here and there of laws and narrative. “This makes Numbers look like the junk room of the priestly code.”¹ Even the famous third-century theologian Origen viewed this book as boring and of no benefit to the salvation of one’s soul. That’s because “most of [Numbers] concerns various rituals and organizational details that are dull to read, hard to understand, and apparently quite irrelevant to the church [today].”² We are far removed from these Bible lands and even further removed from its ancient culture.

So why study it?? Because “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction” (Romans 15:4). The apostle Paul is challenging us to explore this ancient book, to use it as a tool for finding new meaning to our lives today as Christians.

Numbers in a Nutshell:

- ✚ (Chap. 1-10) The Lord provides the Israelites with final instructions for taking the Promised Land. God will be with them, which boosts their confidence.
- ✚ (10:11-25:18) These people and leaders of the Exodus generation grumble and complain. They eventually turn to other gods and sin at will.
- ✚ (Chap. 26-36) This nasty original generation is now dead. God prepares the next generation of Israelites to finally enter the Promised Land and live by his covenant.

¹ Wenham, pg. 14. [The phrase “priestly code” is taken from the J.E.D.P. Source Theory. It is part of Julius Wellhausen’s famous documentary hypothesis which attempts to show how various strands of oral and written history are woven together to produce the Torah. We will not be studying J.E.D.P. theory in this class.]

² Ibid., pg. 26

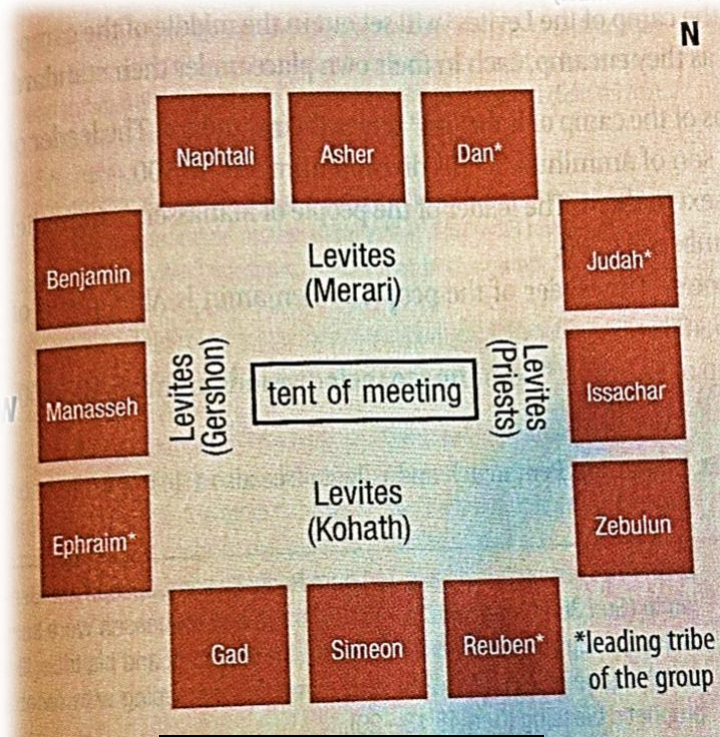
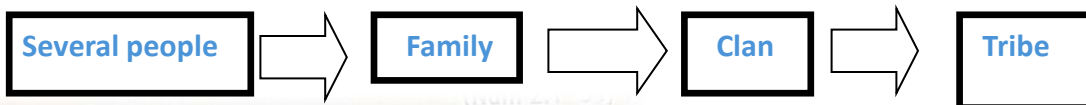
The title “Numbers” in Greek is *Arithmoi*; in Latin (Vulgate) it’s *Numeri*. That’s where we get our English title. “But neither title captures its focus. If length were not an issue, a more appropriate title might be ‘A Tale of Two Generations of Israelites, One Faithless and One Faithful.’”³

When we moderns think of the Book of Numbers, the word “census” also comes to mind. This is the fourth book of Moses, the traditional author of the Pentateuch, and covers a large portion of the forty years that Israel spent in the wilderness. In fact, the Hebrew title for this book means “in the wilderness.” Numbers is a book that binds the people of the Exodus with those who will eventually enter the Promised Land.

In **Chapter 1** we find Moses and his people well into their journey after exiting Egypt.

[READ NU 1:1-2]

They are somewhere in the desert, probably at the foot of Mt. Sinai. God now commands that a census (literally “lift the head”) be taken (vs. 20-46). This appears to be a second census, since the purpose of a first one in Ex. 30:12-16 was to raise money for building the tabernacle. All men (not women, children, nor Levites) of soldiering age who are “able to serve in the army” (v. 3), are to be counted and recorded in the rolls.⁴ We’re told that the leaders of the twelve tribes are to assist Moses in this count.



