

Background

The title Numbers is derived from the Septuagint (*Arithmoi* – Greek). It is also known as “In the desert” (*bemidbar* – Hebrew) in Jewish circles. Numbers has been traditionally ascribed to Moses although some believe that the book in its final form may not have been written entirely by Moses (see 12:3), some portions having been added during later periods by scribes or editors.

As much as Numbers is a book of records that contains census counts, lists of sacrifices, and laws, it also contains the story of Israel’s journey from Mount Sinai, where they received the Law from God and entered into covenant with Him, through the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, to the plains of Moab across from the land of Canaan.

Numbers continues the story from Leviticus with the recounting of the preparations of God’s people to move out from where they had been staying at the foot of Mount Sinai. The book also narrates the transition from the generation that left Egypt to the new generation that stood on the brink of the Promised Land, and with that new beginning a new hope for God’s people.

Most importantly, Numbers shows how the promises God had made to Abraham would be kept despite the repeated unfaithfulness and rebellion of Israel. There are many recorded incidents of Israel provoking God to wrath and yet God persists in maintaining His faithfulness to Israel, not on the basis of anything they had done but out of His own character, His faithfulness, patience and grace.

“Past promises will prevail in spite of present problems”

Outline

Numbers can be broadly divided into two sections. Chapters 1-25 tell the story of the first generation whom God had brought out of Egypt. This generation sinned repeatedly in their ingratitude, unbelief, rebellion, and in turning their hearts back to Egypt (Acts 7:39), ultimately culminating in their refusal to enter the Promised Land. This resulted in the entire generation being condemned to wander in the wilderness until they were replaced by their own children. Chapters 26-36 tell of new beginnings and a new hope with a second census of an entirely new generation with the exceptions of Joshua and Caleb.

The First Generation in the Wilderness (1:1-25:18)

The Preparation and Inauguration of the March of Israel (1:1-10:36)

The first census and orders for encampment around the tabernacle (1:1-4:49)

-God commands Moses and Aaron to take a census of the fighting men of Israel (20 years old or more). The two of them, along with 12 family heads, one from each tribe, take the census of the entire nation man by man excluding men from the tribe of Levi who were set aside for service of the tabernacle of the Testimony. Altogether, there are 603,550 men who are able to serve in the army. (1:1-46)

-God gives the order for the encampment of the Israelites around the tabernacle as well as marching orders for setting out from camp. There is a high degree of orderliness in the camp, which is reflective of God because the tabernacle was to be at the centre of the people (the priests and Levites encamped around the tabernacle and the rest of the Israelites encamped around the priests and Levites). (1:47-2:34)

-God commands a census of the Levite males a month old or more as well as gives the order for the encampment of the Levites around the tabernacle. The male Levites are to stand in place for the firstborn males of the rest of the Israelites on a one-to-one basis as belonging to God. There are three clans of Levites: the Gershonites, Kohathites, and Merarites. Each clan is given specific duties in their service to God. Altogether, there are 22,000 male Levites a month old or more. (3:1-51)

-God commands a census of the Kohathite, Gershonite, and Merarite branches of the tribe of Levi who are able to serve in the work in the Tent of Meeting (30-50 years old) and assigns each one their task in the transportation of the tabernacle. The procedures for the care and transportation of the articles of the Tent of Meeting are highly regimented and specific, showing an order and degree of honor befitting articles

associated with the presence of God. Altogether, there were 8,580 men who could serve in the work at the Tent of Meeting. (4:1-49)

-The items that the Kohathites were responsible for, the most holy things, which included the Ark of the Testimony, the table of the Presence, the lampstand, and the gold and bronze altars, had to be treated with special care. Aaron and his sons were to pack up and cover these pieces and the Kohathites were only allowed to do the carrying. These items were always carried using special poles and carrying frames and were never to be touched because touching the holy things carried with it the penalty of death (see Uzzah – 2 Samuel 6:1-7). This is why the Kohathites were not given any of the carts or oxen from the offerings given at the dedication of the Tabernacle for their work (7:2-9).

