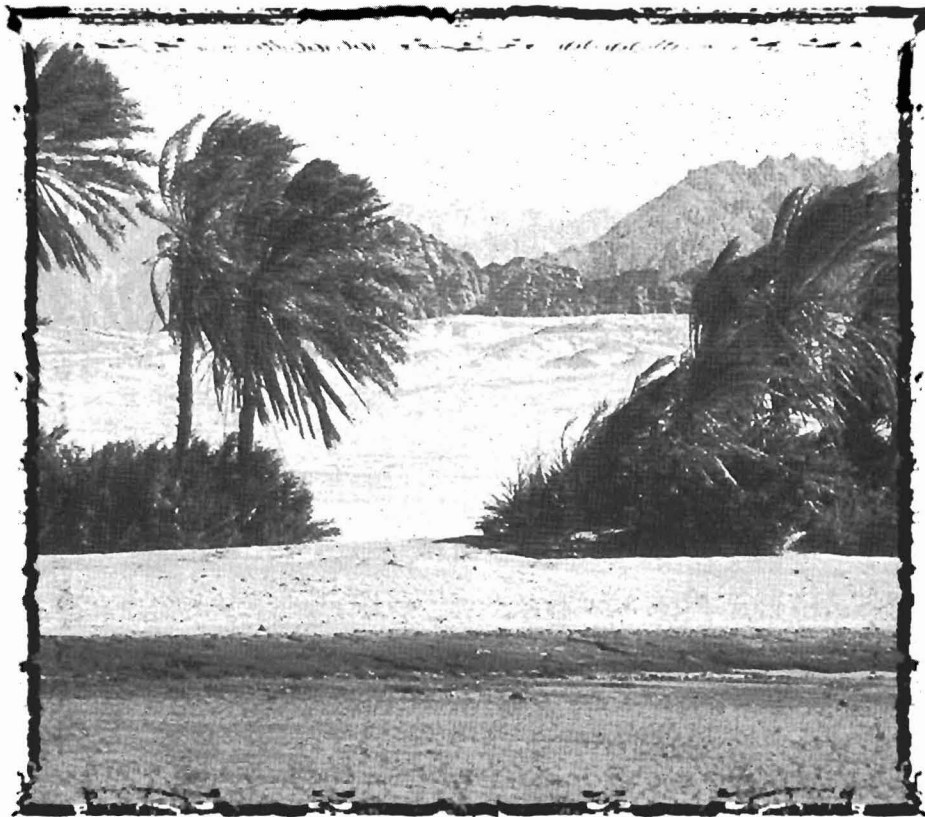


# NUMBERS DEUTERONOMY



© 1981 Biblical Archaeology Society

Oasis in the Sinai desert

The books of Numbers and Deuteronomy are the fourth and fifth books of the Pentateuch or what Judaism calls the *Torah* or Law. The Hebrew name for the Book of Numbers is *bemidbar*, which means “in the wilderness.” The setting for most of the book is the wilderness between Mount Sinai and the Promised Land. Our English name comes from the Greek name. In Greek the book was called Numbers because of the references to the numbering of the Israelites when they were counted in a census.

In Hebrew, Deuteronomy is called *debarim* or “Words.” The English title comes from the Greek language in which Deuteronomy means “second” or “repeated law.”

## NUMBERS I

Numbers opens with the Hebrews still at Mount Sinai. Deuteronomy closes with the death of Moses on Mount Nebo just before the people cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

The Book of Numbers has three main parts. From Numbers 1:1 to Numbers 10:10, the people are still at Mount Sinai. This Scripture forms the first main section of the book.

Chapter 1 of Numbers reports the first census of the Hebrews. God commands Moses and Aaron to count the people—that is, every male from twenty years old and upward who is able to go to war. According to Numbers 1:46, the number of such men

is 603,550. If one adds the wives, the children, and the persons too old to fight, the figure rises to over two million. Many scholars believe that it would have been impossible for so many persons to survive in the desert. Some assume that the number comes from a census taken during the time of David and Solomon. The writer of Deuteronomy then recorded the same number for the desert period. Or, perhaps the writer wanted to emphasize the marvelous nature of God's works. Only the God of the Hebrews could lead two million people through the desert!

