

## NUMBERS

Scholars have had difficulty identifying a unifying theme in Numbers. The Overarching theme is relationship with the Land. The material can be organized 3 ways: (1) A Chronological Cycle – the order the events unfold, (2) Geographical Cycle – there are numerous geographical references. Elsewhere they are secondary; they seem primary here. Many issues in the book are land related. It covers people and their relationship to land. (3) Generational Cycle - the double cycle of Numbers answers the question – who will inherit the land? When we read of the death of a generation leading to a new generation in the Pentateuch, the authors use the *toledot* formula. This is the 12<sup>th</sup> use of this formula in the Pentateuch (3:1). The fact that people are counted shows they are important. The 2 census lists supply the double cycle framework:

*Framework:* the Census Lists (Numbers 1-4, 26).

*The Portent:* (an omen of something momentous): adultery or inheritance? A Male-Female Issue (Numbers 5-25//27-36)

*Preparation:* vows, offerings, and Pesach (Numbers 6-10//28-30)

*Conflict:* Midian and judgment (Numbers 11-12//31)

*Crisis:* 10 against 2 (Numbers 13-14//32)

*Aftermath:* Death and Life (Numbers 15-24//33-35)

The material develops according to a bi-generational paradigm.

The two censuses recorded provide the framework for the double cycle. The Sinai Generation (Numbers 1-4) is the first. Moses was commanded: “Take a census.” This took place at the Tent of Meeting in the Desert of Sinai. It occurred on the first day of the second month in the second year “After the Israelites came out of Egypt.” This date notation provides a positive beginning, but things ended poorly for this generation. The marching orders provide the placement of tribes and order. Levites served as bodyguards and porters of sacred objects. This serves as a reminder of the seriousness of traveling with God.

The Moab Generation (Numbers 26) is the second census. Moses was commanded: “Take a census.” This second census took place on the plains of Moab. It occurred “after the plague.” This setting provides a negative framing. The second generation experiences a rough start but had a positive finish. The second generation did better.

The author of Hebrews is interested in the wilderness experience. We do have to worry about the way we practice our relationship with God. We need material like this. The Sinai generation with the Exodus on its heels and the Moab generation with plague serve as a reminder. God has provided everything, but I’m responsible to participate. Do not underestimate how serious this is.

*The Portent: Adultery or Inheritance? A Male-female Issue (Numbers 5/25 and 27/36)*

### **Sinai Generation (Numbers 5 and 25)**

Male-female difficulty (an inclusio) serves as portent (omen of something ominous). The material in this section focuses on male-female issues/difficulties. We may wonder why a whole chapter deals with male and female discharges. Why is this material not in Leviticus? The chapter discusses male-female stuff and then at the end we find this long ritual about an adulterous wife. When a husband suspects his wife of adultery, he brings her to the priest. The priest prepares a potion for her to drink. This is a trial by ordeal. The husband’s fears are either vindicated or the wife is vindicated. This is a “case” of jealousy (forma case). Issue—when jealousy arises in a relationship it can break down the relationship. The ritual is all about resolving bad feelings. Finding out is better than festering. The priest is supposed to deflect the

issue of jealousy. The issue is jealousy and sexual misconduct (or the lack thereof). This is a priestly issue. The priest has to intervene, resolve, punish, etc.

Jumping ahead to end of the first cycle, Numbers (25) we find another male-female conflict, with men taking wives and this leading to idolatry. This is a case of “jealousy” (same words used). The literary pattern draws these two things together. Men were being drawn into landed Moabite culture. This is an attempt to find access to the divine structures of land. The sexual promiscuity had to do with fertility rituals and adopting the gods of the Moabites. It is a case of God’s jealousy. Then an Israelite brings a Midianite woman into his tent. God was going to wipe them out, but Phinehas intervenes. Sexual promiscuity and jealousy are the issue in both cases (chapter 5 and 25). A priest intercedes in both cases. We find different but similar issues. A little bitty issue became a national issue. Breakdowns in the community lead to national crisis. Male-female relationship are always meant to dramatize our relationship with God. The issue for us is how will we work this out in the church?

