

Study 36: Numbers 1 to 10:10

Background. The book of *Numbers* is the fourth book of the *Torah* or *Pentateuch*, and actually continues the narration begun in the book of *Exodus*. *Exodus* concludes at Sinai with God making a covenant with His people and instructing them in the ways of holiness. We find this described in detail in the book of *Leviticus* through which God schooled His people in the covenant. Having received the Law, they were being formed into a community, a holy community, centered on the Meeting Tent where the Levites carried out their ministry through the religious rites specified by God Himself.

The book of *Numbers* spends almost ten chapters completing the *Exodus* narrative and describing the preparations required to ready the people for the remainder of their 40-year journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. We will address these ten chapters in this first study guide of the book of *Numbers*.

The Hebrew name for this book is *Bemidbar* or "*in the wilderness*," which is probably a more fitting name than *Numbers*, the name taken from the *Septuagint*, or Greek translation of the Bible. It is called *Numbers* because it begins with God telling Moses to "*take a census of all...the people of Israel*" [Nm 1:2]. And *Numbers* concludes with a second census, one that counts the second generation before they enter the Promised Land [Nm 26:2].

Authorship. *Numbers* has traditionally been included among the "*Books of Moses*" – the *Torah* – the first five books of the Old Testament. While Moses could well have been the original source of many of the traditions that formed the core narrative of *Numbers* and the other books of the *Torah*, the text we have today probably resulted from centuries of editing. There exists within *Numbers* some influence of what scholars call the "priestly" tradition, and most believe the book took its final and present form during the exile in Babylon or sometime shortly after the return to Jerusalem, perhaps around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

We actually know very little about this editorial process since we possess no early (pre-Septuagint) texts. Some early fragmentary texts have been discovered, and one, the "Silver Scrolls" unearthed in 1979, includes an amulet containing the priestly or Aaronic Blessing found in *Numbers* [Nm 5:21-27]. These tiny scrolls, dated from the 7th century B.C., predate the Dead Sea Scrolls by 400 years. That they contain the Aaronic Blessing supports the historicity of the *Torah* and demonstrates that portions of the text were written earlier than many scholars had believed.

It's important to realize that in many instances scholarly conclusions are strictly hypothetical and might well be less than accurate. But regardless of the process through which the books of Sacred Scripture have come to us, in no way does this process alter Church teaching that the Holy Spirit inspired the entire Bible. Indeed, the process through which each book arrived at its final form is also the work of the Spirit.

Overview. *Numbers* can be divided into three major sections as follows:

1. The time at Sinai [Nm 1:1-10:10]
 - a. The first census is ordered
 - b. Levites, Nazirites, Priests, and Laws
 - c. Preparations for the journey
2. The wanderings from Sinai to Moab [Nm 10:11-22:1]
 - a. Departure from Sinai
 - b. Rebellion: people, Aaron, Miriam – sin and chastisement
 - c. Rites and observances
 - d. Rebellion: people, Levities, priests – punishment
 - e. Purification: red heifer, water from the rock, bronze serpent
 - f. Kadesh, departure, military victory
3. Plains of Moab [Nm 22:2-36:13]
 - a. Balaam and the ass
 - b. Second census
 - c. Joshua succeeds
 - d. More laws
 - e. The journey's stages
 - f. Boundaries

The narrative in *Numbers* begins after the time of the Covenant and God's proclamation of His Law as described in both *Exodus* and *Leviticus*. This all took place during the first year or two of the journey of God's People. *Numbers*, therefore, continues the description of the Sinai event, and goes on to relate the remainder of the 40-year journey to the Promised Land.

The first chapters of *Numbers*, through Nm 10:11 and addressed in this study guide, continue the narration that began with Ex 19 and is often called *The Sinai Pericope*. (A pericope is simply a portion of related Biblical text.) In this instance it addresses the formation of God's people at Sinai and the beginning of His continuing presence among them. At Sinai God first revealed both His Law and how He was to be worshipped by His people.

God also prepared the people for their long penitential and transforming journey in the wilderness, a journey they had to undergo before entering the Promised Land. It was a time of trial, temptation, and challenge, but also a time in which God's people came to experience His mercy, His forgiveness, and His presence among them.