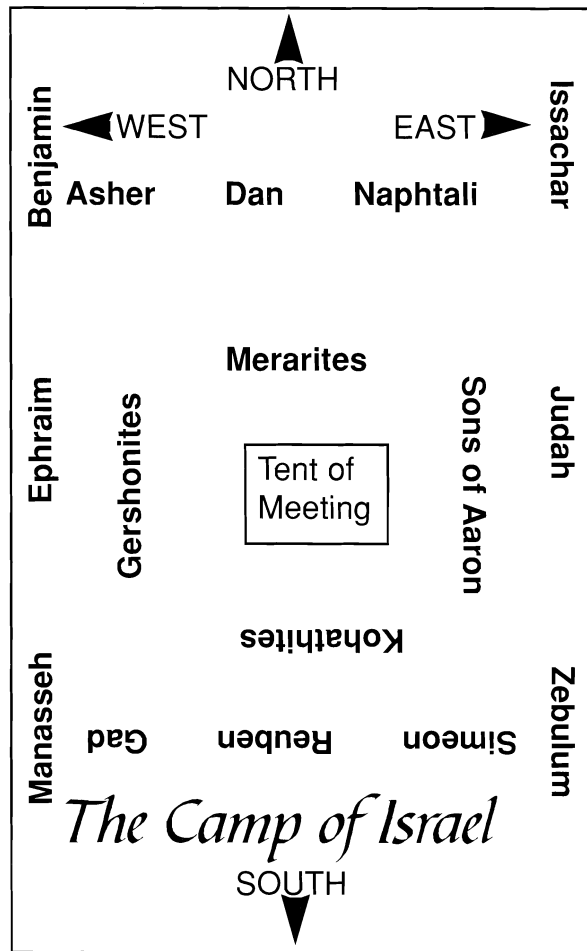
Numbers 1 tells of the census of all the able-bodied men in each tribe who were twenty years old and older. These were men capable of going to war. Read Numbers 1:47-50. Why was the tribe of Levi not included in the census?

### NUMBERS 2-14

According to Numbers 2 the Hebrews encamp around the tent of meeting, facing inward. This arrangement serves to remind the Hebrews that God is in the midst of them. Each tribe receives its special place and marching position.

Chapters 3 and 4 tell about the priests and Levites, their number and duties. The Levites encamp between the ordinary Hebrews and the Tabernacle since they are more holy than the laity. According to Numbers 3:39 the number of Levites is 22,000.

Chapter 5 and 6 contain a collection of various laws. Numbers 5:5-10 states that a person is to repay the money or goods, plus twenty percent, to anyone he or she wrongs. Numbers 5:11-31 outlines the ordeal to follow when a man accuses his wife of adultery, but cannot prove the charge. Chapter 6 contains the laws of the Nazirites. The Nazirites are persons who enter a special order, giving themselves to God. They vow to drink no wine or strong



drink. They also vow that they will not cut their hair or come near a dead body. In the midst of these laws, we find that great and familiar blessing of the Old Testament. Read Numbers 6:24-26.

Numbers 7 reports the sacrifices the people make during the twelve days of dedicating the altar. Chapter 8 describes the golden lampstand and the consecration of the Levites. Numbers 9:6-14 tells about the special provisions for persons who are absent or unclean when the Hebrews celebrate the Passover. These persons hold their Passover celebration a month later. Imagine celebrating Christmas on January 25! The rest of Chapter 9 describes the cloud that covers the Tabernacle and appears as fire at night. In Numbers 10:1-10 God tells Moses to make two silver trumpets to signal the people for gathering or marching out.

With Numbers 10:11 we come to the second main section of Numbers. The peo-

ple break camp and leave Mount Sinai. Through Numbers 21:9 we read about the events that take place in the desert. According to Numbers 32:13 the Hebrews wander in the desert for forty years.

In Chapter 11 the people again bemoan their lack of meat. This chapter parallels several accounts already reported in Exodus 16 and 18. The parallels include God's sending of quail and the selection of seventy elders. In Numbers 12 Moses' brother and sister—Aaron and Miriam—question his authority, and Moses punishes them.

Chapters 13 and 14 tell how Moses sends men to spy out the land of Canaan. The men survey the land and its people as far as Hebron.

The spies return with stories of the land's richness and with a grape cluster so large that two men carry it on a pole between them. The spies report that the people of the land are strong and their cities are well fortified. The Hebrews are like grasshoppers against them. The people lose faith in ever taking the land. They try to replace Moses as leader and return to Egypt. Because they despise God, God condemns them to wander until the unfaithful generation dies. Among the spies, only Caleb and Joshua will enter the land.