The test for purity and the nazirite vow (5:1-6:27)

These were commands to maintain the purity of the people among whom God dwelt.

-Purity of the camp. The Israelites are to send out of the camp anyone who is ceremonially unclean because of an infectious skin disease, a bodily discharge, or contact with a dead body to prevent the spread of defilement within the camp. (5:1-4)

-Restitution of wrongs. God lays out the rules for making restitution (repayment + 20%) when one person personally wrongs another. God equates this wronging of another person to unfaithfulness to the Lord (v.6). This shows that there is a connection between interpersonal/social life and worship life. (5:5-10)

-Testing for marital faithfulness. The law of jealousy (v.29) allows a man who suspects that his wife has committed adultery to bring her to the priest with a grain offering and have her go through a ritual that places her under oath with a curse of barrenness if she had been unfaithful. This provides a real and physical consequence to marital unfaithfulness and also reminds people that God sees everything that His people do and will reveal sin even if no one else knows about it (5:11-31).

-The nazirite vow is a vow of dedication and separation to the Lord. God gives the rules for keeping the vow: no eating or drink anything fermented or from the grapevine, no hair cutting, cannot be near a dead body (see Samson – Judges 13-16).

Dedication of the tabernacle and observance of the Passover (7:1-9:23)

-At the dedication of the tabernacle, the heads of the families that were involved in the census each bring an offering. All of the offerings are identical and are listed in detail. The tabernacle dedication was a community event and each tribe was involved. (7:1-8:8) **[See the lesson notes for Leviticus for more information on the significance of each type of offering]**

-The Levites are purified through washing and sacrifice and set apart for God who gives them to Aaron and his sons to do the work at the Tent of Meeting. (8:9-26)

-Observance of the Passover. God commands the Israelites to celebrate the Passover. Some of the Israelites are unable to participate because of ceremonial uncleanness so God makes a provision for people who cannot take part in the Passover at the appointed time. (9:1-14)

-The cloud over the tabernacle. The visible presence God settles over the Tent of the Testimony as soon as it is set up. The Israelites had the guiding presence of God in their midst. They only broke camp when the cloud lifted and wherever the cloud settled, that is where they stayed. Whether the cloud settled overnight or for a year the Israelites were to move only at the prompting of God. (9:15-23)

The Israelites begin their journey (10:1-36)

-The silver trumpets. God commands Moses to make two silver trumpets. These trumpets had many uses: summoning people (v.2-4, 7), signaling the people to set out (v.2, 5-6), calling on God in battle (v.9), and for use during festivals and times of rejoicing (v.10). (10:1-10)

-The beginning of the journey. At the lifting of the cloud above the tabernacle the people set out according to the order that God had given them. Moses convinces his brother-in-law Hobab to go with them. (10:11-36)

The Cycle of Rebellion, Death, and Deliverance of Israel with Elements of Hope (11:1-25:18)

Complaints of the people and God's judgment (11:1-14:45)

-The people begin to complain of their hardships and God sends fire to consume the outskirts of the camp.

When the Israelites cry out to Moses he prays and God relents from His judgment. (11:1-3)

-The "rabble" among the Israelites start to crave other foods and incited the rest of the people to complain of having no meat. They are ungrateful for God's provision of manna and wail to Moses. Moses appeals to God and God assigns 70 leaders from among the people to help him carry the burden of the people. God provides the whole nation with enough quail for an entire month but also strikes down the instigators with a plague.

