

IN THE WILDERNESS

From Mount Sinai to Kadesh

Numbers 1-14

INTRODUCTION

The fourth book of the Pentateuch (Law) is the *Book of Numbers*. The English title comes from the Greek Bible (the Septuagint), in which the book is called “Numbers” (Greek *Arithmoi*). Why? because the book includes a first and second census of the Israelite tribes and the Levites (Num 1 & 26). It also includes other lists: lists of leaders, gifts, scouts into the Promised Land, and offerings to be brought for feast days, etc. While the title “Numbers” fits some of the content, it does not accurately reflect the story told in the book, and it also gives the impression that its not going to be an interesting book!

In the Hebrew Bible, the title for this book is a more accurate one: *In the Wilderness* (Hebrew *Bamidbar*). This title comes from the very first verse of the text: “The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai” (Numbers 1:1).

STUDY AND REFLECTION

The First Census of Israel (Numbers 1:1-52)

Having received from God the Ten Commandments, the Covenant Law, and a complete system of liturgical worship, the Israelites remained at the foot of the mountain for about one year. Now, they are ready to move. To prepare an army for war, God then spoke to Moses in the Tent of Meeting, saying: “Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel... every male... from twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go forth to war, you and Aaron shall number them, company by company. And there shall be with you a man from each tribe, each man being the head of the house of his fathers” (Num 1:2-4).

God Himself appointed *The Twelve* to serve as leaders of their ancestral tribes. They were: Eli’zur (Reuben), Shelu’miel (Simeon), Nahshon (Judah), Nethan’el (Issachar), Eli’shama (Ephraim), Gama’liel (Manasseh), Ahie’zer (Dan), Pagi’el (Asher), Eli’asaph (Gad), and Ahi’ra (Naph’tali). These were chosen to serve as leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Together with the twelve, Moses and Aaron conducted the census, tribe by tribe. The only tribe not included in the census was the tribe of Levi. Since the Levites were given the responsibility to look after the Tabernacle and all its furnishings, to minister liturgically, they were exempted from all military service.

New Testament Connections

Just as Israel was meant to be militant, so is the New Israel. The Church of Christ on earth is referred to as the “Militant Church.” However, the warfare in which the Church

engages is spiritual in nature. The battle is for human souls, for the kingdom of God; and the enemy is Satan and all his evil spirits, the sinful passions, sin, and death.

Note that God Himself appointed *twelve leaders*, one for each tribe. Later, as described in Chapter 11, a further *seventy elders* will be called to assist Moses. In the New Testament, Jesus will do the same. From among His disciples, He will choose *The Twelve* to form His inner circle of leadership; and later on in His ministry, He will appoint other disciples to form a larger circle of apostles known as *The Seventy* (Luke 10:1-17). Though not as prominent as the Twelve, the Seventy will carry out their mission with fervor and enthusiasm. The Tradition of the Church confirms that the Seventy remained true to the Lord and their calling, fulfilling the vital role in the spread of the Gospel. In our Byzantine liturgical calendar, January 4th is set aside to remember them all.

The War Camp (Num 1:53-54; Numbers 2)

The Lord then said to Moses and Aaron, “The people of Israel shall encamp each by his own standard, with the ensigns of their father’s houses; they shall encamp facing the tent of meeting on every side” (Num 2:1-2). The Lord then gives specific instructions on the arrangement of Israel’s camp.

The Tabernacle of the Lord stands in the center. This is where God dwells among His People as their King and God. The Lord and the worship of the one true God are to be the central focus of the life of Israel.

As the appointed guardians and caretakers of the Tabernacle, the descendants of Levi (Levites) are to encamp immediately around it and facing it (Num 1:53). Now, Levi had three sons: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. The Levitical descendants of Gershon (Gershonites) were to camp on the west side, behind the Tabernacle; the descendants of Kohath (Kohathites) were to camp on the south side of the Tabernacle; and the descendants for Merari were to encamp on the north side of the Tabernacle (Num 3:14-37). And those to encamp before the Tabernacle on the east side, before the entrance to the Tent of Meeting “were Moses and Aaron and his sons, having charge of the rites within the sanctuary, and whatever had to be done for the people of Israel” (Num 3:38).

The twelve tribes of Israel were then arranged into four groups of three tribes, and assigned to encamp around the Tabernacle, facing it, just behind the Levites.

Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun were to encamp on the east side.

Reuben, Simeon, and Gad were to encamp on the south side.

Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin were to encamp on the west side.

Dan, Asher, and Naphtali were to encamp on the north side.

