

NUMBERS

Lesson 1 - Introduction

Well, out of the frying pan and into the fire we go, just as the Israelites were about to do. As we lay down the Book of Leviticus, we begin an exploration of Numbers that will last for several months; so, let's back up for a moment and see the current condition of Israel.

As we end Leviticus they've been gone from Egypt for around one year. So much has happened to these people so fast! Israel had gone from little more than a clan of 75 to a large nation of around 3 million souls during the 4 centuries they had spent in Egypt.

I don't think we can wrap our minds around just how long a period of time 400 years is. Not much over 200 years ago....only half the amount of time Israel was in Egypt....did George Washington become the 1st President of the newly formed United States of America. But for us it's nearly impossible to relate to those days. And yet even with all the papers and books and essays and documents written about those incredible events that led to the founding of this great nation, what actually happened isn't fully known; history is constantly being questioned and revised. We have legends that abound from the Revolutionary War era: Washington chopping down the Cherry tree; Paul Revere's ride; the Boston Tea Party; the first shot fired at Concord and so many more. Almost all of these stories are based on actual events, but most have likely been scrubbed clean, molded and exaggerated to make the characters bigger than life and to express a viewpoint that conforms to a certain political agenda.

For us post-moderns the events of the American Revolution are fuzzy at best and bound up in dusty history books. There is no one alive to defend or deny the most accepted accounts from those days; and those happenings of a mere 250 years ago are barely even considered relevant to us so few even want to know. In an era when printing presses abounded throughout the colonies, newspapers were in full swing, journalism was a well-established profession, libraries were stocked and growing, and the speed of communication was quite rapid still, with all that available to us our current knowledge of that era is limited and our interest in the lives of those folks is near zero. And despite the substantial volume of actual Revolutionary War records there is little consensus among scholars of EXACTLY what occurred during the formative years of America. That shouldn't be too hard to understand as we have a Supreme Court that cannot agree on the intent of the men who penned our Constitution barely over 200 years ago.

With the analogy of contemporary America's view of the Revolutionary War period in mind, put yourself in the sandals of the Israelites, in Egypt, in the years leading up to the arrival of

Moses. How they had arrived in Egypt those several centuries earlier was probably not terribly important to the bulk of the Hebrews. A score of generations had passed since Jacob brought his sons and their families from the Land of Canaan down into Egypt to be cared for through a horrible famine that gripped the region; and their sponsor and caretaker was none other than the Grand Vizier of Egypt: Jacob's very own son, Joseph. Joseph (obviously Jacob's favorite son) whom he thought had been killed by wild animals so many years earlier was the savior not just of Israel but of Egypt as well; because just as God had a purpose for Israel, He had a purpose for Egypt. Egypt was to be the womb in which Israel would gestate until it was God's appointed time to birth them as full-blown nation, set-apart for service to Him.

By the time Yehoveh was readying Israel for Moses' arrival, Jacob and Joseph were but distant memories. How much the current batch of Israelites knew of them that was actually true versus how much was hyperbole and legend would be difficult to assess; except that like us the Israelites were just people trying to live life, and the day to day challenges they faced were enough to worry about without thinking of themselves as some important piece of an unfolding cosmic prophetic puzzle. In reality the Israelites were now more Egyptian in their thinking and beliefs than they were Hebrew. I doubt Abraham would have recognized them. And yet they did not **entirely** forget who they were and where they originated. They had leaders and elders who God had raised up for a purpose; leaders who wouldn't let them forget even though a goodly portion of the Hebrew population thought these leaders senile and hangers-on to a lost hope and an ancient myth. Like us they wondered what events from centuries earlier really had to do with them.

So after 4 centuries, how much did the average Hebrew really think about the promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and then Jacob that their God would give them a land of their own; a land flowing with milk and honey? Even that it would be a very specific land they were to receive, the land that those same 3 Patriarchs roamed throughout for the bulk of their lives: the Land of Canaan.

Was Israel still waiting, expectantly? Or had they largely given up and adjusted to their new circumstances? Had they put the 4-centuries-old hope of a homeland so far back into their minds that it was but a distant memory? How much do we, today, think about the birth of our nation, the Revolutionary War, the Minutemen at Concord, Benjamin Franklin, and of our relatives giving their lives for the freedoms we enjoy today?