(11:4-35)

-Miriam and Aaron begin to speak against Moses and God calls them on it. God summons Aaron and Miriam along with Moses and vindicates Moses. God then strikes Miriam with leprosy and Moses has to cry out to God for her to be healed. (12:1-16)

-The spies' report of the Promised Land. The Israelites arrive outside of the Promised Land and God directs Moses to send a leader from each tribe to survey the land and its inhabitants. The spies bring back a discouraging report about the enemies they would face in the land. Caleb speaks up in confidence that they should take the land but is outnumbered by the other spies. (13:1-33)

-Rebellion of the people and God's judgment. The people accept the bad report and grumble against Moses and Aaron. They complain of not having died in Egypt or on the way and propose to go back to Egypt (v.2-4). They showed no trust in the Lord and were ready to mutiny. Joshua and Caleb stand up to the people and try to convince them to put their faith in the Lord and to not rebel (v.7-9) but the people turn on them as well and talk about stoning them. The glory of the Lord appears and God threatens to strike all of the people down but Moses appeals to God on the basis of His honour among the nations. God forgives them but also declares that none of the people who had rebelled would enter the Promised Land. God then strikes down the 10 other men who had gone into the land and had spread a bad report among the people. God sends the people back towards the Red Sea. The next day the people try to recant and take the land even though God had already commanded them to leave. The people first rebelled against their commission to capture the Promised Land and then they disobeyed God again by going their own way with foolhardy bravado after God pronounced judgment on them and were defeated. (14:1-45)

A collection of laws (15:1-41)

-Supplementary offerings. After Israel's defeat at the hands of the Amalekites and Canaanites God promises once again (though implicitly) to bring the nation into the Promised Land through His instructions for the supplementary offerings (v.2, 18). (15:1-21)

-Offerings for unintentional sins. God provides provisions for both the community and individuals who sin unintentionally. (15:22-31)

-Laws regarding the Sabbath. A man found breaking the Sabbath is stoned for his failure to keep it holy (Exodus 20:8-11). (15:32-36)

-Tassels on garments. The tassels were meant to be a visible reminder to obey the commandments of the Lord (see Matthew 23:5). (15:37-41)

Korah's Rebellion (16:1-50)

-Korah, Dathan, and Abiram lead a rebellion with 250 men (well-known council leaders) to oppose Moses as their leader and usurp the priesthood. Moses challenges them to offer incense before the Lord and they do so without fear even being aware of what had happened to Aaron's sons who were priests (Leviticus 10:1-3). Once again, God was ready to destroy the entire assembly but Moses and Aaron interceded for them so that judgment fell only on the heads of the rebellion and their families as well as the 250 followers.

-The next day the community gathers to oppose Moses and Aaron because of God's judgement on the rebels. As the crowd closes in on the Tent of Meeting God appears in the cloud and sends a plague on the people. Moses quickly sends Aaron to take incense and fire from the altar to make atonement for the people. Aaron

runs into the midst of the people offering the incense as the plague sweeps through the crowd and the plague stops.

The Budding of Aaron's staff (17:1-13)

-God tells Moses to take a staff from the leader of each of the tribes, write the names of the tribal leaders on the staffs, and place them in the Tent of Meeting. God then causes Aaron's staff to blossom and produce almonds as a testimony to the Israelites. Aaron's budded staff was a lasting sign of Aaron's priestly commission to the rebellious as well as an act of mercy from God to put an end to the grumbling of the people, thus saving them from His wrath.

Additional commands concerning the priests (18:1-19:22)

-Duties of priests and Levites. The priests are responsible for the care of the sanctuary and the altar while the Levites are responsible for the care of the Tent of Meeting. (18:1-7)

-Offerings for priests and Levites. The priests are to receive their support from the offerings of Israel dedicated to the Lord while the Levites are to receive the tithes as their portion. The priests and Levites do not receive a part in the inheritance of the land but are to be reliant on God for their provision (v.20, 23-24). (18:8-32)

-Water of Cleansing. The water of cleansing is used to purify someone who has become ceremonially unclean by coming into contact with a dead body, a grave, or a human bone. It was also used in the ceremony to set apart of the Levites (8:7). Failure to undergo cleansing in the prescribed way after becoming unclean will result in being cut off from the people (v. 13, 20). (19:1-22)