God expected the Israelites to trust God to enable them to possess the land. When they refused to trust God, they were destined to wander in the wilderness for forty years. When Joshua was commissioned as the successor of Moses (Deuteronomy 31:23), he was told to be strong and of good courage, for the Lord would be with him. God required the people to have faith in order to be conquerors and to possess the gift of the land.

1. The camp of Israel moved northward toward Canaan. Moses sent out the twelve spies who returned with two reports. Read Numbers 13:31-32. Why did these spies return with an evil (bad) report?

2. Read Numbers 14:1-10. Caleb and Joshua brought back the minority report. Why did they encourage the people to go up to take the land?

## **NUMBERS 15-24**

Chapter 15 contains various laws. We pick up the story line again in Chapter 16. This chapter relates the challenge of Korah and his followers to the authority of Aaron and the other priests. God vindicates Aaron in Chapter 17 by causing Aaron's rod to blossom and bear almonds.

Chapter 18 introduces laws about the tithe and support of the priesthood. Laws on the purification of uncleanness follow. Chapter 19 reports the ritual for removing impurity through the use of the sacrificial ashes of a red heifer.

Chapter 20 and Chapter 21:1-9 tell four main episodes. First, when the people have no water, Moses strikes a rock to produce water, although God commands him only to speak to the rock. Second, Moses tries to get permission from the king of Edom to pass through his territory and thus enter Canaan from the east, but the king refuses. Third, Aaron dies on Mount Hor. Fourth, because of the people's complaining, God sends snakes that bite them and cause death. Healing comes only by looking at a bronze serpent that Moses makes.

The third section begins with Numbers 21:10. Here the Hebrews come into the territory east of the Jordan after circling around Edom. They defeat Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan.

Numbers 22 to 24 contains the story of Balaam and his talking donkey. Balaam is a diviner whom Balak hires to curse the Hebrews. However, try as he might, Balaam cannot curse the Hebrews and ends up blessing them.

The story of Balaam's donkey is recorded in Numbers 22:21-35, but this is only a part of the story of Balaam. Discover other details by reading the following passages; then answer the questions.



© 1993 Biblical Archaeology Society

**Moses, from a wall painting in Dura-Europos synagogue, Syria**

a. Where were the people of Israel encamped when this story took place? (Numbers 22:1)

b. Who was Balak the son of Zippor? (Numbers 22:4)

c. What did Balak want Balaam to do? (Numbers 22:6)

d. What was Balaam's occupation? (Numbers 22:7)

e. Why did Balak become angry with Balaam? (Numbers 24:10)

f. Why was Balaam unable to curse the Hebrews? (Numbers 24:13)

### **NUMBERS 25-36**

According to Numbers 25 the Hebrews begin to worship the gods of the land. So God subjects them to a plague. In Chapter

26, God commands Moses and Eleazar to take a new census after the plague.

In Numbers 27:1-11 Moses judges a case that involves the inheritance right of daughters. According to the Lord's command, Moses rules that Zelophehad's daughters can inherit the property of their father if the father has no sons. The narrative of Moses' commissioning Joshua as his successor follows this inheritance story.

Numbers 28 and 29 contain laws on sabbath observance and festivals. These chapters repeat much of Exodus and Leviticus, while Chapter 30 contains regulations about vows.

We pick up the story again in Chapter 31, which reports Israel's defeat of the Midianites. The land east of the Jordan is now under Hebrew control, and in Chapter 32 the tribes of Reuben and Gad take possession of this land. They promise the aid of their tribes in the conquest of Canaan.

Chapter 33 records all the stages and stopping places of the Hebrews in their movement from Egypt to the camp east of Jordan. In Chapter 34 God reveals to Moses the boundaries of the Promised Land. In Chapter 35 God states that the Hebrews are to set cities aside for the Levites, as well as cities of refuge for the guilty, once the land is taken.

Interestingly, the daughters of Zelophehad reappear in the final chapter of Numbers. Moses rules that the daughters can inherit, but they must marry within the tribe of their father. This way, the property never transfers to another tribe.

With the close of the Book of Numbers, the Hebrews finish their long march from Egypt and begin their conquest of the Promised Land.

## **DEUTERONOMY**

The bulk of the Book of Deuteronomy consists of speeches or sermons by Moses. The book contains his farewell and final instructions to the Hebrews before his death and their movement across the Jordan. We can imagine Moses as an elderly father who assembled his children around him to offer instructions and encouragement before his death.