So there were the Israelites just living life (albeit a miserable one as they had become the slave labor force of a nationalist Egyptian government that had empire building in mind) when suddenly a man named Moses shows up, and says that God sent him. The Hebrews sighed a collective, "yeah, right" and went on about their business.

Well after all those years of mere existence, hundreds of years of sitting on the sidelines, suddenly the prophetic dominoes began to fall at a breathtaking rate. Moses informs the elders of Israel of his mission, then he immediately goes to Pharaoh with his message from God to let His people go; the Pharaoh refuses and God sets about to change the Prince of Egypt's mind through devastating plagues. Finally after Pharaoh remains hardened to the Lord's warnings and disciplines, El Shaddai's judgment is poured out on the land of Egypt and all firstborn of

Egyptians and their animals die. The Hebrews had been instructed in advance to paint the doorposts of their mud brick huts with the blood of a yearling ram, in a sign to God that they were in submission to Him. Many Egyptians and sojourners from other far-flung nations had seen the power of the God of the Hebrews in that series of 9 other-worldly plagues and infestations, and so they followed suit; those who obeyed...Hebrew, Egyptian, Canaanite, Hittite, Bedouin, African.... were all spared death at the hand of the Creator.

Within 24 hours after that horrific judgment the Israelites were packed and on they're way out of Egypt. Within a few weeks of that they arrive at Mt. Sinai and their leader, Moses, begins to receive a long series of commands and ordinances directly from the mouth of Yehoveh. Moses is receiving the Constitution of Israel, and it's unlike anything man has ever seen because it's not OF a man. Although they are called a nation of priests, a separate Priesthood is established by means of the family of Moses' brother, Aaron. God's principles were made visual and physical and understandable by humans, by means of rituals and celebrations and holy days and the construction of the all-important earthly dwelling place of God Almighty, the Wilderness Tabernacle.

This grand portable tent was a physical earthly model of God's Heavenly throne room. Moses met with God on a regular basis, face-to-face, inside the Holiest Place in that tent, and received counsel and instruction.

But now, by the end of the book of Leviticus, the redemption of God's people had been accomplished, the laws and ordinances and principles for the new nation of Israel had been established, and a means for God to be in the midst of His cherished people had been completed. And from the night of the great death in Egypt (which we today call the Passover) to the end of the Book of Leviticus, was but a mere ONE year. Imagine if you were one of those ordinary Hebrews, how your head must have been swimming. How at odds everything Yehoveh had instructed through His mediator, Moses, was with everything you had ever known. All that you thought was of great value God says is worthless. All that you thought was worthless God says is priceless. Could **you or I** in ONE YEAR be completely remolded? Could **you or I** in 12 or 13 cycles of the moon go from thoroughly pagan to thoroughly Godly? Could you or I in that short of a time forget our customs and traditions that were real and unquestioned; those thoughts and knee-jerk reactions that defined our lives and our ancestors lives, in favor of a whole new set of rules that at this point were simply theoretical ideals?

Well that's the point in the development of Israel where we enter the Book of Numbers. And of course all that Israel had been through up until then was but the beginning. All that had happened and all they had been instructed to that point was not an end in itself; it was only to prepare them for what lay ahead.

Let me comment that while divine idealism was at the core of the Torah and the teachings that the Lord gave to Moses and Moses passed on to his charges, these commands were also practical. These priestly laws of Leviticus in some ways envisioned a kind of utopia on the one hand but on the other they were the framework for a new and holy lifestyle that the Israelites were to live and enjoy as God's people. But we must grasp that these laws were saturated by a realism that fully reflected the social and political conditions of ancient Israel and the ancient

Middle East in general. How Israel operated looked, from the outside, fairly typical for a people of that era.

Even more, these laws worked. It is common and correct for the Believer to say that the Law was a shadow and a type and it pointed forward to the work and mission of Messiah. Yet to make it as though the laws didn't actually have a real and tangible and immediate purpose for Israel, or that they weren't meant to operate and perform as they were designed in every day practical ways is a mistake. The God-ordained laws and rituals that set out a means to atonement PROVIDED actual atonement for sin. The law and rituals that set out a means to become clean again after contracting ritual impurity PROVIDED actual cleansing. This was not a "pretend" or "inferior" atonement and cleansing as is too often erroneously taught. Thus in the book of Numbers we'll see these rituals in full operation as people sin and become ritually impure and then the priests perform the proper ritual in the proper manner (with the full participation of the worshipper) and the situation is remedied.