Note that the tribe of Judah was encamped on the east side of the Tabernacle. According to the prophetic words spoken by Jacob before his death, the promised Savior, the Christ, would come from the tribe of Judah (Gen 49:8-12, Heb 7:14).

In English, another word for “east” is the word “orient.” It comes from the Latin word *oriens*, which means “east.” The phrase *ad orientalem* means “to face east,” and the phrase *ex orientalem* means “to come from the east.”

The prophet Zechariah prophesied that the Christ would be called “the East” or “the Orient.” The Lord God said: “Behold the man, *Orient* is His name, and He shall rise up from below the horizon, and He shall build the house of the Lord” (Zechariah 6:12 [Septuagint]). On the Day of the Lord, “His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east” (Zechariah 14:4). The prophet Malachi said He would rise-up from the east (Latin *ex orientalem*), and so, he calls Him the *Sun of Righteousness*. “But to you who fear My name the *Sun of Righteousness* shall arise with healing in His wings” (*Malachi 4:2*). For the prophets Zechariah and Malachi, to look towards the east is to “orient” oneself towards the coming of the promised Savior, the Christ, who is the “Orient” and who will rise from the East.

In the same way, every Christian is called to orient his life towards Christ; otherwise, he becomes “disoriented.” From the earliest times, the Church has always prayed towards the east, in expectation of His glorious return. “For as lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (Matthew 24:27).

The Priests and Levites (Numbers 3-4, 8)

As mentioned already, the Levites were set aside for special service, as caretakers and guardians of the Tabernacle. They replaced the first-born sons of Israel after the incident with the Golden Calf. Aaron was consecrated to serve as the high priest, while his sons served as priests. The other Levites assisted with manual labour and the transportation of the Tabernacle items and furnishings.

The service of the Levites was a type or prefigure pointing to the future ministerial priesthood within the Church of Christ. The high priest was a type of Christ, the Great High Priest, “the Shepherd and Overseer (Bishop) of our souls” (1 Peter 2:25); and also type of the bishops, who are the living icons of Christ. Bishops are the “high priests” of the Church. Aaron sons were a type of the priests, who are also icons of Christ, and spiritual sons of their bishop. Finally, the other Levites who assisted the priests are a type of the “deacons” in the Church, who assist the bishop and priests with liturgical worship. The twelve tribes of Israel prefigure the future laity of the Church.

PEOPLE OF GOD	OLD TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT
Clergy (Ministerial Priesthood)	High Priest (Aaron) Priests (sons of Aaron) Levites (liturgical assistants)	Jesus, Bishops Priests Deacons
Laity	All Israelites	All the Faithful

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Number the children of Levi by their father’s houses, by their tribes, and by their families; you shall number every male from a month old and above” (Num 3:14). So, Moses and Aaron took a census of all the Levites, identifying them as descendants of Levi’s three sons: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. Then, the three groups were assigned different liturgical responsibilities.

The descendants of Kohath (Kohathites), encamped on the south side of Tabernacle, were responsible for the transportation of the furnishings: the Ark of the Covenant, the

Table of Offering, the Lampstand, the Altar of Incense, the Laver, the Altar of Burnt Offering and all supplies of oil and incense, utensils and vessels. Everything was covered with appropriate coverings and a final blue leather covering. Their overseer was the priest Eleazar, the son of Aaron.

The descendants of Gershon (Gershonites), encamped on the west side of the Tabernacle, were responsible for the transportation of the veils of the Tabernacle, the coverings over the Tabernacle, the curtains of the court, the entrance screen, cords, all equipment and accessories. Everything was covered with appropriate covering and a final blue leather covering.

The descendants of Merari, encamped on the north side of the Tabernacle, were responsible for the transportation of all the frames of the Tabernacle, the bars, pillars, bases, capitals, pegs and cords, equipment, and all accessories. Their overseer was the priest Ith'amar, the son of Aaron.

A second census was taken to determine the number of Levites who are between twenty-five and fifty years of age, and eligible for liturgical duties.

Various Laws (Numbers 5-6, 15, 19)

In various chapters throughout the book of Numbers, we find various additional laws that are given by Moses, who serves as a mediator between God and the people of Israel. They include the following:

Laws Concerning the Unclean (Numbers 5:1-4)

Those who become “ritually unclean” due to contact a leprosy, any skin disease, a dead corpse, blood, or the discharge of any bodily fluids, are to *isolate themselves outside the camp*, until their purification is completed.

Confession and Restitution (Num 5:5-10)

If a man or woman commits a grave sin against his neighbour, *the person needs to confess the sin openly*. Then, the person is to make restitution for the sin committed, repaying the one who was wronged in the full amount, plus one-fifth of it. In addition, he will offer the prescribed guilt offering, a ram of atonement.

