



The Bible Challenge

A daily guide to reading the Bible in a year

Numbers

The Rise of a New Generation of Hope

(Chapters 26-36)

Structure²¹

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)

After the Plague

Chapter 25 of the book of numbers marks the death of the last members of the generation that left Egypt with a few notable exceptions. Moses being one of them, he will continue to shepherd the Israelites as a teacher of wisdom and mediator of YHWH right to the threshold of the promise land but no further. The other two exceptions were Joshua and Caleb, the two men who spied the land but did not rebel. These would become the new leaders of Israel as they crossed the threshold of the Promised Land. Aaron has been replaced by his son, Eleazar (cf. Numbers 20:25-29).

A New Census

The organization of the census is by the tribes and clans of the Israelites listed in Genesis 46.

Genesis 46	Numbers 26
Gad: Sons of Gad	Gad: Sons of Gad
Ziphion	Zephon—Zephonites
Haggi	Haggi—Haggites
Shuni	Shuni—Shunites
Ezbon	Ozni—Oznites
Eri	Eri—Erites
Arodi	Arod—Arodites
Areli	Areli—Arelites

²¹ Olson, Dennis T., Numbers (John Knox Press: Knoxville, TN 1996)



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And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?"

—Numbers 14:2-3

The tribes have been shaped by the consequences of the wilderness rebellions. In Reuben for example, the census takes note of the death of Dathan and Abiram because of their participation in rebellion of Korah (Numbers 16). However, the Lord preserved the sons of Korah (26:11). Several generations into the tribe of Manasseh, the clan of Zelophehad had only daughters and no sons. This will become an issue needing resolution.

The number of the Israelite men "able to go to war" (26:2) was 601,730. (cf. Num. 1:46, 603,550). The Lord has essentially replaced the generation who left Egypt with their children—this in spite of their fears for their "little ones".

The first generation did bear the consequences of their rebellion against the Lord the census concludes with:

But among these there was not one of those listed by Moses and Aaron the priest, who had listed the people of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. ⁶⁵ For the LORD had said of them, "They shall die in the wilderness." Not one of them was left, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. —Numbers 26:64-65

The second census is both a sign of complete judgment on the first generation and a sign of hope for a new generation that did not rebel.

God has preserved his people and now they are ready to succeed where their parents had failed. The land would be divided proportionally based on the size of the tribes set in this census. (26:52-56)

Succession: The Daughters of Zelophehad and Joshua (27)

The next challenge for the Israelites is succession. There are two issues: one is inheritance of the land, the other is leadership.



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When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

--Matthew 9:36-38

Land

For the most part, land passes with in the tribe in a straightforward manner. But what about exceptional cases such as when there are no sons. The question of the daughters of Zelophehad, becomes an opportunity for Moses to seek the Lord for laws and precedent to govern the transfer of land inheritances. This will be revisited again in Numbers 36, as further clarification is needed when the daughters are ready to marry.

Leadership

The second major challenge for succession is leadership transition. Knowing that his death was imminent, Moses would not have his people be as “sheep that have no shepherd”. So he inquired of the Lord related to this issue of Leadership transition:

¹⁸ So the LORD said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him. ¹⁹ Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. ²⁰ You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey. –Numbers 27:18-20

Jesus would raise the same concern to his disciples related to the crowds who were harassed and helpless. They would need to seek the Lord’s provision for appropriate leadership succession.

Time and Holiness (28-30)

Numbers 2-4 concerned maintaining order in “space” as the camp was organized to with YHWH’s holy presence in their midst. Numbers 28-29 is focused on the ordering of the Israelites “time” as a people dedicated to the God of creation. Their schedule of worship sacrifices and festivals would provided temporal order as God’s new creation. The days, weeks, months, seasons and years are all set apart and ordered. God is a God of order and not chaos—so too shall his holy people be.



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Vows

As the Israelites approached the battle it was common practice to take vows to the Lord for deliverance and victory.

And Israel vowed a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction. Numbers 21:2

The central concern is in the sacredness of a vow and not taking a vow thoughtlessly. God is holy and his word is sacred—so to shall the Israelites word be their bond.

Holy War: The Midianites (31)

The last sad episode of the first generation was an idolatrous fling with the women of Midian and the worship of Baal. While the Israelites were judged by plague for this rebellion, what of the Midianites? As one of Moses final moments of decisive leadership (31:2), Moses commands Israel to “execute the LORD’s vengeance on Midian.”(30:3)

The Israelites falter in their conquest by preserving the lives of the Midianite women and boys. But, Moses commanded total eradication of the Midianites because of their idolatry to Baal and the seduction to idolatry by the Midianite women.

A Crisis Averted: Reuben and Gad’s request (32)

The tribes of Reuben and Gad create a certain tension with Moses as they make a request to settle outside the promise land. Moses severely warns them that they are going against the LORD’s will for the tribes and conquest of the Promised Land and would bear the consequences for rebellion. For a dramatic narrative moment, the reader wonders whether the second generation will again go the way of rebellion.

But a crisis is averted when the men of Reuben and Gad commit to “take up arms” and go before the people of Israel” until Israel has



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“gained its inheritance”. Moses corrected them, its “go before the LORD in arms”, but their request and offer prevailed and they were granted the land.

A Journey Remembered (33)

The documentation of the entire wilderness journey and wandering is commissioned. It would set forth a history for future generations to be able to always remember their potential for failings and the consequences. Memory fades, but the blessings and hope of God’s promises will endure for those who remember the LORD and walk in his ways.

The Boundaries of the Land