I doubt many Christians have EVER ventured into the Book of Numbers. What a dull sounding book to our ears. But as you're about to discover the Book of Numbers is one of the most vibrant and informative of all the books in the Bible.

You see for us in our day the word "numbers" is associated with accounting and records keeping, math; income tax returns, balancing check-books, using computers and the Internet, dealing with budgets and debt. Numbers are impersonal and cold and in some ways even feel like a threat to our culture; in other ways numbers represent a kind of self-imposed bondage we are forced to deal with like it or not.

But long ago numbers were magical. They were mysterious and portended good things and bad. They were symbolic and thought to be the very key to unlocking the mind and will of the gods. Numbers were desired, exciting and thoroughly studied and discussed. Numbers were awesome, welcome, and at times fearsome. Numbers were intensely important to the Hebrew people as well, right on through Jesus' era and into today.

The Apostle Paul made abundant use of the book of Numbers in one of his greatest teachings, as found in the 1Cor. 10. Let me read it for you:

READ 1 COR.10:1 - 11

You see all of these events that Paul listed are found WRITTEN DOWN in the Torah, in the book of Numbers to be specific. Paul saw what we would see: that the book of Numbers while a record of history is also prophetic. We will see the Messiah in the book of Numbers, and we will see Him operating BEFORE He became a man.

Numbers is not actually the Hebrew name for this, the 4th of the 5 books of Torah. Numbers is merely the English translation of the Greek name given to this book.....Arithmoi.....from which we also get the word arithmetic. And the Greeks gave this name to it because in the early chapters the Lord orders a census taken of the Israelites, and the results are recorded.

In Hebrew the name for this book is **B'midbar**, and it means "In the Wilderness". It is in the book of B'midbar where we find the story of the 40 years that Israel spent wandering in the wilderness of the Negev, the Sinai, and probably for a short time the Arabian Peninsula. Numbers is really a misnomer and the amount of actual "numbers" and lists is quite small. The vast bulk of this book consists of stories and narratives of those formative 40 years that our Lord apparently thought important for us to know about (as Paul forcefully points out to his readers).

B'midbar has all sorts of interesting nuances; not the least of which is that the first 10 chapters covers a time period of only 20 DAYS. That's right, the first 10 chapters record the events of less than 3 weeks.

Everett Fox, the editor and commentator for the scholarly Schocken Bible, sees a structure of B'midbar that can be broken into thirds.

The first section covers chapters 1 -10, and he calls it "In the Wilderness of Sinai: The Camp". It covers the census of the Israelites and the duties assigned to the Levites. It explains the ordering of the Camp, the rites of the Nazirite, matters of God's presence in the Wilderness Tabernacle, and the beginning of the journey towards the Land of Canaan.

The second section covers chapters 11 - 25, and Fox calls it "The Rebellious Folks: Narratives of Challenge". It begins by dealing with the fate of the generation of Exiles that came out of Egypt, the first 3 of their rebellions, the account of the 12 spies sent into Canaan, then some more rebellions, encounters with various other peoples, and then the famous story of Balaam, the pagan prophet.

The third section includes chapters 26 - 36. Our commentator entitles it "In the Plains of Moab: Preparation for the Conquest of Canaan". It begins with another census, talks about certain Holy Day sacrifices, adds some rules about making vows, tells of some battles they had with people they ran across, discusses the upcoming conquest of the Promised Land, and lays out laws about the Sanctuary Cities, or Cities of Refuge, that will be operated by a special group of Levites as a safe place for those who committed manslaughter to reside under protection from the Kinsman Redeemers who want revenge.

Since this is a fairly large book it helps us to know in advance that from a 30,000-foot view B'midbar, Numbers, plays out according to a pattern of 3; and so we find three important cycles of revelation and instruction from the Lord laid out in its pages. The first takes place at Sinai; the second at Kadesh (also called Kadesh-Barnea), and the third takes place in Moab, as Israel gets ready to enter Canaan.

Numbers would NOT be the first book that one who is intent on studying the Scriptures would probably want to start with; because Numbers is based entirely on the foundation laid by Genesis and Exodus. If one doesn't know or understand the foundational context for B'midbar then one will invariably misunderstand what goes on (particularly as regards the many God-ordained rituals).