Within *Numbers* we find several key themes. The first, and most obvious, relates the story of the wanderings of the Israelites as they made their way from Mount Sinai to the Plains of Moab. It is from the latter that they began their conquest of the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, Moses' successor.

Another theme of *Numbers* relates to God's active role in the lives of His People. Through the Exodus and the calling of Moses, God ultimately led His people into the Promised Land; but this was not the entirety of His plan for them. God's primary desire was that His people should serve Him, and for this reason they

were led first far to the south, to Sinai and to Covenant. To live the Covenant, God's chosen people were commanded to worship God alone [Ex 20:3-5; 34:14-17] and to obey His Law that called them to an entirely new and different way of life.

As we follow them on their journey, we discover how often they needed God's protective hand and guidance. He not only protected them from enemies and the obvious challenges of their long trek through what was often an inhospitable wilderness, but He also protected them from themselves. Through Moses, their leader, God taught them His ways and chastised them when they strayed and rebelled against Him. The Covenant and its Law provided God's People with a solid framework, a means to return to God when Israel inevitably strayed, as they would many times in the centuries to come. We can better understand the history of God's people, if we view it more as a record of divine rather than human activity.

ROUTE OF THE EXODUS OF THE ISRAELITES FROM EGYPT



The First Census. The Lord instructed Moses to take a census of Israel “*by families, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head; from twenty years old and upward...*” [Nm 1:2-3] Its purpose was to identify the number of males of an age capable of bearing arms and therefore available for military service. From these “*counting and musterings*” Moses could organize an army into companies based on tribal affiliation. Not only were the men numbered, but Moses also named “*a man from each tribe, each man being the head of the house of his fathers*” [Nm 1:4].

Moses and his leadership needed an accurate count, but they also needed to create a capable military organization to deal with the expected hostile resistance they would surely encounter as they made their way to the land God had promised them. Additionally, because the movement of so many people would be a breeding ground for mass confusion and other problems, order was necessary and procedures had to be established for making, breaking, and setting up camp. Here we see the beginnings of a military and political organization based on the existing tribal structure. In a very real sense, Moses was faced with a “law and order” situation: in *Leviticus* he lays down the law and in *Numbers* he establishes order.

The basic military purpose of the census is highlighted by the omission of the tribe of Levi from the count. Because the Levites were to engage only in the liturgical and other religious duties related to their service in the sanctuary, the Levites were not permitted to engage in activities that would make them unclean. Since this also included military service, the tribe was not included in the census. The Levites were also tasked with taking down, transporting, and setting up the tabernacle whenever the people moved to a new location. [See Nm 1:47-53]

And yet, despite the omission of the Levites from the count, the census was more than militarily necessary. It also had a strong religious basis. We encountered this in *Exodus* when the census was used to determine how much each person should contribute to the construction of the Tabernacle [Ex 38:24-31]. Note, too, that the formation of military units did not lead to the establishment of a national army of the kind found in other nations. It resulted instead in the Army of the Lord, formed to carry out God’s will. We see this foreshadowed by God in Egypt at the onset of the plagues, when He tells Moses:

“Pharaoh will not listen to you; then I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring forth my hosts, my people the sons of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment” [Ex 7:4].

The results of the census listed the number of males in each tribe (Judah was the largest) and gave a total count of 603,550 males of military age. If this seems like an excessively large number, it probably is. It is highly unlikely that there were anywhere near that many men in the wilderness with Moses. Such a number would mean upwards of several million people when we include women and children. What are we to make of this large number? A pure literalist will simply say that the number is accurate and go on from there, ignoring the obvious issues related to food, sanitation, encampment, organization, and travel that

would result from so many people gathered in the wilderness. Such a large number would far exceed the known population figures at the time, and would also make little sense in light of the events that had just occurred in Egypt and would soon take place in Canaan.

What, then, are we to make of it? First of all, it's important to realize that the author did not intend to write a modern historical document. *Numbers*, like all of Sacred Scripture, is primarily a theological document. With this in mind, many scholars believe the large numbers reflect the population of Israel at a far later date, perhaps during the time of the Kingdom or when *Numbers* underwent editing either during or after the Babylonian exile. Viewed from this perspective, the large numbers were a kind of anachronism that showed how God had blessed His people, that He was faithful to the promise that Abraham's descendants would be many. The first census, then, proved God's faithfulness to His people, that He had kept His promises. He redeemed them from their slavery in Egypt and joined with them in sacred covenant. Although they entered Egypt centuries before as a small clan of 70 people, they departed as a multitude, as a nascent nation that God would preserve and protect.