Journey to the plains of Moab, further disobedience (20:1-21:35)

-Miriam dies while the Israelites are staying in Kadesh. During that time, the community gathers in opposition to Moses and Aaron when there is no water. God tells Moses to take his staff and to speak to the rock that was there to make it yield water but Moses disobeys God and strikes the rock with his staff instead to bring water out of it. Because of this, God says to Moses and Aaron that they will not bring the community into the Promised Land (20:23-24; 27:12-14). (20:2-13)

-Resistance of Edom. Moses sends messengers to the king of Edom to ask for passage through their territory but is denied permission so Israel has to turn away and go in a different direction. (20:14-21)

-The death of Aaron. God tells Moses and Aaron that Aaron will die atop Mount Hor because the two of them disobeyed God at the waters of Meribah. He instructs Moses to transfer the priestly garments from Aaron to his son Eleazar and Moses does so. Aaron dies on top of the mountain and Israel mourns for him 30 days. (20:22-29)

-Destruction of Arad. The Canaanite king of Arad attacks Israel and captures some of them. Israel vows Arad's total destruction if God will give them victory in battle and God answers them. Even in the midst of judgment God continues to rescue His people and give them victory over their enemies. (21:1-3)

-Rebellion and the bronze snake. Along the way, the people begin to speak against God and against Moses again so the Lord sends venomous snakes among them that kill many of them. The people repent and turn to Moses who prays for the snakes to be taken away. Instead, God tells Moses to craft a figure of a snake and to put it up on a pole so that anyone who is bitten can look to the image and live. (21:4-9)

-The journey to Moab. A record of the travels of Israel from Mount Hor to the valley of Moab. (21:10-20)

-The defeat of Sihon and Og. Israel sends messengers to Sihon the king of the Amorites to ask for passage through their territory. Instead, Sihon gathers his entire army and attacks Israel. Israel defeats him and takes over his land. Israel then continues on its campaign and captures more Amorite settlements. When Israel turns toward Bashan, Og king of Bashan marches out with his whole army against Israel. God also delivers Og and his army into Israel's hands and they destroy them completely and take their land as well. (21:21-35)

Balaam's oracles (22:1-24:25)

-When Balak king of Moab learns of the approach of Israel, he sends for Balaam to get him to put a curse on Israel. God speaks to Balaam and prevents him from returning with Balak's men, He tells him not to curse Israel because they are blessed. Balak then sends another delegation to summon Balaam and this time God allows him to go but commands him to do only He tells him. (22:1-20)

-Balaam's donkey. The angel of the Lord stands in the road to oppose Balaam as he makes his way to Balak because God is angry with him. Twice the angel stands in the way of Balaam's donkey that moves out of the way to avoid him and twice Balaam beats his donkey because he doesn't see who the donkey is trying to avoid. The third time the angel stands in a place the donkey cannot pass and the donkey lies down under Balaam causing him to beat it again. God then opens the donkey's mouth and allows it to speak to him. God also opens Balaam's eyes so that he can see the angel and confronts him about his plans, ultimately sending him on his way to Balak with a second warning to speak only what He tells him (v.35). (22:21-39) Why was God angry with Balaam? Balaam seemingly followed God's command to go but he went with his own agenda (see 22:20, 32, 35; 24:1).