Yes B'midbar has (of course) much ritual woven into the narrative. After all the prescribed rituals of Leviticus had only within the last several weeks before the events of Numbers even been introduced, and so the time to put them into practice was just beginning.

Modern day Christians (particularly modern day EVANGELICAL Christians) don't particularly like rituals as a general rule. In fact this distaste for ritual is not new. Most post-Enlightenment era Christian Scholars make no bones about disliking ritual, and it shows up in their backhanded swipes at the Torah commands and their superficial study and investigation into the roles of the Levite priests, especially. Since most seminaries teach according to the values and conclusions of these same scholars, the aversion to either DOING ritual or even seeing value in the ancient Hebrew ritual practices has carried over to the church in general. Further as we have discussed before, the Church has essentially discarded any sense of communal responsibility and in its place adopted individualism as the platform for action and expression of our faith. This disdain for ritual has a comfortable companion in individual-oriented denominational theologies and so the lens through which the Torah is now viewed (and most especially the Christian attitude towards the priestly rituals), is this: personal freedom and spontaneity are good, organized ritual is bad.

I have to tell you honestly that having been raised in the Protestant branch of the church, and being mostly a product of the Jesus Movement of the late 60's and early 70's, I have had a terribly hard time adjusting to accept celebrating the Biblical Festivals, Sabbath, and so on. It's not that I don't think it is good for me and my family, nor do I even argue that it is God's commands; it's simply not what I've known all my life, and so it is WORK to set aside what is comfortable and usual in exchange for what is Biblically prescribed.

Even if you do not see the value in YOUR involvement in Biblical ritual, I can assure you that understanding the Torah rituals is KEY to understanding the Torah as well as God's plan for mankind. Anthropologists have for a long time known that if they are going to understand a society (modern or ancient) they must begin with that society's rituals; for rituals are the foremost statements of any society's values.

Listen to what M. Wilson, a noted Anthropologist, said, a half-century ago about the importance of rituals in defining a culture:

"Rituals reveal values at their deepest level.....men express in ritual what moves them the most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, ritual reveals the values of the group. I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies....."

I don't think there is a more ignored or disliked (and therefore more terribly misunderstood) subject in the Bible than the rituals associated with SACRIFICING. Yet there is rarely a Pastor or Bible Teacher who would not regularly point out that Jesus fulfilled the very sacrificial system they both dislike and know nothing about. As Gordon Wenham points out, the sacrificial system is at the very heart of Biblical worship; it is unavoidable.

So while it may not be entirely comfortable for us, we NEED to study and understand the

rituals of the Torah because the entire purpose of these rituals revolves around communication between God and man. These rituals explain the very essence of our relationship with the God of the Bible. These rituals for the ancients were like our going to the movies today: the visual element is a needed and desired thing for understanding and it is so very powerful for men.

The Church today has few rituals left that actively involve the worshipper: mainly Baptism and Communion, but little else. The problem with this is that what we now have for ritual has become one-sided: somebody else performs, we watch. And somehow or another our mere presence counts for worship. That was NOT the essence of Biblical ritual, Old Testament OR New. As I've made clear, except for sacrifices that were on behalf of the priests or the entire community of Israel as a whole, the worshipper was an active participant and it was HE who killed the sacrificial animal. The worshipper was required on 3 occasions each year to make a pilgrimage to the Temple. The worshipper was required to set aside his normal work, cease almost all productive activity, and rest on the Shabbat. The worshipper was required to build and LIVE IN a Sukkah during Sukkoth. Active participation in ritual was the norm.

How easy it is for us to sing Billy Graham's famous call to the Altar, "just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me". How much more would those words mean to us if we had to take a half-ton Bull (that we had raised and/or purchased) and dragged it up to the Altar, tied it to one of the 4 Altar horns and then ritually slit its neck artery, watching its life drain away in a few seconds.

The point is that these Biblical rituals should not be lost on us. As we revisit them in the book of Numbers they are no longer simply the idealism and theory of Leviticus; so pay close attention to them for their underlying principals are what the unchanging Lord God is trying to teach us.

