

The order of march

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[0:00] And that's what the book of Numbers is about. So please open your Bibles at these early chapters of Numbers.

! So lots of Numbers are in it.

I believe it comes from the Septuagint. I'm not absolutely certain about that. But certainly it's not the Hebrew title of the book. The Hebrew title of the book actually comes from this first verse.

The Lord spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting, tabernacle in other words, in the desert of Sinai. So on your map there, that's down between those two branches, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, if my geography is correct.

I wasn't very good at geography, but I think that's right. That's where the desert of Sinai is, or the wilderness of Sinai is, on the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt.

[1:14] In other words, they've been out about a year or so. The book does contain a lot of numbers, certainly.

And yet the book isn't primarily a book of statistics. It reflects the wilderness experience that the people of God have or had.

There are people in transit, in a desert. They're no longer in Egypt. They've left the life they knew. But neither are they yet in Canaan, the place they're heading for.

And Numbers addresses this issue. How can the people live in transit, in this time of transit, in this present hostile environment, and with all those tensions of what has been left behind and what is still to be obtained, and those tensions unresolved.

So I've given you a handout there which gives an overview of the whole book, but in these four sermons, we're going to look just at the first ten chapters. The book starts a year after the escape from Egypt, and apparently, as I say, covers a period of just 20 days if you look at chapter 10, verse 11.

[2:41] And that includes 12 days of offerings and the consecration at the tent of meeting, which we find in chapters 7 and 8, and the Passover celebration, which starts on the 14th day.

It's possible that the numbers, the discussion is not entirely chronological, and some of the things in the middle may not have been part of the chronology, but basically, it seems to cover a period of just 20 days in which a lot happened, as you can see.

They took a census, they consecrated the tabernacle, and then they celebrated the Passover. Well, that's all very well, but why would we, 3,000 odd years later, want to study the book of Numbers?

Well, one answer I could give to that is, of course, the one that Paul gives to Timothy when he says that all scripture is useful for teaching and for doctrine and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be equipped for every good work.

So, we start from that premise, that presupposition, don't we, that all scripture has something to say to us. It is the word of God, after all, and it, therefore, has something to say to us.

[4:03] But more specifically, here's some reasons why we might get something useful by studying the book of Numbers. First of all, as I've already said, it chronicles the tensions that the people found in the wilderness, the tension between the world they'd left behind in Egypt, the city to come, the land to come where they were hoping to settle, but also the fact that they weren't in either of those places at the moment, they were in transit.

And how were they to live now in that time of transit? That's kind of what Nathan, was it this morning? Nathan, yeah, was talking about this morning, wasn't it?

Living in this time of transit between the, having left the world, but entering the eternal city. And more specifically, it talks about a few things that we might need to know.

It talks about how to organise the march. It talks about leadership. There's lots of arguments about leadership one way or another in these first ten chapters.

And a lot of it is about maintaining a sense of the holy. When you're stuck in a desert, how can you maintain a sense of things that are holy and special and clean and important?

[5:33] And a lot of the book of Numbers is very much about this. How can we maintain a sense of the holy things? So there's some reasons we might want to study Numbers.

Now let me give you some reasons why you think you might not want to study Numbers. Well, it consists, as you've already seen, of a lot of lists of names of people who are more than 3,000 years dead.

Are we really going to get much from studying these lists of names and things? And when you begin to dig into the book, you find that some things seem really quite strange.

And I'm going to look at these chapters next time, I think. I think it's the next one. In chapter 5, for instance, there's a test for adultery.

I'm sure you'd all find that very useful. Why is it there? And some of the things are not so much strange as just plain draconian.

[6:38] So in chapter 15, we won't actually get that far in these first four sentences, but in chapter 15, we find that somebody is sentenced to death. Why? Merely for the crime of collecting sticks on the Sabbath day.

That all seems rather draconian and old-fashioned and a bit odd, really, doesn't it? And another problem we might have with the book of Numbers is it contains an awful lot of ritual one way or another.

And of course, we Protestants are really rather suspicious of ritual, aren't we? We have, you know, no pictures on the walls, no... Not even the Ten Commandments up on the walls.

We're suspicious of ritual, and yet Numbers is an awful lot of ritual. What are we going to get from this? Well, I can tell you, actually, none of those was the reason why I haven't spoken on the book of Numbers before.

Because the reason I haven't spoken on the book of Numbers before is the problem of interpreting the numbers themselves. Ever since I read the book of Numbers many years ago, I thought these numbers don't seem to quite make sense to me.

[7:52] Most of you know, I was a mathematician by profession, and mathematicians expect numbers to be well-behaved, to march in orderly ranks and to be precise and be, well, say to be well-behaved.

But when you start to look at these numbers closely, they seem like the Israelites themselves to cause you a bit of trouble. And I actually one time said, I'm never going to speak on the book of Numbers until I understand the numbers.

But then I thought, well, if I wait until I understand them perfectly, that ain't going to happen anytime soon.

So I decided, after all, I would dive into the book of Numbers. But how do we deal with the numbers?