-Balaam's first oracle. No one can go against the blessing of God, those whom God has not cursed cannot be cursed, the people of Israel are set apart (they do not live as the other nations do), they are numerous and righteous. (23:1-12)

-Balaam's second oracle. Israel is blessed with an irrevocable blessing that even mystical powers cannot overturn, God is with them, they are strong and victorious and their triumphs will be spoken of by others. The blessings are based on God's unchanging character and faithfulness. (23:13-26)

-Balaam's third oracle. Israel is prosperous, they are strong and victorious and the nation will be exalted, "May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed" (see Genesis 12:3). (23:27-24:14)

-Balaam's fourth oracle. A king will rise up from the tribe of Judah. Israel will grow strong and will defeat the other nations. This is a prophetic message as it far predates Israel's first King. The prophecy is initially fulfilled in King David and ultimately in Jesus Christ (see Matthew 1:2; Luke 3:34). (24:15-19)

-Balaam's fifth through seventh oracles. The defeat of Amalek, the Kenites, and Asshur are foretold but by contrast it is implied that the blessing of Israel will endure. (24:20-25)

God's treatment of Israel as His special people is highlighted in the story of Balaam. God intervenes, overriding Balaam's attempts to curse in order to bless Israel (Joshua 24:9-10).

Israel's apostasy and the end of the first generation (25:1-18)

-The Baal of Peor and Israel's apostasy. Moab begins to seduce the men of Israel to indulge in sexual immorality and idol worship through their women. Even the leaders of the people participate in these acts and fall under God's judgment (v.4, 14). An Israelite leader then brings a Midianite woman into the camp in the midst of all the people as they were mourning. When Phinehas sees this he takes a spear and kills them both. At this point a plague had already broken out within the Israelite camp but, because of what Phinehas did, the plague was stopped when God saw the zeal of Phinehas for His honour and that he had made atonement for the Israelites. This tactic of the Midianites was taken on the counsel of Balaam (see 31:16 and Revelation 2:14).

The Second Generation Prepares to Enter the Promised Land (26:1-36:13)

The Preparation of Israel as They Ready Themselves to Enter the Promised Land (26:1-36:13)

-There is a positive outlook for the new generation of Israelites, there are no deaths or any instances of disobedience recorded for the rest of the book. The focus is on the promise of the future.

The second census (26:1-65)

-God commands Moses and Eleazar to take a census of the fighting men of Israel (20 years old or more) as well as the number of male Levites a month old or more. At this point the 40 years of wandering have passed and

the generations in Israel have completely turned over (v.63-65). Altogether, there are 601,730 men who are able to serve in the army and 23,000 Levites a month old or more. Comparing with 1:46 and 3:39, God maintained the numbers of the Israelites through the changing over of the generations and even grew the Levites more.

Inheritance for women (27:1-11)

-The daughters of Zelophehad from the tribe of Manasseh approach Moses and the leaders to address a concern over their father's lack of a male heir. They wanted to ensure that their father's family would receive a share of the land inheritance. Moses brings the matter to God and on account of what daughters did God gives a law concerning the passing down of inheritances that would apply to all families in Israel. The order of inheritance was to be: Son ⇒ Daughter ⇒ Brothers ⇒ Uncles ⇒ Closest clan relative.

The successor to Moses (27:12-23)

-God calls Moses to go up a mountain in the Abarim range so that he would be able to see the land that God had given to Israel before he died. Moses asks God to appoint another man to lead people and God tells him to take Joshua and commission him as his successor, which he does.

Commands regarding feasts, offerings, and vows (28:1-30:16)

-Commands regarding offerings. God gives instructions for the daily offering, Sabbath offering, and monthly offering. (28:1-15)

-Commands regarding festivals. God gives instructions for offerings for the Passover, Feast of Weeks, Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles. (28:16-29:40)

[See the lesson notes for Leviticus for more information on the significance of each type of feast]

-Commands regarding vows. Vows and pledges made by men are binding but a young woman living in her father's house who has made a vow will be released from it if her father forbids it as soon as he hears about it (v.5). The same is true for a married woman if her husband nullifies her vow as soon as he finds out about it (v.8, 12-13). Vows and pledges made by women not living under the authority of another man (e.g. widows or divorced women) are binding (v.9). (30:1-16)

The war against Midian (31:1-53)

-God commands Moses to go to war against the Midianites and gives Israel total victory over them (v.49). All of the men are killed along with the five kings of Midian. Balaam is also killed (see Joshua 13:22; Jude 1:11; 2 Peter 2:15). However, the Israelites fail to fully wipe out their enemies and instead capture the women and children. Moses has to admonish them to complete the destruction of the Midianites but allows them to keep alive the virgin women (Israel had to avenge themselves on the women who had led them into sexual sin and idolatry). The division of the spoils from the defeat of the Midianites is recored.