The first part of Moses' speech is Deuteronomy 1:1–4:40. Here Moses reviews the people's history in the wilderness and pleads with the people to give heed to the Law and obey the statutes and ordinances. He also warns the people that if they are unfaithful, God will punish them, removing them from the land and scattering them among the nations. Deuteronomy 4:25-26 contains a good summary of such warnings. Read Deuteronomy 4:25-26.

The second part of Moses' speech is Deuteronomy 5 through 11. This speech is a passionate appeal for Israel to hear the commandments of God and to be obedient after they possess the land. It stresses the covenant made between God and Israel; and it repeats, although with some variation, the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20.

1. Read Deuteronomy 6:4-7; then answer the following questions.

a. How should Israel love the Lord God?

b. What were the Israelites to do with the words that Moses commanded them?

2. Read Matthew 22:34-40 in the New Testament. What commandment did Jesus add to the great commandment?

## **DEUTERONOMY 5-34**

Two themes appear in Deuteronomy 5 through 11. The first focuses on God's choosing of Israel. We see this theme in Deuteronomy 7. Read Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

The second theme is Israel's responsibility to God, which we see in Deuteronomy 10:12-13. Read this passage.

Chapters 12 through 26, the third part of Moses' speech, spell out the laws that the Israelites are to obey. Through their obedience the Israelites show their love of God. These laws emphasize that Israel is to worship one God, to worship in one holy place, to obey one set of laws (those in Deuteronomy), and to preserve their purity as a people.

In Chapters 27 and 28 Moses explains how the people are to act once they reach the Promised Land. They are to publicly exhibit the Law and participate in the ceremony of blessings and curses.

In Chapters 29 and 30 the people and Moses reaffirm the covenant while still in Moab, southeast of the Jordan. The covenant-making ceremony closes as Moses proclaims the blessings that will come if the people are obedient and the curses that will befall them if they are unfaithful.

In Chapter 31 Moses takes leave of his people, reminding them of his age. The Lord will not allow him to cross the Jordan with them. Moses commands that the Law be read at a set time every seven years. Joshua serves as his successor.

Chapters 32 and 33 are the so-called song of Moses and his blessing upon the twelve tribes. Chapter 34, the final chapter of the book, reports Moses' death. Moses dies at the age of 120. His eye is not dim, nor his natural force abated. God buries him in an unmarked place. In praise of this great man, the writer notes that "never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face."

Read Deuteronomy 34:5-12, and answer the following questions.

- a. Where did Moses die?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. How old was Moses when he died?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- c. What did Moses do to designate Joshua as his successor?

### **SUMMARY**

Five major events in the history of Israel are portrayed in Numbers and Deuteronomy.

- (1) Moses and Aaron's numbering the people (Numbers 1)
- (2) Moses sending spies to gather information about the land of Canaan (Numbers 13-14)
- (3) Balaam's blessing the Hebrews (Numbers 22-24)
- (4) Moses' commandment to love the Lord with heart and soul (Deuteronomy 6 and 10)
- (5) Moses' farewell speech to the people (Deuteronomy 1-26)

God's commissioning of Joshua as the new leader over the people prepares the way for the Book of Joshua. We will continue this story in the next lesson.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. At the close of Deuteronomy the Israelites were encamped in the plains of Moab opposite Jericho. They were ready to cross the Jordan and to go in and possess the land of Canaan. God had promised to give that land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deuteronomy 34:4). But they had to conquer the land. What does this need to conquer the land imply about God's promise to Abraham? What does this biblical example teach us about the gift of salvation in Christ for each of us? What does it teach us about overcoming ourselves? about overcoming the world?

2. We have finished our survey of the first part of the Bible, the Pentateuch. How useful are the Old Testament Scriptures to Christians? Consider the example of Jesus in Luke 4:1-13.

3. On pages 23 and 24 we paid particular attention to the story of Balaam. A surprising part of the story is that the source of Balaam's knowledge was the God of Israel (Numbers 24:13). How does this story enhance God's protective oversight of the chosen people? What applications do these ideas have to us as Christians?

4. At the close of the Book of Deuteronomy we are told that Moses does not cross over into the Promised Land. Why does God not allow Moses to cross over the Jordan? Despite the fact that Moses dies in Moab, does the story have a positive ending? Why or why not?

---

### **DAILY READINGS FOR JOSHUA, JUDGES, AND RUTH**

- Day 1: Joshua 1:1-11  
Day 2: Joshua 6:8-21  
Day 3: Joshua 23:1-13  
Day 4: Joshua 24:14-31  
Day 5: Judges 2:6-23  
Day 6: Judges 16:18-31  
Day 7: Ruth 1:1-18