### **Moab Generation (Numbers 27 and 36)**

Chapter 27 begins with a male-female issue. The daughters of Zelophehad come to Moses to because their father has died without having any sons. That means there is no one to carry on his name or receive his allotment in the land. They ask Moses to give them their father’s inheritance. Moses consults God who responds, “They are right” establishing the girl’s right to receive the inheritance. This is a male-female issue; men against daughters. They submit to the authority of Moses, who establishes the daughters’ inheritance. Authority is a big issue for us today. Jump to end of the cycle and another male-female issue occurs. This forms an inclusio. We return to Zelophehad’s daughters at the end of the cycle. Men of Israel coming back to Moses—what if the daughters marry outside the tribe? Same words, “they are right,” used again to say they must marry within their tribes. The comparison to the Sinai generation is also a marriage issue. But it is about marrying outside or inside the tribe. Resolved with #2 but not #1. Generation 1 and 2 have an inclusio that have certain things in common that give perspective on how things work. We see Moses’ authority versus the priests’ authority when dealing with breakdowns within the redeemed community. The people are gearing up for battle with outsiders; but the real enemy is on the *inside*. How they relate to each other and God is the major issue.

*Preparation: Vows, Offerings, and Pesach (Numbers 6-10, 28-30)*

### **Sinai Generation (Numbers 6-9)**

Can we get moving? It seems like the people are never going to set off for the Promised Land. We have more laws/rituals/statutes. We find various vows and offerings and a reference to Passover. The idea is that before they set out, they are to celebrate Passover. Notice the vows dealt with: the Nazirite vow pertains to someone who is separate by not cutting their hair. They are exempted from celebration (they are not to drink wine. They are to possess a priestly character i.e. they were not to touch the dead. These people were a benefit to Israel because they were billboards for Israel. They were a reminder that God has done everything for us; He has saved and set us apart, so just let your hair grow. Passover, Nazirite vow, and dedication of sanctuary offerings all remind us that God is with us. These focus on benefits.

### **Moab Generation (Numbers 28-30)**

Chapters 28-30 contain details about daily offerings, husband-wife vows, and Passover. This is too much of a coincidence, not to be part of a deliberate literary pattern. Passover—we find the formulation of regulations, not an actual performance. The focus is on responsibility. It is a reminder for us not to just focus on benefits, we need to understand our responsibility as

participants in a covenant relationship. The two clusters of material showcase regulations versus the performance.

*Conflict: Midian and Judgment (Numbers 11-12, 31)*

### **Sinai Generation (Numbers 10-12)**

The march begins but they encounter a Midianite issue. Three things confront them from the beginning. First people complain about *rah* (bad). We do not know what they were complaining about. But they are drawing attention to the Genesis garden story. It is the creation of a people, God is in their midst, and they are discontent. The author never tells us what the issue was. It just was not what they had hoped it would be. This is telling us that difficulty begins from within. That is what Genesis said too. In response to their complaining, God sent fire hitting them from outside camp to remind them that He was there. Second, they came to a place called “the grave of the belly-achers.” Called it this because they got sick of manna. They wanted quail. You can usually find quail there because Sinai is right in the migratory path. The people eat the meat and then pretty soon they get a belly-ache. We see the ones who violated the Sabbath by taking too much. We always eat ourselves to death. This is an issue of authority. When God gives regulations, do not take them lightly. People with unrestrained appetites are unwilling to listen to God. The rebellion in this case is on the part of the people. The third rebellion is recorded in chapter 12 and has to do with Moses’ wife. This time it has to do with the leaders. Aaron and Miriam complain about Moses’ wife. Moses has been married to Zipporah the entire time, but once they are in the wilderness situation everything comes apart. We know Moses’ wife was from Midian, a Kushan tribe. The issue is not that she was from Africa. The deal is that he is married to the wrong woman. God strikes Miriam with leprosy. Leprosy is often the punishment for encroaching on divine prerogative. Leprosy is the result of encroachment upon God’s domain.

### **Moab Generation (Numbers 31)**

March also begins here, but all of a sudden, we encounter a Midianite issue. God says they are going to battle the Midianites. The second generation does well. There is a reference to the prior Baal-Peor incident where Midianite women turned the hearts of men away from YHWH (Num 25). Men take Midianite women, children, and flocks and goods as plunder. This forms a literary connection to Moses’ Midianite wife. God’s response is “kill the boys and women who have slept with a man.” The men do it. The issue is God’s authority. The points are the same between the first cycle and the second, but the conclusions are different.

