

People on the Move: The Book of Numbers

A New Order

Lesson #1 for October 3, 2009

Scriptures: Genesis 15:14-16; Leviticus 10:1-11; Numbers 1-4; Jeremiah 23:23,24; John 14:15-18,23.

1. This lesson is a discussion of how God organized the children of Israel as they prepared to leave Mount Sinai on their way to the Promised Land. It also talks about how order is important in the Christian church today. Exodus 23:20-23 says that God would do all their fighting for them. Why did He then organize them for military service by listing all the men who were 20 years of age and older who were fit?

We need to recognize as we begin this study that up until now, there has been no documented evidence from either Egypt or the Sinai peninsula that the children of Israel were ever there! No bones (remember that an estimated one million people died in that desert!), no metal objects, no trace whatsoever. Critical scholars point to this fact and completely discount the story of the sojourn in Egypt and the story of the exodus. There are some who believe that the area in which the children of Israel wandered was actually northwestern Saudi Arabia. But, no one is allowed to travel there or to investigate such a claim. A few have tried to do so without authorization, but their stories are questionable and have not been recognized by any group of scholars.

2. Prior to the time of the exodus, the children of Israel had been shepherds and slaves. They had never been organized as a military group. Did God imply by “numbering” them that He wanted them to start fighting their own battles?
3. Moses was born about 1525 B.C. His work for the children of Israel began about 1445 B.C. after 40 years in Egypt and then 40 years tending sheep in Midian. The events recorded in Exodus 3:1-40:38 took about a year and a half. (Exodus 19:1,2; 40:1,17) The events recorded in Leviticus covered one month. (Exodus 40:1,2,17; Numbers 1:1) Numbers covers almost the entire 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Most of the events within that forty year period and recorded in Numbers are undatable at this time. (Numbers 1:1; 33:33-38; Deuteronomy 1:1-3) Deuteronomy covers the last few months waiting on the east side of the Jordan River just before crossing into the Promised Land. (Deuteronomy 1:1-3; 2:14; 8:2; 29:5; 31:1-2; 34:7)
4. A lot of discussion has taken place over the years about God’s instructions later given in Deuteronomy 20:16-18 to kill all of the Canaanites. (Compare Exodus 23:20-23; Exodus 34:11-16) (Notice that God emphasized that the danger in Canaan was that they would adopt the pagan customs and worship the pagan “gods” in that land.) Why was it necessary for them to “completely destroy” the Canaanites? Did God plan for the Israelites to do all of that killing? Or, did God originally have a different plan? If so, what was that plan? Weren’t there some very notable times when God fought for them? (Joshua 6; 10:11) After seeing what God did to the Egyptians and to Jericho, why didn’t they ask God to do all their fighting for them? Were they afraid that God would get all the credit and that no one would respect them for their military prowess?
5. Read Genesis 15:14-16. What is implied about the condition of the Canaanites? Have we become so wicked that we must be destroyed? Is our “cup of iniquity full”?

Remember that God sent Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (and perhaps Lot) to those people as the first known “foreign missionaries.” The Amorites had had a lot of truth presented to them. Remember also that the Canaanites were fertility-cult worshipers. They would go “up” into the hills, get very drunk, and have sexual orgies as a means to “inspire” their “gods” to increase the fertility of their crops, their herds, and themselves. Remember that as subsistence farmers, their very lives depended on the fertility of their crops and their animals.

If the children of Israel had been faithful as they should have been and had been ready to witness to the Canaanites, and if the Canaanites had been ready to listen, then, no doubt, God’s instructions would have been different. Consider Rahab. (Joshua 2) Would you have picked Rahab as someone who was savable? God will be the One who will judge all of those people in the end just as He judges us.

6. Was God fair to the Canaanites? Compare Deuteronomy 9:5. Earlier, during the time of Abraham, God said they had not yet filled up their cup of iniquity.
7. Read Numbers 2. What does this teach us about God’s desire for orderliness? Prior to that plan, did the children of Israel just camp wherever they felt like putting their tents? Was there fighting over who would get the better campsites? We sometimes draw pictures of all of the children of Israel camped in perfect rows using what look like U. S. military tents! Of what did they make their tents? Were they all the same? Very unlikely!
8. Take a look at the general organization of the camp. The tabernacle of God was in the center. Surrounding the tabernacle were the campsites for the Levites. Surrounding the Levites, and thus, further away from the central tabernacle, were the 12 tribes—three tribes on each of the four sides of the encampment. Notice that the tribe of Joseph was divided and counted as two tribes—Ephraim and Manasseh—thus “replacing” the tribe of Levi to make a total of 12 tribes in addition to the Levites.
9. Did orderliness in the camp of Israel lead to greater reverence and respect for God? Why were the Levites given the special camping places surrounding the tabernacle? What were their special responsibilities for the tabernacle? Why did God need to give such specific instructions about the tabernacle/tent? Who was to care for it? Who was to move it, etc.? Notice that while the sacred tent was carried following the first three tribes, and the other sacred objects were carried after the first six tribes, the ark itself was leading the way in the very front! (Numbers 10:33) Did the children of Israel believe that with the ark and the pillar of cloud in front of them, that God was directly guiding them? Was all of that a kind of “training camp” for the Israelites?
10. Review the marching order that God directed them to follow. Why do you think God chose that particular order?
11. There is a kind of contradiction in God’s statements in His directions to the Israelites. He said to them, “Make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” (Exodus 25:8) But, there are other verses which seem to imply that they were not to get “too close”! (Numbers 3:10; 17:13) What does that teach us about our relationship to God? What do others say on this subject? (Psalms 139:1-10; Isaiah 57:15; Jeremiah 23:23,24; John 14:15-18,23)
12. While this lesson does not deal with that question specifically, we know that the children of Israel were instructed to take their offerings to the tabernacle to offer them. How are we to understand the verses which say that anyone who got near the tabernacle had to be put to death? (Numbers 3:10; 17:13) “Drawing near to the tent” was an idiom referring to the work

of a priest. (Numbers 1:51; 3:10,38; 4:15,19,20)