Other scholars address the issue by highlighting possible problems relating to translation and the development of language. The Hebrew word, '*elep*', translated as "thousand", is often translated quite differently and can mean a military unit, or a clan, or simply a portion of a tribe. Some suspect that it is these non-numerical definitions that were in use during the earlier time described in *Numbers*, while '*elep*' coming to mean "thousand" might be a later linguistic development. Accepting this would result in significant changes to the census results. For example, the men of the tribe of Judah, instead of numbering "seventy-four thousand, six hundred," would number "seventy-four military units, six-hundred men." The total for all the tribes would then amount to 598 military units, composed of 5,500 fighting men – a much smaller and far more realistic figure. Theologically this also reminds us of God's power and His plan to take this numerically insignificant people and make of them a nation capable of defeating their enemies but only through God's help. God raises up the weak and oppressed to accomplish remarkable things for His glory.

God also instructed Moses to organize the tribes, uniting and forming them into a nation, a holy nation centered on God's abiding presence. We see this in how the tribes are positioned both in the encampment and on the move through the wilderness. As described in *Numbers* 2, each tribe was assigned to encamp in a specific location. The Tabernacle was at the center, with the Levites surrounding it. The other tribes (the descendants of Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were included as two of the twelve tribes) were assigned specific locations relative to the Tabernacle's central position.

East: Judah, Issachar, Zebulun

South: Reuben, Simeon, Gad

West: Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin

North: Dan, Asher, Naphtali

Certainly some tribes are assigned places of honor, but the arrangement of the tribes also highlights their essential equality and their unity as foundational elements of the holy nation central to God's plan. It provided a structure, a physical reminder that God is at the center of their lives and, as a people, they must trust in Him always and turn to Him for everything. God's plan, then, not only established a sense of order but also reinforced His importance in the lives of His people. It is one thing to live in slavery and yearn for freedom, but it is something else entirely to become free rather suddenly and accept the responsibilities that accompany freedom. This is something Israel will come to accept only with difficulty.

Levites, Nazirites, Priests and Laws. Although the Levites were not included in the first census, *Numbers* continues by describing a special census of just the Levites "*whom Moses and Aaron numbered at the commandment of the LORD, by families, all the males from a month old and upward...*" [Nm 3:49].

Barred from military service the Levites were instead appointed "*over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings, and over all that belongs to it; they are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall tend it, and shall encamp around the tabernacle*" [Nm 1:50].

In *Numbers* 3 each family among the Levites was assigned specific responsibilities relating to the care and furnishings of the Tabernacle. The various Levite families were also positioned in the central location of the encampment, immediately surrounding the Tabernacle, with Moses, Aaron, and his priestly sons assigned the prime positions to the east of the Tabernacle's entrance [Nm 3:38].

We should note the importance given to the Tabernacle and its furnishings. Liturgical vessels and other objects were treated with special reverence in accordance with God's will. This became apparent in God's instructions to Moses detailed in *Numbers* 4. Note how the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, and its sacred furnishings were protected from misuse, profanation, and damage, and that responsibility for their care was assigned to specific families among the Levites.

Following the lead of our ancestors in faith, the Church has always insisted that its liturgical objects be treated with the same kind of special respect. For example, in one of his letters St. Jerome, perhaps the greatest of the early Church's scriptural scholars, wrote:

"...the testimony of Holy Scripture shows the veneration that should be given to Holy things and to everything used in the ministry of the altar. Sacred vessels, sacred linens, and all objects relating the liturgy of the Lord's Passion should not be regarded as ordinary everyday objects. Because they are in contact with the Body and Blood of the Lord, they have holiness attached to them and should be venerated with the same respect as is shown His Body and Blood" [Jerome, Letter 144 to Theophilus].

In *Numbers* we see how well the people were organized; and it was an organization designed for God's indwelling. But this physical organization also protected them from God's overwhelming power. They were a people that needed to recognize and experience this power and become the holy people God desired. One element of this spiritual journey to holiness was the Aaronic or priestly Blessing which we encounter in Nm 6:22-27. Communicated to the people by Aaron and his sons (the priests), it empowers the people and sets them apart from all other nations.