Why wouldn't ALL of the people be counted at this point?

vs. 47-54--- Moses and his people placed a strong emphasis upon faith in God, and the Levites were the people's link to God. Their job was to care for the tabernacle (a.k.a., “Tent of the Meeting”), which was the large portable tent/sanctuary. These men were also priest-warriors, duty bound to guard the tabernacle and its precious contents. **[READ NU 1:51-53]** The tribe of Levi is not counted in this census though it is one on the “twelve tribes of Israel.”

So why are there still twelve?

³ Zondervan, Introduction to Numbers, pg. 239.

⁴ Engaged or newly married men were exempt from this draft (DT 20:7).

Chap. 2 describes how the camp is to be laid out each time by surrounding the Tent of the Meeting with Levites, and in what order the people are to later break camp and march.⁵ Note how all of the four groups are described as “divisions,” *vis-à-vis* military units (vss. 10,16, 18, and 21).

Today’s universal church could well be likened to this image of God dwelling among his people, leading them onward daily. Christ is also here: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (Jn 1:14)

The **ark of the covenant** held the two stone tablets of the Law: the Ten Commandments (Ex. 25:16).

This golden box was housed in the most sacred spot in the tabernacle, the Holy of Holies. Many years later this concept of a movable worship tent was replaced by King Solomon’s temple.



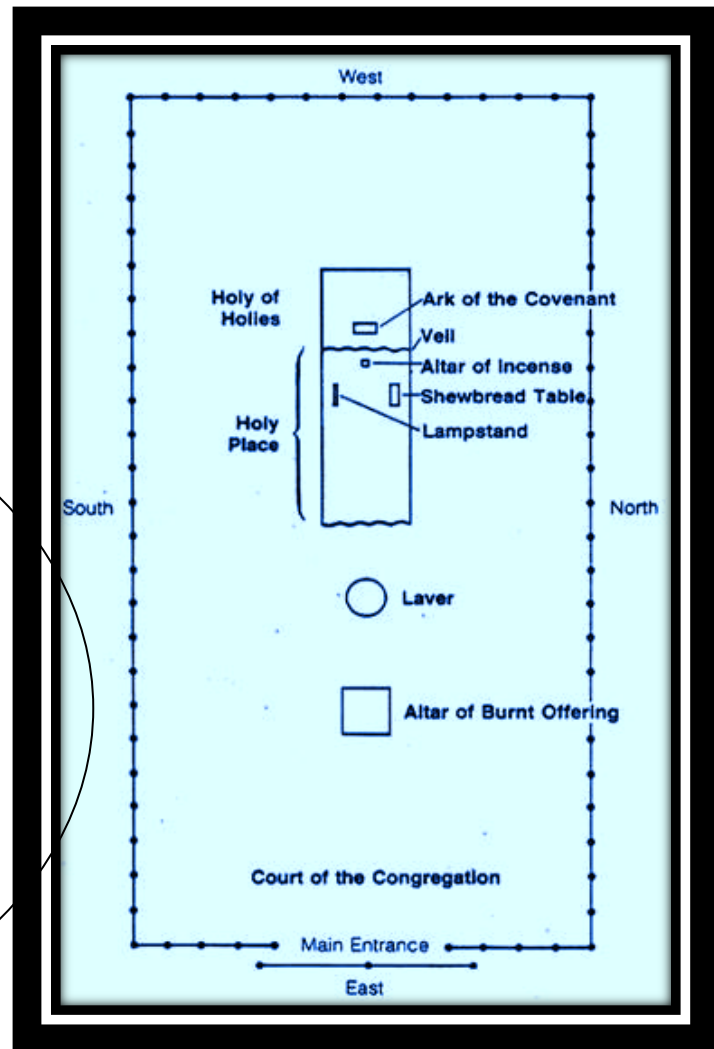
THINGS TO CONSIDER:

How could they transport all of this? Exodus 38:21ff gives us some details about the challenge:

- silver (3.75 tons),
- gold (1 ton),
- hundreds of feet of fine (heavy) curtain fabric, etc., etc.

Theologians cannot agree on a solution but the general consensus is that:

- (1) Moses and his people probably camped for long periods of time. It wasn’t a constant march;⁶
- (2) a later writer or writers had a hand in the final version, which focused more upon God’s greatness than upon the logistics of the journey.



⁵ The Book of Revelation pictures heaven looking similar to this, with God in the center. (Rev. 21:10ff).

⁶ Early on the Israelites arrive at Sinai (EX 19:1) and don’t break camp for another ten months and nineteen days, as told in NU 10:11. They probably spent the greater part of their later wilderness journey at a desert place called Kadesh (NU 13:26; 20:1, 16). [Anderson, pgs. 101-102.]

In NU 1:54 we find that when it came to the tabernacle, “the Israelites did all just as the Lord commanded Moses,” which we later learn “is typical in the beginning of the book and in the end, but not in the middle, from 10:11-25:18. Obedience is a necessary sign of embracing the covenant from the heart.”⁷

How many people are we talking about? This first census totaled 603,550 fighting men (only), which implies a total Israelite population of about **2,400,000** (NU 1:46), all of whom were on the move with Moses at the head.

