



The Bible Challenge

A daily guide to reading the Bible in a year

Numbers

*In the Wilderness
(Chapters 1-10)*

“And he brought Abram outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them—so shall your offspring be.”

—Genesis 15:5

In the Wilderness

Structure

Part I: The Death of the Old Generation

- I. Obedient Beginnings: Preparation for the March of the Holy People of God in the Wilderness (1-10)
- II. An Abrupt Slide into Rebellion: The Death of the First Wilderness Generation Begins (11-20)
- III. Hitting Bottom: The End of the First Generation –Signs of Hope in the Midst of Death (21-25)

Part II: The Rise of a New Generation on the Edge of the Promised Land (26-36)

Obedient Beginnings: Preparations for the March of the Holy People of God in the Wilderness

Census of the Twelve Tribes: Grains of Sand, Stars of Heaven, Promises of God

When Israel entered Egypt under Joseph they numbered 70, now the promises of God to the Patriarchs have been fulfilled. The number of Israelites adds up to over 600,000 fighting men (which would correspond to over 2 Million souls when you add women, children and the elderly). It remained for the Israelites to take possession of the Land of Promise.

Two Lists: A Great Multitude

Moses is commanded by YHWH to take two census, they are found in Numbers 1 and 26.



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	<u>Numbers 1</u>	<u>Numbers 26</u>
Reuben	46,500	43,730
Simeon	59,300	22,200
Gad	45,650	40,500
Judah	74,600	76,500
Issachar	54,400	64,300
Zebulun	57,400	60,500
Ephraim	40,500	32,500
Manasseh	32,200	52,700
Benjamin	35,400	45,600
Dan	62,700	64,400
Asher	41,500	53,400
<u>Naphtali</u>	<u>53,400</u>	<u>45,400</u>
Totals	603,550	601,730

The number of fighting men at roughly 600,000 is the same as that given in Exodus 12:37: “The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children.”

The large number is either amazing or impossible. There have been several explanations given by scholars who have reflected on this:

1. It is a theologically symbolic quantity for a “great multitude” (12 X 50,000). There are six tribes listed above 50,000 and six below 50,000.
2. The number is accurate. There have been probability studies related to population growth rates that would correspond to the number based on quality living conditions in Egypt and the fact that Hebrew women were “vigorous” (Exodus 1:20) in their reproduction.
3. The number is a scribal mistranslation. The case has been made that the Hebrew word for “thousands” (‘elep) is semantically similar to the Hebrew word for “tribal chieftain” (‘allup). So the result would be for example, Rueben would have 46 tribal-chieftains and 500 men.
4. The numbers have simply been deliberately and hyperbolically exaggerated by a factor of 10. Again, with Rueben: 46,500 would have been 4,650.



Thus did the people of Israel; they did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses. –Numbers 1:54

“Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”

–Exodus 13:2

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Obedience

As the Israelites were organizing for the first march through the wilderness, they showed faithfulness and obedience to the command of YHWH through Moses. (1:54, 2:34, 8:20, 9:5) Examples include the faithful census, the organization of the Levites for Tabernacle service and transport (1:47-53); the arrangement of the Israelite camps, the redemption of the firstborn, and the keeping of the Passover.

The Israelites demonstrated faithfulness and orderliness. The camp of the Israelites was ordered around the Tabernacle. Later in the Numbers, Balaam’s third oracle will reflect on the Eden-like beauty of the Israelite camp:

*How lovely are your tents, O Jacob,
your encampments, O Israel!
Like palm groves that stretch afar,
like gardens beside a river,
like aloes that the Lord has planted,
like cedar trees beside the waters.*

–Numbers 24:5-6

The Redemption of the Firstborn

In Exodus, the YHWH redeemed Israel from Egypt and declared that the firstborn of every Israelite tribe belonged to him. In Numbers, we see that the Levites serve as an acceptable substitute for the fulfillment of this commitment. “Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle. The Levites shall be mine: I am the LORD.”

However, in Numbers 3, we read that the number of Levites was close but not enough, 22,000 Levites vs. 22,273 first born males. The difference of 273 was paid by the redemption price of 5 shekels of silver paid to the sanctuary (according to the valuations of a person for a vow, see Leviticus 27:6).



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The Sons of Kohath, Gershon and Merari

Within the Levite tribe, the Lord set apart subsets with the particular task of “carrying” the Holy Things, the curtains of Tabernacle, and the frames and structure of the Tabernacle when the tribes were on the move. Only the sons of Aaron could handle the Holy Things, but once prepared for transport, the entire tabernacle complex could be moved. Yet even in its movement the tabernacle manifest the Holiness of God:

Number 4:¹⁸ “Let not the tribe of the clans of the Kohathites be destroyed from among the Levites,¹⁹ but deal thus with them, that they may live and not die when they come near to the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint them each to his task and to his burden,²⁰ but they shall not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment, lest they die.”

The Levites stand organized and ready to serve and care for the tabernacle and its movement through the wilderness.

Clean and Unclean, Adultery and Nazirite Vows

The emphasis in chapter 5 is on the institution of the laws related to governance of the non-Levites. Israelites complied with the clean and unclean by setting the unclean “outside the camp”. “And the people of Israel did so.” (5:4) Notice again the emphasis on the Israelites obedience to the Laws—a good start as they embark from Sinai.

The test for adultery has echos of the golden calf episode where Israel had to drink the dust of crushed up idol. The woman suspected of adultery by her husband is told to drink the water of bitterness made from the dust of the floor of the tabernacle. While this law may seem one sided toward the man, recognize that it provides for a way for the Israelites to be free from the destructive forces of the Spirit of Jealousy within their midst. The woman is “clean” and “free” so long as she remains faithful to her husband—even if he suspects otherwise!



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The Nazirite Vow

A Nazirite was a man or woman who made a special dedication of themselves to the Lord. They took on three commitments: Drink no alcohol, cut not hair, touch no dead bodies.

Several figures in the Bible were dedicated in this way: Joseph (Gen. 49:26), Samson (Judges 13:5), Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11). Samson will break all three commitments in Judges 14:8-9 (lion carcass), 14:10 (drinking feast), 16:15-22 (Delilah).

Any vow made by an Israelite is a matter of utmost seriousness. The keeper of such a vow can be used by God in powerful ways. The violation of such a vow can have disastrous consequences for not only the individual but the entire community.

The Aaronic Blessing

Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and
be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and
give you peace.*

²⁷ "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." (6:23-27)

The posture of the LORD toward Israel was one of blessing. The LORD promised his continuing presence manifesting grace and peace to the Israelites. Sadly, this blessing could be taken for granted.



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The Blessing to the Lord

In chapter seven, we see the Israelites manifesting faithfulness in making the appropriate first round of obedience in offerings to the Lord. Each tribe gave the appointed sacrifices as required by the law recorded in Leviticus. Again, the Israelite are making a good and faithful start. And all was right in the relationship the channels of communication between Moses and the Lord were open. (Numbers 7:89)

They keep a faithful Passover in Chapter 9. Israel is ready to embark into the Wilderness. They are organized, instructed and obedient for the journey to the Promised Land.

“And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped.”

—Numbers 9:17

The Cloud and Fire

The journey would be led by the Lord. The Israelites would know when to make camp and when to travel based on the cloud and fire over the Ark of the Covenant.

And so the Israelites set out:

³³ So they set out from the mount of the LORD three days' journey. And the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them. ³⁴ And the cloud of the LORD was over them by day, whenever they set out from the camp.

³⁵ And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, “Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.” ³⁶ And when it rested, he said, “Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel.” (10:33-36)