The LORD said to Moses: "Speak to Aaron and his sons, and tell them: this is how you shall bless the Israelites. Say to them:

The LORD bless you and keep you!

The LORD let his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you!

The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace!

So shall they invoke my name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them."

About this blessing one early Jewish commentary stated:

"By gradual stages from the petition for material blessings and protection, to that for divine favor as a spiritual blessing, and in beautiful climax culminates in the petition for God's most consummate gift, *shalom*, peace, the welfare in which all material and spiritual well-being is comprehended."

Interestingly, some Jewish scholars, digging more deeply into the original Hebrew words, offer perhaps a more literal, theological translation:

The LORD will kneel before you presenting gifts and will guard you with a hedge of protection.

The LORD will shine the fullness of His being on you bringing order, comfort, and sustenance.

The LORD will lift up His wholeness of being and look upon you; He will set in place all you need to be whole and complete.

Invoked by the priests in their role as mediators with God, the Aaronic Blessing has become widely used in both Jewish and Christian liturgy and worship. Many Church Fathers suggested that this tripartite blessing encompasses the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And as a priestly blessing, it is one of the optional final blessings with which a Catholic priest blesses the congregation at Mass before the dismissal. It is also included as an integral part of many of the Church's sacramental and other rites.

Interestingly, the Aaronic blessing follows immediately after the law relating to the *Nazirite* vow with which it is closely connected [Nm 6:1-21]. *Nazir* is a Hebrew word meaning "one who is separated or consecrated" and described anyone whose dedication was expressed in ways far beyond that normally required by the Law. The practices related to the *Nazirite* vow – abstention from wine, uncut

hair, avoidance of all ritual impurity – were outward, visible signs (in a sense, sacramental) of an inward, spiritual intention.

Numbers is also closely linked to *Leviticus* in that it presents us with additional laws supplementing those in *Leviticus*. These additional laws obviously relate to future conditions the people would encounter during their time in the wilderness and after their entry in Canaan, and most relate to ritual uncleanness. Through these laws God gave His people a message: where God is present, all must be clean. I'm reminded of the maxim my mother, an RN, used to repeat to me when, as a young child, I came home covered in dirt and grime: "*Cleanliness is next to Godliness*. Now, go, take a bath." And like a Levitical priest, she would inspect me afterwards to ensure I was truly clean.

These laws begin with some brief comments regarding lepers [Nm 5:1-4]. (More comprehensive laws on leprosy are detailed in *Leviticus* 13-14.) They may seem harsh to us today, but before the advent of modern medicine, communicable disease often spread quickly. Given the nature of the disease and the lack of medical knowledge on how leprosy was communicated, these were reasonable precautions, especially for a people on the move in the wilderness. Even in relatively modern times, there existed leper colonies established to separate lepers from the community at large. For example, in Hawaii St. Damien, SS.CC. ministered in a leper colony on the island of Molokai during the 19th century. Jesus, of course, perfected and fulfilled the Law; and in doing so welcomed lepers, cleansed them, and ministered to them. He taught that we were made unclean not from outside sources, but by that which came from within, from our own hearts.

Following these laws *Numbers* comments on the law regarding restitution [Nm 5:5-10], a subject covered in far greater detail in *Leviticus* 5. But one of the more fascinating laws addressed in *Numbers* relates to the "trial by ordeal" of a wife suspected of infidelity [Nm 5:11-31]. This trial might seem more than a bit odd to us, but marital fidelity was critical to ensure familial and tribal cohesion. Adultery, therefore, was a very serious offense against both God and community, and if proven resulted in the death penalty. But the trial of a woman *suspected* of adultery was actually quite mild compared to the ordeals practiced by Israel's neighbors at the time. From our modern perspective we might question why this trial applied only to women, but before we apply our 21st century mores to the ancient world, we must recognize the critical role played by women in raising children and maintaining the family household. To get a sense of how highly women were valued by the ancient Jews, read Proverbs 31:10-31. It was this value as wife and mother that was threatened by acts of adultery. Adultery, especially that committed by wife and mother, tore the fabric of the family and, by extension, of tribe and nation. Of course, this holds true today as well, for both men and women.