This is a staggering number! Today, the states of New Mexico and Nebraska each have just a bit less people than this! Some theologians speculate that these large numbers represent the census of Israel’s entire population, not in Moses’ time, but during King David’s reign hundreds of years later.

Existence would have been difficult in the desert, even with heaven-sent quail, manna, and some isolated miraculous springs of fresh water. This was not a land that favored travelers...then or now. In fact, in the modern Sinai region the Bedouin

population has still reached only a few thousand.⁸

Ephraim and Manasse

THE ISRAELITES' LOCATION: WHERE AND HOW LONG

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION	DURATION
Deliverance from Egypt (Exod 3:1 — 15:21)	Several months (?)
Travel to Sinai (Exod 15:22 — 18:27)	2 months, 14 days (Exod 19:1)
Encamped at Sinai (Exod 19:1 — Num 10:10) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • from arrival to erecting the tent of meeting • from erecting the tent of meeting to the beginning of Numbers • from beginning of Numbers to departing Sinai 	10 months and 19 days <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 months (cf. Exod 19:1 with Exod 40:2) • 1 month (cf. Exod 40:2 with Num 1:1) • 19 days (cf. Num 1:1 with Num 10:11)
Travel to Kadesh (Num 10:11 — 12:16)	Several months (cf. at Num 13:20)
Travel to and stay at the plains of Moab (Num 15:1[?]-22:1)	38 years (cf. Deut 2:14)
Total	40 years (Num 32:13)

WHAT ARE WE TO BELIEVE ?

Remember, don't get hung up on the numbers. Whether it's 2 million or only a fraction of that, the point is that God was with them.

However, here are some choices.⁹ First, let's assume that the census figures are **correct**. If so:

a.-- We must believe that this land was more fertile in ancient times, and that God managed to supply the needs of the many by supplying food and water.

b.-- By comparison, most Canaanite kings had armies of only a few hundred troops. Even at the famous battle of Qadesh where two world superpowers collided-- Egypt and the Hittite empire---

⁷ Zondervan, pg. 249 fn for 1:54. “Location” chart source: Zondervan, pg. 246.

⁸ Wenham, pg. 61.

⁹ Wenham, pgs. 60-66.

only about 20,000 soldiers fought on each side. In Moses' case, he could draft up to 600,000 fighting men, though realistically not all would be expected to fight.

A second assumption is that the incredibly large figures were due to an error in reading a key Hebrew word: *'elep*, which can mean either "family" or "thousand." For instance, the tribe of Ruben is shown as 46,500, though it may have meant 46 families consisting of 500 men. Meanings and language change over time, which could have led a later scribe to misunderstand *'elep* as meaning 1,000.

Chapters 3 & 4 are more census numbers, with both chapters focusing on the Levites. This was to determine how many of the Levite were 30 to 50 years old: i.e., those fit for assembling, dismantling, and carrying the tabernacle. The total: 8,580 (NU 4:48).

What about the 20-29 year old Levites? Why not use them, too ?

God directs Moses to tell Aaron that these Levites are here to assist him with the many duties and responsibilities. Primarily, the Levites were to guard the Tent of the Meeting (and Ark) and to set up, dismantle, and transport the tent when required.

Yes, it's Old Testament

Yes, it's ancient history

and *Yes,* those wild population numbers make us wonder----

BUT

Here is the takeaway from these first four chapters.

1. Every one of God's (Christ's) followers has a part to play in this life.

Thousands of years ago the Israelites quickly realized that ritual and organization were paramount if they were to exist as a culture. Without both of these, that wandering mass of refugees had no hope of surviving, much less conquering. Each Israelite was required to cooperate and work as one unit. Otherwise, all would be lost.

In our modern age, where self-reliance seems to be the pinnacle of well-being, we must remember that we are all just a heartbeat, a breath, away from totally relying on God. God and his son Jesus Christ still work in our lives daily, like it or not.

The Israelites wandered through no-man's land for 40 years. How many times did they believe that this Yahweh god was still with them? It must have been often because the people were constantly tempted to give up on God, even though He had not given up on them. We have an advantage over these wandering Israelites: we have the assurance that Jesus and the Holy Spirit rest with us...if we let them.

2. Our society, like that of Moses' travelers, is built on a hierarchy.

At the head of his pyramid of influence was God...not a person or a philosophy. The Israelites in Egypt were miserable for hundreds of years. They pictured a better life if only they could escape pharaoh...or so they thought.

- **How many times have you said, “I’m not happy with my life!”?**
 - like the Hebrews who felt stuck in Egypt as slaves
- **We all make bad decisions that affect the rest of our lives.**
 - The people escaped one misery but replaced it with a life-long toil in the desert
- **“God wouldn’t want a sinner like me!”**
 - How many of these wilderness hikers were NOT sinners? As they—and we—often find out, God has consequences for disobedience and disbelief. But “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

AMEN

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