

SESSION SIXTEEN

PREPARATION FOR THE JOURNEY

Numbers 1:1–10:10

I. INTRODUCTION

The book of Numbers reflects the transitional experiences of the nation as they moved out from Sinai and sought to enter the land of promise. Of course, the generation that came out of Egypt refused to believe God for the taking of the land. The result of their disobedience was forty years spent in the wilderness, time enough to allow that generation to die off.

II. THE YEAR AT SINAI

As far as the historical setting goes, the book opens with Israel still encamped at the base of Mount Sinai. Following the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites spent over eleven months at Sinai. Ex 19:1 states that they reached Sinai in the 3rd month following the exodus, and Num 10:11-12 reveals that they departed from Sinai on the 20th day of the 2nd month of the 2nd year.

Several things took place during this intervening period:

- (1) They received the Law (the constitution for the nation) including the instructions for the tabernacle and priesthood.
- (2) They were instructed in the way to approach YHWH through sacrifice and the mediatorial priesthood, as well as the way to live with YHWH in their midst (Lev).
- (3) They were organized for the transporting of the camp and the care of the tabernacle by the Levites (Num 1–10).

As the story continues, we need to keep in mind that these chapters represent the outworking of the promises and covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12 & 15). God had promised to make of them a nation and give them the land. This intervening period (Ex 19–Num 10) reflects God's faithfulness in doing just that. He is carrying out and ensuring the divine program. Everything has been prepared for this generation to receive the land.

The year spent at Sinai was a remarkable year of privilege, as Israel received such extensive and specific revelation from God. Already they had learned so much about the power, glory, attributes and holiness of YHWH. They were privileged far beyond any nation of the world. As God had promised, they were His "peculiar treasure" (Ex 19:5)! But this is what makes the failures in Numbers—the murmuring, unbelief and even rebellion—stand out all the more vividly. Numbers must be seen against the background of the Abrahamic covenant and the immense privilege with which the nation of Israel had been entrusted.

III. THE NATURE OF THE BOOK

Although the English title is Numbers, the Hebrew name for the book is *b^amidbar*, meaning "in the wilderness." This is a more appropriate title, for the wilderness is the critical concern of the book—a wilderness in which takes place a long discipline. This involves the purging out of those rebelling against God. Kerr, writing in the *Biblical Expositor*, has stated:

Reaching maturity is often a painful process, whether in the case of a young child or of a young nation. New freedoms bring new responsibilities. The Book of Numbers is the story of how the Israelites, who had chafed under the imperious rule of Pharaoh, transferred their resentment of authority to Moses and ultimately to God himself. The new limits of the divine law were sometimes as irksome as the arbitrary impositions of slavery. The responsibilities of a free people were sometimes more than Israel could fulfill. Yet in it all God was at work, molding a people for His own possession.¹

IV. STRUCTURE

Various suggestions have been made to identify the structure of the book, some reflecting a chronological approach, others a geographical one, etc. For the purpose of this study, I will divide the book into three sections based on the preparation of each generation that is to enter the land.

Preparation of the Nation for the Journey	Disobedience and Unbelief of the Exodus Generation	Preparation of the New Generation to Enter the Land
1:1 10:10	10:11 25:18	26:1 36:13

V. THE THEOLOGY OF NUMBERS

The whole episode revolves around YHWH's faithfulness in contrast to Israel's waywardness and rebellion. YHWH had decreed His will very plainly in Ex 6:8: "*And I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession; I am the LORD.*" There would be no change of His will or failure on His part to do what He had decreed. This is what would come to pass. However, in the outworking of His decretive will, YHWH made room for Israel's disobedience to His will. The nation is allowed to fail, disobey, and even rebel, but God acts so that His decreed will is not undermined or threatened. Theologically, we are allowed to see how God acts in the accomplishment of His will in spite of the sin of man to the contrary. God uses the wilderness as a judgment on the first generation, while at the same time using the wilderness to prepare a generation who will accomplish His will. The unswerving commitment of YHWH to the nation is most graphically illustrated in the Balaam oracles (Num 22–24). From a perspective inside the camp of the enemy, the Balaam oracles reveal that

¹ D. W. Kerr, *Numbers*, The Biblical Expositor (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1960).

