

## INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

# Numbers

The name of the Bible's fourth book comes from its census reports (chs. 1-4, 26). "Camping in the Desert" would be a more historical title. Numbers deals with priests/sacrifices but less than Leviticus does before it. It contains some laws but fewer than Deuteronomy after it. Half its 36 chapters are historical.

**Setting:** Chapters 1-10 find the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai, where they've received the covenant (Exodus) and priesthood (Leviticus). Chapters 10-21 have them moving across the Sinai Peninsula toward Canaan (see campsites in ch. 33) or wandering near Kadesh-Barnea in the wilderness of Zin, on Canaan's border. In chapters 22-36 they're in the plains of Moab across from Jericho, awaiting instructions (Deuteronomy) before crossing the Jordan River to settle in the Promised Land (Joshua).

**Timing:** These events took place about 1,400 years before Christ and cover a period of about 40 years in Hebrew history. By contrast, Genesis covers thousands of years and Exodus a few hundred, while neither Leviticus nor Deuteronomy covers time.

**Crucial event:** The turning point is the multitude's unbelief after hearing the report of the spies from Canaan (chs. 13, 14). Here at Kadesh, Israel failed the test by refusing to enter the nearby Promised Land and was assigned 40 years in the wilderness, while all over age 20, except Joshua and Caleb, died (26:63-65).

**40-year highlights**

- Israel departs Mt. Sinai (ch. 10).
- They crave meat, get quail (ch. 11).
- 70 elders receive the Spirit (ch. 11).
- Aaron, Miriam complain against Moses (ch. 12).
- Sabbath-breaker is punished (15:32-36).
- Korah's rebellion is followed by plague (ch. 16).
- Aaron's rod blossoms (ch. 17).
- Miriam, Aaron die; Moses disobeys (ch. 20).
- God sends snakebites and a cure (ch. 21).

- Kings Sihon, Og refuse passage, are defeated (ch. 21).
- Balak hires Balaam to curse Israel (chs. 22-24).
- Israel commits harlotry with Moab (ch. 25).
- Joshua is named Moses' successor (27:12-23).
- Israel wars against Midian (ch. 31).
- 2-1/2 tribes ask, receive land east of the Jordan (ch. 32).

**The numbers?** The first census counted males over 20: 603,550 (1:46), plus Levi's 22,000 (3:39). With women and children, this suggests a mass migration of 2 or 3 million Hebrews from Egypt. Thirty-nine years later, the second census showed little change: 601,730 males (26:51), plus Levi's 23,000 (26:62).

**Main man:** Leading the Hebrews 40 years, Moses became known for his

humility (12:3) and intercession for the people (11:2; 12:13; 14:13-20; 16:47; 21:7; 25:7), even though they often complained and rebelled against him (11:1ff; 12:1ff; 16:1ff, 41; 20:3ff; 21:5ff).

**Main message:** Just as they began their walk with God by faith (leaving Egypt), so His people must continue the journey by faith (to the Promised Land). In 1 Corinthians 10:1ff, Paul cites Israel's sins in the desert (lust for evil things, sexual immorality, tempting Christ, complaining, etc.) to warn Christians about their deadly result. "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition . . ." (v. 11).

**Interesting sidelights**

- test for marital infidelity (5:11-31)
- Nazirite vow instituted (6:1-21)
- longest chapter on giving (7)
- second Passover permitted (9:1-14)
- marching orders (9:15-23)
- blowing of trumpets (10:1-10)
- Moses' uniqueness as prophet (12:6-8)
- sacrifice of red heifer (19:1ff)
- Balaam's talking donkey (22:21-34)
- inheritance rights of females (27:1ff; 36:1ff)
- boundaries of Canaan (34:1-29)
- cities for Levites; cities of refuge (35:1-34)

**Ancient blessing:** "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace" (6:24-26).

**Numbers in a sentence:** Under the strong and humble hand of Moses, inconsistent Israel follows the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night from Mt. Sinai toward Canaan, is severely tested along the way, and arrives at the Jordan River after enduring 40 years of unbelief, grumbling, and death in the wilderness.