New Testament Connection: Note that Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, went beyond this law. Moved by Jesus’ presence in his home and in the spirit of genuine repentance, he made four-fold restitution, plus he offered half of his possessions to the poor. So, Jesus said to him “Today, salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:19).

Laws Concerning Vows (Numbers 6:1-21)

An extraordinary vow of consecration to God was not required by the Law of Moses. It was strictly voluntary. However, when such a vow was made, the man or woman making the vow, was held accountable to fulfill it. The person was called a *Nazarite* (one who is “set apart” or consecrated). Any man or woman who made a *vow of a Nazarite* was obligated to do three things during the designated time of the consecration:

- 1) First, to abstain from wine and strong drink, grapes, grape juice, and anything produced by the grapevine.
- 2) Second, to abstain from cutting hair; to allow the hair on the head to grow long, until the days of the vow are completed.
- 3) Third, to not go near a dead body, even the bodies of deceased parents or siblings.

When the days of the vow are fulfilled, the person is to offer a male lamb (one year old, without blemish) as a whole burnt offering; a female lamb (one year old, without blemish) as a sin offering; a ram as a peace offering, with a basket of unleavened bread; and a grain offering and a drink offering. The hair on the head is to be shaved at the door of the Tent of Meeting and burned on the fire, under the sacrifice of the peace offering.

New Testament Connection: In the Book of Acts, during his final trip to Jerusalem, St. Paul made a temporary Nazarite vow to allay any suspicions of his faithfulness as a Jew. Together with four other Jewish Christians who had also made a Nazarite vow, he completed his vow and purification with the offering of sacrifices in the Temple (see Acts 21:15-26).

A Priest's Blessing (Numbers 6:22-26)

To bless is to invoke God's favour, His love, mercy, and grace upon someone. Priests were given permission to bless people in the name of the Lord. God spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: "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" (Numb 6:22-24). In this way the priests were to "put the name of the Lord" upon the people of Israel, and the Lord would bless them.

In the New Testament Church, bishops and priests continue to "put the name of the Lord" upon the people when they bless with their hands in the form of the cross. The fingers of the right hand form the Greek letters IC XC, a four-letter abbreviation of the Greek words ISUS KHRYSTOS, which means "Jesus Christ." The bishop and priests "put the name of the Lord" upon the people, but it is the Lord, Jesus Christ, Who blesses them.

Israel Departs from Mount Sinai (Numbers 10)

From the time that the Tabernacle was built and consecrated, the pillar of cloud, signifying God's Presence, came over it and covered it. In the evening, through the night until morning, it took the appearance of fire. Whenever the cloud lifted up from over the tent, it was a sign that Israel was to break camp and to move; and wherever the cloud settled, it was a sign that Israel was to encamp there.

Moses had two trumpets made from silver. They were to be used at various occasions: to summon the congregation to break camp; to assemble the leaders of the twelve tribes; to assemble all the people; to signal which tribes are to set-out in procession; and when going to war. The trumpets were also to be used at appointed feasts, at the beginning of months, and at the beginning of a new year.

The Marching Order

After being encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai for almost a year, the time had come to begin their journey towards the Promised Land. Just after the celebration of the second Passover (Num 9:1-14) in the month of Nissan (March-April), God gave the signal to depart by lifting the cloud of His Presence off the Tabernacle. The silver trumpets were blown by the priests, giving the signal to the various tribes to break camp in proper order. So, they set out from Mount Sinai for a journey of three days, “and the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord went before them for the three day’s journey, to seek out a resting place for them” (Num 10:33).

Note that God Himself, the Lord and King of Israel, invisibly present over the Ark of the Covenant, carried by the Levites, is the One Who leads the people of Israel as a conquering army. Each time they set out, the Ark reminds them that God is establishing a new nation and a new kingdom. It is not something they are doing by themselves. God is the One Who is doing this. He is the One leading them, and He will put their enemies to flight.

When they broke camp with the Ark of the Covenant, Moses said: “*Rise up, O Lord! Let Your enemies be scattered and let all who hate you flee*” (Num 10:34) And when the ark rested, he said: “*Return, O Lord, to the many thousands in Israel!*” (Num 10:35). The cloud also overshadowed them by day when they broke camp. These words are prophetic. They prefigure the Resurrection of Christ, “*Rise up, O Lord!*” and His second return in glory at the end of time, “*Return, O Lord!*”

The First Three Rebellions (Numbers 11, 12)

The First Rebellion

As soon as the people begin their journey through the wilderness, a change takes place. As they leave Mount Sinai, they quickly lose hope, and their attitude becomes negative. They begin to “murmur,” grumble, and complain about everything, just as the complain during their journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai. *This is the first rebellion.* While encamped at a place called *Taberah*, a fire breaks out and destroys some outlying parts of the camp. The people cried to Moses. Moses prays to the Lord and the fire is quenched.