Settlement of the Transjordan tribes (32:1-42)

-The Reubenites and Gadites ask for the land on the east side of the Jordan across from the Promised Land. They want to build pens for their livestock and cities for their women but pledge to cross the Jordan to fight with the rest of Israel to take the Promised Land for the remaining tribes. Moses allows this provided that they keep their promise to fight with the rest of Israel. The Reubenites and Gadites, along with the tribe of Manasseh, build cities and livestock pens in the land captured from Sihon and Og.

Appendix: travel logs and instructions for land inheritance and transfer (33:1-36:13)

-The stages of the journey. A record of the travels of Israel from the Exodus to the plains of Moab. There are also instructions for the taking and allotment of the Promised Land (v.50-54) and warnings for disobedience (v.55-56). (33:1-56)

- The Land of inheritance. God gives the boundaries around the Promised Land and chooses twelve men, one from each tribe, to assist Joshua and Eleazar to assign the inheritance to the Israelites. (34:1-35:5)
- Cities of refuge are Levite towns where someone who had accidentally killed another person can flee. While in a city of refuge, the avenger of blood, a relative of the slain person, cannot pursue the killer in order to exact vengeance on him. However, if the person is found outside of a city of refuge the avenger can kill him and be innocent of murder. Only after the death of the high priest can the person leave the city of refuge to return home. God also gives the qualifications for murder (use of a weapon or attacking with malice aforethought) as opposed to accidental killing. There are also additional commands regarding the circumventing of justice in the case of bloodshed. (35:6-35:34)
- Security of the tribal inheritances. The relatives of Zelophehad bring another concern to Moses and the leaders, the marriage of female landowners will cause the inheritance to pass from the woman's family to her husband's and so be lost by the original family. God decrees that in these cases, the woman must marry within the tribal clan of her father to prevent the transfer of inheritance from one tribe to another. (36:1-13)

Themes

The Promises of God Fulfilled

In Genesis, God made a covenant with Abraham that involved specific blessings. The Abrahamic covenant included promises of: **People, Place, God's Presence, and Blessing to Nations**. These blessings can be seen taking shape to varying degrees in the records and accounts found in the book of Numbers.

Promise of People (Genesis 12:2; 13:16; 15:4-5; 17:4-6)

-It was God who commanded the censuses to preserve a record of how He had worked to grow Abraham's descendants from his son Isaac into a great nation. In the span of a few generations (400 years), the 70 people (Genesis 46:26-27; Exodus 1:5; Acts 7:17) who had entered Egypt grew to over 600,000 (Exodus 1:7-20). God continued to preserve the numbers of His people despite the repeated instances of His judgment falling on them and His condemnation of an entire generation. The numbers from the second census are almost identical to those of the first.

Promise of Place (Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:18-21)

-God offered the land of Canaan to the first generation that left Egypt but the people refused take it. Despite their rebellion, God remained faithful to His word for the next generation and brought them back to the edge of the Promised Land with a new opportunity to obey Him. God also gave victory to the Israelites against the rulers to the east of the Jordan along with their land as part of the spoils. Even for the first generation, in the face judgment and defeat at the hands of the inhabitants of Canaan, God gave to His people a word of assurance that entry into the Promised Land would be certainty for Israel, albeit a distant one. Much of the last few chapters in Numbers deal with the details regarding the land that the people were preparing to enter.