God's blessing cannot be frustrated in spite of Israel's failures! This was an affirmation of YHWH's intent to bless Israel and a reaffirmation of the Abrahamic Covenant.

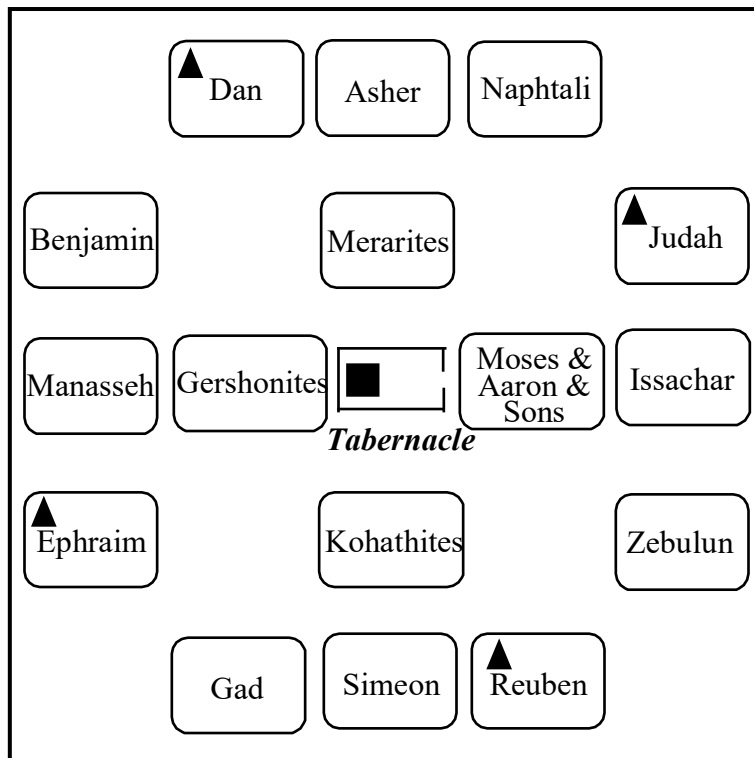
The purpose statement for the book of Numbers could be stated in this way:

to trace YHWH's patient preparation of a people to enter the land contrasted to Israel's repeated waywardness and rebellion in sin.²

This purpose statement is reflected in the three major parts of this book:

- (1) to prepare the camp to function as a nation for the journey (1:1–10:10)
- (2) to purge the nation of sinful rebellion while assuring them of YHWH's continued faithfulness (10:11–25:18)
- (3) to prepare the new generation to enter the land (26:1–36:13)

VI. ARRANGEMENT OF THE TRIBES



²Elliott E. Johnson, "Numbers" (unpublished class notes in Bible 302, Dallas Seminary, Spring 1976), 15.

VII. THE LEVITES AND NAZARITES

When the Israelites are organized for the journey, they are grouped according to twelve tribes. Notice, however, that the Levites are not one of the twelve. Rather, Joseph has received a “double portion” (cf. Gen 48:5,20,22), because Ephraim and Manasseh (the two sons of Joseph) are each listed. From these twelve tribes, men who were twenty and older were counted for the army (1:20). The Levites, however, were set apart to serve in the Tent of Meeting (i.e., for those thirty to fifty years of age, 4:3). Chapter 3 spells out the role of the Levites, while chapter 8 describes the ceremony of setting them apart. Although men from other tribes were prohibited from participating in the ministry of the Levites, they did have the option of taking a Nazarite vow and dedicating themselves to the LORD (ch 6).

The vow of the Nazarite was entirely voluntary, i.e., something the Law did not command but made provision for. The Israelite who undertook the vow was signaling that he was finding his strength and dependence in God. This was an evidence of devotion, dependence, or dedication to God . . . recognizing that God has a right to be served.

VIII. A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

The account of the guiding cloud and pillar fire is noteworthy. Num 9:23 says, "*At the command of the LORD they camped, and at the command of the LORD they set out . . .*" This was their principle: moving out when God gave the signal to move out and settling in when God gave the signal to halt. Either way, they depended on the LORD to direct their steps. Today, we do not have a visible cloud or pillar of fire to guide us as the Israelites did. But we do have the indwelling Spirit, and we should recognize His right to direct our lives. We are to be an obedient people—ready to move out when the Lord prompts us to move out!