

NUMBERS – The Long Pilgrimage to the Promised Land

There were enormous numbers of Israelites in the nation of ex-slaves that Moses was leading to the land of their ancestors. They had to be organized. The first six chapters describe the military precision with which this was accomplished. One of Moses' earliest assignments, even before they left the shadow of Mount Sinai, was to hold a census. The adult males amongst the twelve tribes or family groups, each descended from one of the twelve sons of Jacob, added up to more than 603,000, excluding the tribe of Levi. The Levites, official priests for the nation, added another 22,000.

To preserve discipline and safety, the tribal groups were allocated specific zones in the giant encampment. The layout was in the form of a square, with the shiny new Tabernacle in the centre, guarded by the Levites. Each tribe had its own flag or standard, with an emblem (probably a Lion, a Calf, a Man and an Eagle), to which even a lost child could easily gravitate to find the way home. Latrines were outside the camp for hygiene, and in chapter five lepers and those with potentially contagious disease were commanded to be kept away from the assembly. Even the order of march was prescribed, each tribe having an allotted place in the mighty column as it wound its way through the wilderness.

The 12 tribal leaders each donated a new cart for carrying the heavy Tabernacle curtains and equipment (the ark and the internal furniture were still borne on shoulder bars), a handsome gift that Moses accepted on behalf of the Lord. The following chapters describe the dedication of the Levites to their new role, and the signalling system, using trumpets, that controlled public assemblies and movements when the Angel of the Lord in the pillar of cloud moved on in front of the camp.

Chapter 11 begins a long list of rebellions against God, their patient shepherd. First the Israelites complained that the manna, their staple diet, was boring. Then Miriam, Moses' sister, egged on Aaron their elder brother to find fault with Moses, and was punished by a week outside the camp. Coming at last to the border of the Promised Land, the people persuaded Moses to send off 12 spies to reconnoitre the country. These men confirmed it was indeed a desirable place to live, but insisted the local inhabitants were too strong to conquer. Two of them, Joshua, Moses' understudy, and Caleb from the tribe of Judah, dissented from the majority, but could not persuade the people to put their trust in the God who had resoundingly delivered them from the Egyptians. They were overruled, and panic spread through the camp.

God was so angry at the Israelites' lack of faith. He decreed that only Joshua and Caleb would enter the land. The rest of the Israelites would die in the wilderness, and their children would take their place. The long march resumed.

The authority of Moses was soon assailed again, this time by a coalition of 250 tribal leaders headed by Korah, Dathan and Abiram. It was ended by a fiery judgment from the Lord (chapter 16). The next challenge came when the water supply dried up, and Moses once again found an angry deputation at his tent door. This time the Lord instructed him to call water forth with his voice from the rock that had dried up, but in his fury with the people he instead thrashed it with his rod. This earned him a rebuke that cost him his right to enter the land. He was to die in the wilderness, like the people he had served so well. Such is the responsibility of leadership.

The next complaint arose over the length of time the journey was taking. This time a plague of poisonous snakes was sent to attack the people. Significantly, God offered them healing. If they had faith to crawl out of the door of their tents and look up at a bronze serpent Moses fastened to a pole, they would recover. Those who were sceptical stayed indoors, and died. Later, in John chapter 3, Jesus would liken himself to that serpent nailed to the stake. The serpent in the Bible represents Sin, human rebellion against God. By nailing sin to the cross, Jesus brought salvation to all who will join themselves to him.

At last, after years of wandering, the people crossed to the east of the River Jordan. With Moses in charge, they subjugated the inhabitants in that region. The Moabites, Israel's distant relatives on the east side of the Dead Sea, were ordered to be left unmolested. However the Moabite king, in a panic, hired Balaam, a soothsayer, to curse Israel for him. Unfortunately for Balaam, God turned his curses into a blessing. Wily Balaam, still determined to win a big reward from his employer, got him to tempt the Israelites to their downfall. He suggested sending glamorous Moabite girls to seduce Israel's young men. This stratagem worked, and many of the people were punished by death when they were found worshipping the gods of Moab. This led to a second numbering of the people, which found only Joshua and Caleb left alive from the original group that had left Egypt 40 years before.

The last chapters of Numbers include the appointment of Joshua as Moses' successor, and a listing of the three important annual Feasts of the Law, Passover, First Fruits and Tabernacles. On these three occasions, every male Jew had to travel to from his home to the Tabernacle with his family.

The two and a half tribes who were professional cattle ranchers asked to be

given their inheritance on the grassy plains of Gilead east of the River Jordan. This could have led to resentment among the other tribes. Moses settled on a compromise. He insisted they must first help their brethren settle into their inheritances. Only then could they return to the east.

Moses then drew up an official description of the land, naming the Canaanite cities and defining the boundaries, and appointing cities for the Levites, who were to be scattered among the other tribes in order to teach and enforce the Law.

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