Watch as we explore B'midbar for even more emerging God-patterns; patterns that will show themselves mightily in the New Testament. One of the most interesting patterns, I believe, is that of the Nazarite. When I say Nazarite, do not confuse that with Nazarene or Nazareth, Yeshua's home. A Nazarite is a NON-Levite and NON-priest who has been set-apart for service to God by means of a vow, and thus has an elevated holy status as compared to the other Israelites. In modern day terms while a Levite priest is clergy, a Nazarite is a layman. Put another way, taking the vow of a Nazarite is a way for a person who is not a natural member of the priestly tribe of Levi to be DECLARED holy and fit for service to God, generally on par with a priest.

The similarity between a priest and a Nazarite becomes obvious when we study *the rituals* prescribed for a Nazarite: they are almost identical with those of a priest. We'll look at these rituals, which contain the essence of the spiritual meaning of its purpose, at the appropriate point in our study of Numbers; but for now just understand that a priest is a priest by birth. He has a birthright to be a priest because he's born into the proper tribe. A Nazarite on the other hand is an ordinary Israelite; he is a person who has NO right to be a priest because he wasn't born into the right tribe. Yet God has made a provision for those who are non-Levites but still want to serve Him, to be able to do so. By faith and trust in God, and by God's declaration, this person (this Nazarite) who is foreign to the priesthood is allowed to take on a special holiness virtually equal to a priest; again, the only difference is that the Nazarite cannot perform

Sanctuary duties. This is a model of how a gentile, who is a foreigner to Israel, can if he so desires be brought by the declaration of God into the service of God UNDER THE COVENANTS OF ISRAEL. In other words, the Nazarite is a model and pattern of how a gentile can become a Believer and worship the God of Israel.

Physically speaking a Jew and a gentile are different; a Jew has an advantage in that he is born into the covenants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but a gentile is not. Physically a priest and a Nazarite are different (a priest is of the tribe of Levi, a Nazarite is not). Spiritually a Jew and a gentile who trust God are made equal in status before the Lord. Spiritually a priest and Nazarite are made equal in status before the Lord. They each merely have different roles. The one was BORN into his role while the other had to be grafted in to attain his, so to speak. But in both cases, they are under the same covenants.

The point here is that we are going to see these patterns and principles appear in the New Testament. Paul speaks on them and uses the incidents recorded in Numbers, especially, to make his point that Yeshua fulfilled the patterns and principles of the Torah. But...and this is so essential to grasp in these and the days just ahead of us.....Paul also makes the point that if the already redeemed Israelites rebelled and got punished for it in ancient times (as told of in the book of Numbers), why would a Believer redeemed by the blood of Yeshua think he could be rebellious and escape God's harsh hand of discipline?

I would like to close this preparation for a study of B'midbar, Numbers, with the words of a man who's works I greatly admire and find myself usually in lock-step with: Gordon Wenham, a wonderful Christian scholar who teaches in Gloucester College of Higher Education in England. And he says this about the importance of understanding and accepting the value of Biblical ritual for the modern Christian:

"Similarly, the sacrificial offerings of animals, flour, oil and wine prescribed in Numbers are no longer valid expressions of Christian worship because they point beyond themselves to the one atoning sacrifice of Christ which has made them obsolete. Yet, Christians are still reminded: ".....let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of the lips that acknowledged His Name. Do not neglect to DO good, and to SHARE what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God". The principle of whole-hearted dedication to the worship of God LINKS the Old and New Testaments, even if our mode of devotion has altered. Similarly, if the tithe remains a norm for Christian giving, it may be noted that some Believers evidently gave much more. If much of the Biblical legislations cannot be applied today, its thoroughness and attention to detail should challenge the modern church to ask whether our more casual attitudes may not be a cloak for indifference".

Gordon Wenham is certainly not calling to start sacrificial procedures anew. But it is a reminder to us that so many of the Biblical rituals that take their form in the Biblical Feasts, for instance, while in no way needed for Atonement or Salvation are *indeed* needed to TEACH and to REMIND. To teach and remind us of God's principles, of His laws and commands, of how it is better to live our lives in rhythm with the Universe He created, rather than out of tune.

The Book of Numbers is historic, worshipful, instructive, and at times poetic. And having

Lesson 1 - Numbers Introduction

studied the 1st 3 books of Torah, you're now prepared to drink in and grasp the awesome revelations that will provide so many connecting links to the work of Yeshua HaMashiach, the saving attribute or person of the Lord God.