*Crisis: 10 Against 2 (Numbers 13-14, 32)*

### **Sinai generation (Numbers 13-14)**

The big crisis is the spy episode. It is the fourth conflict. These 12 people represent the whole community. The people stop at Kadesh. From Kadesh they could move right through Avdat and the Sin Wadi system. Imagine standing at the base of Avdat. Twelve spies go up through there 3,000 years ago. They come back, 10 bring a negative report. They say the task is too big. Only 2 men, Caleb and Joshua, said “We can do it” (one from southern and one from northern tribe, the remnant). Ten spies say they are small just like grasshoppers, but the Bible writers know grasshoppers can devour the land; they are unstoppable; you cannot destroy them. That is the joke, the Israelites ARE grasshoppers. When they enter the land, they will be unstoppable. The men of the land are *nephilim*, people about to fall. The 10 spies could only see how small they are and how big the *nephilim* are, but they are capable of devouring and the *nephilim* are about to

fall. We often fail to see the significance of having God in our midst. Because of the people's lack of faith and confidence in God, He sentences them to wander in the wilderness and die. They attempt to go up and take the land on their own but fail miserably.

### **Moab Generation (Numbers 32)**

Coming into land and there is a 2 against 10 issue. There are two tribes, Reuben and Gad, who want to settle on the east side of the Jordan River. No, they did not forfeit their inheritance. The question is "Should they come in?" The issue—if they do not go, that might spark fear in others. The issue of 10 against 2 is turned around to 2 against 10. The parallels are simple. Every generation of God's people experience the same thing. The issue is how we experience the authority questions.

*Aftermath: Death and Life (Numbers 15-24, 33-35)*

### **Sinai Generation (Numbers 15-24)**

God tells the first generation, "I will make you like shepherds." That means they will always be wandering. We encounter more laws. The material is dominated by the words "holy" and "to draw near." The people were trying to get close to God to get control of Him. They wanted power and saw the only power left was in God. If we look past the laws, we will see that these people were trying to get control. We have the Conquest of Hormah. They were beaten back once, but now they succeed. They defeat Sihon and Og. God is fighting for himself to ensure that his purposes succeed. His purposes will succeed; He will not be limited by us, but He cannot work with apostasy and rebellion. At some point He says, "I am going to do it on my own." God starts to work with animals. The focus is on the sovereignty of God and his ways. He works with foreigners too.

Numbers 15-24 recount the unraveling of the first generation. God already decided they will not see the promised land. This material shows us what a generation looks like that has already failed. The prophet's job was to convince their generation that they were already dead. We are always overly optimistic about our ability to redeem ourselves, over eager to repent (on the surface). Sometimes God calls it quits. There needs to be death if there is going to be life later on. Jesus HAD to die because of a dead generation. This generation did in fact die. We look at what a dead generation looks like. What does a dead church/generation/mission field look like? We often will not admit we are dead, that might be why we are not successful. Let this free you if you are in a situation of death. If this is what God is persuading you of, it is important to proclaim death. Death and resurrection are critical to the Christ event. Numbers 15-24 is a pretty good look at a dead generation.

Chapters 15-20 have a focus on the generation. They present all the laws of a Sabbath generation. Why give a focal point here? First, we must understand the significance of the Sabbath. The Sabbath stands for God's finishing/completing. When we violate the Sabbath, we are saying we do not trust in God's finished work, we have to take it on ourselves. The focus in this section is on the people breaking the Sabbath. Prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel emphasize the breaking of Sabbath as what destroyed the generation. We cannot say exactly where it happened. But breaking the Sabbath was proof you did not trust God anymore. Consider the rebellion of Korah, even the Levites are not comfortable with God's authority. Authority has been a key issue all along. Refusing accountability and authority in your life, is a good indication of your spiritual life. The people of Korah were not comfortable with Moses and Aaron's leadership. The people were griping and complaining. Griping and complaining are a sign that one is uncomfortable with authority, which points to a breakdown with God. Griping began