Promise of God's Presence (Genesis 15:1)

-God dwelt visibly among His people in the cloud that rested above the tabernacle. The tabernacle itself was always at the center of the Israelite camp as a reminder of God's abiding presence. He was personally involved in leading the people throughout their travels (9:17-23) and acted swiftly to bless them as well as to punish them. He also had a special relationship with His servant Moses through whom He spoke to His people. God Himself declared that he dwelt among the Israelites (5:3, 35:34).

Promise of Blessing to the Nations (Genesis 12:3)

Moses invited his brother-in-law Hobab (Judges 4:11), a Midianite, to join the Israelites on their journey with a promise of kind treatment from the people (10:29-32). God also made provisions for aliens in the laws and commands He gave so that those who were willing to become a part of the community and take Israel's God as their own could be included in the ceremonies, celebrations, and worship of the Lord (9:14; 15:14-16, 26, 29-31; 19:10; 35:15).

The Grumbling, Disobedience, and Rebellion of Israel

-One of the problems that the Israelites experienced was a pervasive discontentment with God's gracious provision and ingratitude for all of the miracles He performed for them. This dissatisfaction led the Israelites to grumble over their circumstances and to rise up in opposition to Moses and Aaron, rejecting the authority that they had been given by God. The Israelites complained about their food (11:4-6, 13, 18; 20:2-5; 21:4-5), their lack of water (20:2-5; 21:4-5), their hardships (11:1), and God's chosen leaders (12:1-2; 16:1-3, 41-42). The degree of grumbling and distrust reached the point where they were not only doing it against those who remained faithful to God (14:5-10) but against God Himself as well (14:28-29).

-A recurring theme in the grumbings of the Israelites was the disturbingly backward comparison they repeatedly made between what they were experiencing and what they remembered experiencing in Egypt (11:4-6, 18-20; 14:3-4, 21-23; 16:12-14; 20:3-5; 21:4-5). The Israelites had deluded fond memories of Egypt and they constantly longed for what they had left behind. In their hearts they had turned back to Egypt (Acts 7:39). For them Egypt was the land of milk and honey (16:13) and the journey to the Promised Land was forsaken by God. Their actual experience in Egypt consisted instead of harsh oppression, forced servitude, and decreed infanticide (Exodus 1:11-16, 22).

-Israel's unbelief in God and His power was also major cause of their troubles (Hebrews 3:7-19). The people's doubt over God's ability to deliver the land of Canaan into their hands was a key factor in their rebellion against His call for them to conquer the Promised Land (14:1-11). This represented the height of the people's disobedience as it stood in direct opposition to the fulfillment of the promise of land that was part of God's covenant with Abraham. Moses and Aaron also displayed distrust in the Lord at one point and had to face the same consequences as the first generation that came out of Egypt (20:7-12).

-The Israelites were quick to forget God and ran after the Moabite women and their idols (25:1-3). Some were even brazen enough to do this openly in the middle of the Israelite community (25:6). They ate food sacrificed to false gods and joined in worship with a people that God would ultimately destroy for their wickedness and enmity towards Him.

The Holiness of God

-In many places in the book of Numbers God gives warnings or injunctions to only approach Him and the place where He dwelt on the terms that He had set, with death being the consequence for failing to do so (1:51, 53; 3:10, 38; 4:15, 18-20; 8:19; 18:3, 5, 7, 22). This was especially true relating to the tabernacle and the articles that were used in the worship of God. This highlights the overwhelming holiness of God. Sinful man is unable to approach God except by God's express invitation and pardon. Anything less than this would be an affront to the honour and authority of God especially given that He did provide them with explicit instructions on how they were to relate to Him. Without showing God or, by extension, the articles associated with His presence and glory, the proper reverence, a person would be held accountable and would face God's immediate judgment.