13. As we know, some Christian groups want to emphasize the sovereignty of God. To them God is quite removed from humanity—being far above us and a very strict authoritarian figure. By contrast, other more charismatic groups seem to teach that God is right here and now, even in their bodies—taking control of their speech and their actions. Should Seventh-day Adventists strike some kind of middle ground between those two extremes? Why? Or, why not? Should the church allow a certain amount of leeway based on cultural norms?
14. Would it be correct to say that sin is responsible for the chaos and disorderliness in God's universe? Is there chaos and disorderliness anywhere except here on planet Earth? If it wants to represent God correctly, should the church be carefully organized and neat and clean? Does God expect us to be neat, clean, and orderly in our churches today?
15. Was God being discriminatory in any way by His placement of the tribes in their different positions? Did any of the tribes feel like they were in a less favorable position? If you were a member of one of the tribes located at maximum distance from the tabernacle, would you feel disadvantaged? If you were a member of one of the tribes that was located right next to the Levites, would you feel privileged?
16. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was not officially organized until 1863—19 years after the great disappointment in 1844. Why do you think such a long time passed before they felt the need for “organization”?
17. The appointment of Aaron and his descendants as the high priests and the rest of the tribe of Levi as priests, singers, and caretakers for the tabernacle—and as God's intermediaries in one sense or another between Himself and the tribes of Israel—seems to imply some kind of barrier between God and the people. Adventists have been opposed to the idea of setting up priests. We do not ordain priests in our churches. Why do you think God did so back at that point in history in ancient Israel? Why don't we do it now? Is it that we have one High Priest, that is, Jesus Christ? (Hebrews 10:18-23) Or, is it that we are all a priesthood and a royal nation? (1 Peter 2:5-9; Romans 8:37-39; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21) If having priests was a good idea in Moses' day, why don't we appoint priests in our day? Can you imagine living in a theocracy today?

Why didn't God set up a system of schools instead of the system of the tabernacle, priests, and sacrifices? Didn't they need a lot of education?
18. How much individual liberty do you think was allowed for the separate tribes and even clans and families in that context? Where do you think the children of Israel got the tents that they lived in for those 40 years? Were all of those tents similar in appearance and design? Or did the camp look something like a hodgepodge?
19. In Exodus 13:2,12-15, God made it clear that after passing over the firstborn and preserving their lives during the tenth plague, He claimed the Israelite firstborn males as His special priests. This appears to be an extension of the fact that the oldest male in the family had been considered to be the priest of the family in times past. But after the experience of the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai, God appointed the tribe of Levi to take the place of all the firstborn sons in the other tribes. (Numbers 3:12-15) According to the numbers that are given, there were 273 more firstborn among the other tribes than the number of Levite males. God instructed the children of Israel to pay five pieces of silver or five shekels as compensation for each of those 273 males that could not be “exchanged” for Levite males. What was God

implying by that? Does that teach us something about the substitutionary role of Jesus Christ? If there had to be a strict one-for-one substitution, how could the one Savior, Jesus Christ, substitute for all of us?

20. The Levites had to be set aside in a special ordination ceremony before they could carry out their special duties involving teaching, judging, caring for the sanctuary, and performing the sacred duties connected with the sanctuary. Today, we ordain pastors and elders in local churches. Are they supposed to be carrying out those same duties?
21. Review the sad story of Nadab and Abihu who were sons of Aaron. (Leviticus 10:1-11) What do you think happened to those young men? Did they drink too much alcohol? Had they failed to develop a proper respect for God? Did they think that because they had been given such high positions as assistants to the high priest that they were “above” the rules? How would we respond to God doing such a thing in our day? If it happened to two “drunk” pastors, would you say, “Amen”? Compare the story of Ananias and Sapphira. (Acts 5) When God is trying to set up a new organization or group and someone directly challenges His directions, He takes it very seriously!
22. When God told the children of Israel that they would not be allowed to enter the land of Canaan but would have to go back and wander in the wilderness for 40 years until all of the men ages 20 and above—except for Caleb and Joshua—had died, there was a kind of rebellion in the camp. (See Numbers 14) When it looked like they were about to stone Moses and Aaron, God Himself stepped in and revealed His presence above the sanctuary. (Numbers 14:10,11) How do you think you would respond if the pastor, elder, or someone in a responsible position in the church did something they were not supposed to do and suddenly God’s presence appeared in your church? How would you have responded after going through that great disappointment of discovering that you would never enter the land of Canaan but instead were to die in the wilderness?
23. Are we serious enough about our Christian duties? Do we constantly seek out opportunities to witness for the truth? Does the appearance of our church and the way we behave while in a worship service correctly represent our holy God? What does it mean to be a holy people? The original word meant “to be set aside for a special purpose.” Do we believe that we are a distinct, set-aside people here on this earth?
24. What does it mean when God says, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”? (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2)
25. What are the benefits and challenges or problems connected with organization, particularly church organization? In the early years of the Advent movement, there were men who chose to travel around acting like Adventist ministers and expecting to be supported, but they had not been authorized by anyone. What kind of problems might that bring? Should the church seek to shut down anyone who attempts to teach the truth but who is not “authorized”? Would that prevent the development of any new ideas? What is the relationship between orderliness and independence?

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