when they started moving, they got uncomfortable. The Bible never tells us what about. The Bible is telling us that it was not anything specific, it was an assessment that something was bad in God's good world. All of this comes together. This is intentional material, though much is legal/cultic. The people were denying authority—Moses and Aaron's, and God's! Notice how much the words "holy," "sanctified," and "to draw near" come up. God is always on the defensive because people are trying to tread on him. They have no sense of the holy. They approach Him ill-advisedly. They are trying to get God on their side, but the real issue is acknowledging God's initiative. The people saw God as a way of making something happen. This leads to chapter 20, the cliff that cannot be easily stepped over. Everyone dies. Probably did not all happen on same day, but focus on it together. Moses' death prescribed here too.

Striking a rock is part of an old Bedouin trick. When it rains, it is easy to capture water. The ground in the region is soft limestone and chalk. Water seeps in. Cracks develop on surface, so water flows down and gets to level of hard limestone, fanning/spreading out and flowing for miles. Water runs under the surface, so you cannot plant there. Water flows down into wadis. Calcium carbonate forms crust on the cracks. This crust looks like rock, but Bedouins can spot and cultivate these channels. When you are finally willing and desperate, you take a stone and strike the rock/calcium carbonate and the water flows. Moses did this. God prepared him to do this during his wilderness time. No way he could have survived in wilderness unless he did this. Our romantic notion about this is not what the Bible means. Moses learned stuff in the first 40 years that will help him survive these 40 years of wilderness wandering. The people grumble and complain. The Bible plays up water because it equals life. In chapter 20 Moses is ready to do the trick—providing for people who do not trust him. He is even MORE into authority. That is what Moses says—"It all started with you." God sees this coming and says he should SPEAK to the rock. God is introducing the power of the word. That is what this is all about. God's law is the glue of their relationship. The word is all that held them/holds us together. God says, "Let's demonstrate how powerful the word is." Moses then takes the rock. Sounds like God is severe with a procedural error. No, the real issue is authority and Moses is not ready to handle it. It comes here at the end as an epilogue. "Oh yeah, Moses did not make it either." The *toledot* prepared us for this. Aaron is going to die before Moses, but Moses is as good as dead.

Chapters 21-24 is good news. That is why some commentators say this stuff does not make sense. Yes, it's good news but it's about God. This is the last slap in the face to show them what God is like. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are dead. Suddenly, without any leaders, they defeat their enemies. This is a comment on the character of God. No way He will fail. We do not live like this. This has to be last in order to show success comes when a generation is destitute (has nothing). Then a whole new generation of leaders emerges.

### **Moab Generation (Numbers 33-35)**

Chapters 33-35 contains lists of material and an itinerary. It looked like they were not going anywhere, but now the plan is revealed. This generation moved as if there was a plan. The other generation had no plan. From the perspective of the second generation, they caught on. God was willing to work with this generation. In the beginning of Deuteronomy God says He is going to work with their dependents. Recognizing dependency makes it easier to submit to authority. People who knew neither good nor bad only need an itinerary. Chapter 33 is referential, giving information. But we were starting to doubt it. We wonder if it is going anywhere, not sticking to any one genre for long. Chapter 34 lays out the conquest of Canaan and boundaries of the promised land. The issue here is going into the land. Leadership is again established (reminds us of chapter 13). Chapter 35 lays out all the Levitical cities and cities of refuge, which are all about

protection. The list of leaders, itinerary, and list of cities of life sets up Deuteronomy—the issue is life or death. Every day is about life or death.

### *Summary*

This literary cycle conveys six theological themes:

1) Understanding of God's people – about corporate responsibility, challenges our understanding of what it means to be the people of God, the potential for rebellion exists in every generation.

2) Issue of leadership – are we breeding rebellion or confidence in God?

3) Evaluation of God's character – He is a finisher, faithful, not fearful of us, He will not be contaminated, He will judge

4) Failure – The first generation began with many benefits, refused to trust, took things into their own hands

5) Success – There is an emphasis on warning and obedience, success came as a result on relying upon God

6) Paradigm for succeeding generations – Pentateuch is everyone's story, listen and learn, be careful you choose to participate in God's kingdom.

Numbers set the stage for Deuteronomy by showcasing life and death.