Shadows of Christ

-The bronze snake (21:8). When Moses prayed that God would remove the snakes from among the people that He had sent on account of their grumbling, God did not remove the snakes. He instead instructed Moses to craft the form of a snake and to raise it up amidst the people. Those who were bitten had to look to the snake and believe that it was God's chosen method of deliverance for them in order to survive. Instead of

removing the sources of death from around them, God gave them a way to live within that situation through an act of faith and obedience. The people had to trust in God's miraculous provision once again. Jesus cites this account as a parallel to His own ministry in John 3:14-15.

-The one who is the star of Jacob and scepter of Israel (24:17). The scepter was a symbol of kingly rule. Jesus was a descendant of Jacob (Matthew 1:2; Luke 3:32-33) and a king (Matthew 25:31-32) who will conquer and rule over the nations (Revelation 11:15). He is also a descendant of King David, who was an initial fulfillment of this prophecy. In Revelation 22:16, Christ describes Himself as "the bright Morning Star."

[See the lesson notes for the OT Survey Introduction – Part 2 for more information on the fulfilled prophecies of Jesus as the coming king from the line of Judah]

-The work of the priest in atonement (16:41-48; 25:6-11)

There are two accounts in Numbers of the actions of a priest saving the entire nation of Israel from God's wrath. When the Israelites turned on Moses and Aaron because of God's judgment on Korah and his band of rebels God sent a plague among the people. Aaron ran into the scene of death and chaos offering incense to the Lord to make atonement for Israel and turned away God's wrath. Later on when Israel abandoned God to indulge in sexual immorality and idolatry God sent a plague on Israel once again. Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, purged the defilement from the camp and made atonement for Israel when he killed an Israelite leader and the daughter of a Midianite tribal chief (political alliance forming?) that he brought in with him. Once again, God sees the act of one man and the zeal Phinehas had for God's honour and stops the plague. In each case the actions of one man resulted in the salvation of many people from the certain wrath of God.

-The death of the high priest as it pertains to those sheltered in cities of refuge (35:25-28)

Only upon the death of the high priest could people seeking asylum in cities of refuge for the accidental death of another person return home. Until that point, the six Levite cities of refuge were the only places in which these people could live in safety from the avenger of blood. Leaving the city prematurely would result in the person being vulnerable to the wrath of the avenger who would not be guilty of murder. However, after the death of the high priest, the guilty person is restored and is able to return to his people and his land. Should the avenger of blood harm the person at this point, he would be accountable to God and subject to the appropriate punishment for his actions.

Conclusion

Numbers is a book of promises fulfilled in God. The fulfillment of these promises was hindered by the disobedience and rebellion of the people but in the end even they could not nullify what God had already decided He was going to do. The people God had redeemed mightily from slavery in Egypt turned their backs on Him and the covenant He had made with them, rejecting their calling and forfeiting their opportunity to take the Promised Land for themselves. They proceeded to oppose God and His servants in their grumbling and turned their hearts back to Egypt. In spite of everything God chose to preserve His people and remain faithful to His purposes for them.

God never took away His presence from Israel even though they repeatedly provoked Him to wrath. He preserved their numbers and continued to graciously provide for them (the old generation as well as the new) amidst His condemnation of an entire generation. He ultimately brought the new generation to the edge of the Promised Land and prepared them once again to enter it. Finally, God preserved a group for Himself who would remain faithful and formally opened the way for foreigners and aliens to worship alongside Israel, thus showing them to be Abraham's true children (Romans 9:6-8).

In all of God's dealings with Israel, God showed that His promises were unshakable and irrevocable because of His faithfulness. Although Israel seemingly did everything in their power to deter God from His purposes, God's ways triumphed in the end to His own glory and the good of His children. All of Israel's hope was ultimately rooted in the unchanging character and goodness of God (23:19) to bring His words to fulfillment.

References

Longman, Tremper III, and Raymond B. Dillard. An Introduction to the Old Testament, second edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

Olson, Dennis T. The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985.

NIV Study Bible

<http://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/we-equip/adults/core-seminars/old-testament/>