The Lord God hates grumbling because it is an expression of ingratitude. Grumbling is one of the sins that undermines spiritual stability. We are to do all things without grumbling; so that we may shine as lights in a fallen world. The Apostle Paul writes: “Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life” (Phil 2:14-16).

The Second Rebellion

The next thing that the people complain about is the food. They are sick and tired of eating plain manna every day. They complain and lament how much better it was for them in Egypt, where they freely ate cucumbers, melons, leeks, onion, garlic, and other foods.

Moses too begins to complain to the Lord about his inability to handle the unruly mob (Num 11:10-15). *This is the second rebellion.*

God responds to both complaints by providing the people with quail and Moses with seventy spirit-inspired men, that will assist him as officers over the people. After the people partake of the quails, a plague breaks out, causing the death of many.

The time in the desert was meant to be a time of fasting for Israel. God fed them only with a simple and basic food, manna, not just to ensure their survival, but also to teach them a lesson. Fasting reminds us of our utter dependence upon God. It also teaches us that there is much more to life than just feeding the body. More important than physical food is the need for spiritual food: *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word proceeding from the mouth of God man shall live.”* (Deuteronomy 8:3).

In rejecting God’s gift of manna by their grumbling and complaining Israel has rejected God and His provision. They have failed the test of faith by their lack of trust and their ungratefulness.

The Third Rebellion

The third rebellion is against the authority of Moses. Some of the leaders of the people resent the fact that Moses has a special relationship with God and that he speaks to God directly. Moses’ older sister, Miriam, turns against him; his brother Aaron, also turns against him. They challenge his authority as the sole mediatory of God’s revelation; *“Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses?”* (Num 12:2). In other words, they claim to be prophets also. What precipitated the resentment was the issue that Moses’ wife was a “Cushite” woman, a foreigner, and not a Hebrew. There is no evidence in the Scriptures for a marriage other than to Zipporah, who was from Midian or Cush (see Exodus 2:15-22; 4:24-26; 18:2-3; Hab 3:7). Moses’ marriage to a foreigner, Zipporah, was being used to undermine his authority. Another source of resentment may have been the fact that God took his Spirit, with which He had anointed Moses, and shared it with the seventy elders, and not with Miriam.

Miriam is portrayed as the main protagonist and leader of the rebellion against Moses’ authority. God punishes her by making her skin white with leprosy, which means that she is deemed unclean, and is isolated outside the camp. The punishment is ironic. She complained about Moses’ dark-skinned wife not being part of Israel, and now she becomes the opposite, white-skinned, due to leprosy; and in her isolation outside the camp, she stops being a part of Israel. In the end, Moses intercedes on behalf of his sister. After a week, the punishment is lifted, and Miriam is restored to her role as leader of Israel’s women (Num 12:9-15).

The Spies, the Report, and the Revolt (Numbers 13, 14)

Israel journeyed into the *Wilderness of Paran*, which is located below the Promised Land. There, they encamped at a place called *Kadesh*, a well-known oasis.

Moses chose twelve spies, one from each tribe, and sent them into Canaan to gather information about the land, the cities, the people, their armies, and their defenses.

After spying out the land for forty days, the spies return to the Israelite camp at Kadesh, in the *Wilderness of Paran*. They bring some of the fruit from the land of Canaan.

Ten of the spies give a negative report. “We went into the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless, the people who dwell in that land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large” (Num 13:27-28). They recommended a return to Egypt.

Two of the spies, Joshua, and Caleb, give a positive report. After the first group of spies had spoken, Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said: “Let us go up at once and occupy it; for we are well able to overcome it” (Num 13:3). The recommended immediate conquest. God will provide the victory.

Then ten spies with the negative report replied, saying: “The land... is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people are of great stature... and compared to them were like grasshoppers.” Then all the people raised a loud cry. The people wept and began to murmur against Moses and Aaron. They threaten to replace Moses with another ruler, who will lead them back to Egypt. “Let us select a ruler and return to Egypt” (Num 14:3). Moses and Aaron respond by falling to the ground in helplessness.

Caleb and Joshua tear their garments in grief, and they say to the people of Israel: “The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, He will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only, do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them.”

But the congregation did not listen, and were prepared to stone them to death, and choose another leader to take them back to Egypt.