Numbers 7 provides a description of the events surrounding the consecration of the Tabernacle and Sanctuary:

“On the day when Moses had finished setting up the Tabernacle, and had anointed and consecrated it with all its furnishings, and had anointed and consecrated the altar with all its utensils, the leaders of Israel, heads of their fathers’ houses, the leaders of the tribes, who were over those who were numbered, offered and brought their offerings before the Lord...” [Nm 7:1-3]

The chapter continues with a detailed description of the specific offerings of each of the twelve tribes, and their value. The consecration of the Tabernacle came to be seen as a special event in the life of Israel, one that would be celebrated centuries later when Solomon builds the Temple in Jerusalem [See 2 Chron 5-7 and 1 Kgs 8:1-66]. The generosity of the people, especially as it relates to divine worship, continues and is evident even up the time of Jesus.

Numbers 8 begins with a description of the golden lampstand or *menorah* that is positioned in the holy place. Its seven arms are said to indicate completeness and the creative power of God. Some Early Church Fathers believed the lampstand to be a sign of Christ, who brings light to the world, while some medieval exegetes considered the seven arms as representing the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. One thing we know for certain: it gave off light and illuminated the holy place.

Following this, *Numbers* describes the ceremony through which the Levites were dedicated to God’s work. They were not consecrated, as were the priests, but only cleansed. Held in high regard because of their loyalty to God and Moses during the confrontation with the idolaters [Ex 32:25-29], the Levites were given special treatment and were claimed by God as His own:

“Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine. And after that the Levites shall go in to do service at the tent of meeting, when you have cleansed them and offered them as a wave offering” [Nm 8:14-15].

A “wave offering” was the portion of a sacrifice offered to God, and was literally waved in the air before the Lord. The cleansing ceremony also included a laying on of hands by the people, indicating that the children of Israel gave the Levites to God [Nm 8:10].

We are then told of the preparations for Israel’s departure from Sinai as they begin their journey to the Promised Land [Nm 9:1-10:10]. These verses begin with God’s command to Moses that each year “the people of Israel keep the Passover at its appointed time” [Nm 9:2]. The second Passover was therefore celebrated by Israel at Sinai, shortly before their departure. This is followed by a discussion of individual cases in which uncleanness and travel prevent a person from celebrating Passover at the proper time.

Numbers 9 concludes with the miraculous manifestation of God’s Presence in the cloud that covers the Tabernacle:

“On the day that the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and at evening it was over

the Tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. So it was continually; the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night” [Nm 9:15-16].

The cloud not only manifested God’s Presence among His people, but also expressed God’s Will for them, as it related to their movement. [See Ex 14:19-20] As we read in *Numbers*:

“...[when] the cloud continued over the Tabernacle...the people of Israel remained in camp...but when it was taken up, they set out. At the command of the Lord they encamped, and at the command of the Lord they set out; they kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by Moses” [Nm 9:22-23].

Once again, through His Presence and signs, God taught His people to listen to Him, to obey Him, and to trust in Him. He will then guide and protect them as they make their way through the wilderness, all under the priestly and religious authority He granted to Moses, Aaron, priests, and Levites.

In the same way, Jesus reminds us that obedience will keep us in His Presence:

"If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love" [Jn 15:10].

To remain in Jesus’ love is to be in His Presence, to trust that He will lead us to the salvation He has planned for us. Just as God made Himself present to Israel, so too does Jesus make Himself present to us in a far more personal way in the Eucharist, a gift that comes to us through the priestly ministry of the New Covenant.

Numbers 10:1-10 addresses the construction of two silver trumpets used to summon the people for worship at the “*entrance of the tent of meeting*” [Nm 10:3]. The trumpets were also used as a call to arms when the people “*go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you*” [Nm 10:9]. Note, too, that the blowing of the trumpets was a priestly task – “*And the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow the trumpets*” [Nm 10:8] – because, most importantly, it was a call to God, an appeal for Him to come to His people’s aid. The trumpets, therefore, were another reminder of God’s enduring Presence among His People, a sign that He will lead them to victory if only they trust and obey.

At this point *Numbers* begins its narrative of the wanderings of God’s people from Sinai to the plains of Moab [Nm 10:11-21:1]. We will address these events in the next Study Guide.