Well, some people who speak on numbers hardly refer to them at all. And yet, somebody thought it was worth recording all these numbers of this first sentence, not only recording them, actually recording them twice.

[9:02] And then there is another census at the end of the book and lots of other numbers as well that we come across as we go through the book. Somebody thought these numbers were important and therefore it seems a bit odd to sort of say, well, there are any statistics, we don't really care about that.

But there are difficulties interpreting the numbers here. I've put a bit more on the back of the handout, actually.

I'm not going to say quite as much as there is on the book of the handout. But there are difficulties with these numbers. And I feel, you know, I don't want to confuse people, but I think I do need to point out some of the difficulties as we try and make sense of these numbers.

Perhaps you even spotted, as we were reading. Apparently this census all happened on one day. What? Moses managed to record 600,000 names on one day?

Was the army really 603,550? That number is repeated twice in these chapters, in 1, chapter 40, and 2, chapter 32.

[10:25] Exodus 12, 27 says that the army was about 6,000 men. That implies a population probably of total Exodus population, all the people who left Egypt with the Israelites.

They weren't all Israelites, of course, there were some hangers-on as well, but all the people who left with the Israelites, probably around 2 or 3 million. But when you think about these numbers, it doesn't quite seem to chime with some of the other scriptures that talk about the Exodus.

For instance, an army of 600,000 is hardly going to be seriously bothered by a brigade of Egyptian cavalry, and yet when we read in Exodus, it suggests that they were worried they were going to be swept into the sea.

Of course, you would take losses, but with 600,000, you're going to win the battle just by sheer weight of numbers. And in fact, archaeologists tell us that the whole strength of the Egyptian army, as you can tell at that time, was only around 24,000.

And when the spies go and spy out the land of the Canaanites, they say, oh, they're too strong for us, chapter 13, verse 31. And yet, the Canaanite land was just full of small, fortified towns, although they described them as cities, but cities by the standards of those days, not by the standards of today.

[12:10] Even Nineveh, at its height, only had a few hundred, population of a few hundred thousand. These cities were probably held in the region of 10,000 inhabitants, something of that order.

Again, archaeologists have estimated that the total population of Canaan was probably not much more than 140,000, and although we're not given detailed populations in the scriptures, it does seem, when we are given occasional data of numbers of armies, sizes of armies and so on, that seems consistent with this sort of number of a Canaanite population of around 140,000.

And yet, we're told in Exodus 23, verse 29, that they are told to take over the land little by little and expand to fill it as they move in.

Deuteronomy 7, verse 1, says that they are being sent to a land of a people who are more numerous and stronger than you.

Obviously, if there are only 140,000 Canaanites and 3 million Israelites, that would be far from the case. And some of the actual numbers really seem quite confusing.

[13:38] For instance, in Joshua 4, verse 13, we read that Joshua crossed the Jordan with apparently only 40,000 armed men. And even if you take that just to apply to the tribes that were set up home east of the Jordan, it still doesn't work because the second census talks about 180,000 or so armed men from those three tribes.

And then, here's a bit of actual mathematics we can do. In numbers 3, 43, in these very four chapters that we're looking at, we are told that there was a census taken of all the first-born males among the Israelites of a month old and above.

And that came out as 22,273. That's numbers 343. Well, as the Americans say, do the math. 22,273 is about 3.7% of 603,550.

Which means that if 3.7% of the army are first-born males, the average number of males per family would need to be about 27. But actually, it's worse than that because the army census was of people over the age of 20 able to bear arms.

[15:16] The 22,273 is of all males a month old or more. So probably the more accurate number would be around 30 males.

And of course these families would be having daughters as well, presumably a similar number of daughters, which suggests that the average family size are about 60 siblings and that just makes no sense.

clearly we're missing something. Well, what are we going to do?

Are we going to give up on the historical accuracy of the book of numbers? I might draw your attention at this point actually to the book I've put here, which is, I'm afraid it costs 25 pounds, so it's too expensive to give out free copies, but it's 25 pounds, very well spent.

It's called Evidence for the Bible and it's written by people some of us know, Clive Anderson, Brian Edwards, who of course do these interesting tours of the British Museum and it's and it shows how archaeology on the whole almost always proves that the Old Testament stories are historically accurate.

[16:42] Again and again they've been challenged and then new archaeological discoveries have shown that the Old Testament histories are actually accurate. but there are a few problems with the Exodus itself, the problems over dating it and there are problems over these numbers and there's quite an interesting article on the numbers in the back of here which is quite accessible.

while I'm at it I'll just mention a couple of other things I've mentioned on the book here. More scholarly works, there's an article by John Wenham in the Lion Handbook to the Bible and the Tyndale commentary by his son Gordon Wenham deals with these number issues as well and then for the real academic enthusiasts there's, well it's a whole book by the archaeologist K.A. Kitchen which called On the Reliability of the Old Testament which again I don't read it myself but I'm told by those who have again shows how accurate the Old Testament stories mostly are but that points out there is a problem with the numbers.

There's a problem generally with numbers in the Old Testament that there are large numbers I'm talking about here, thousands and that they have been miscopied on occasions and this turns up on occasions for instance when in 1 Samuel 13 when the Hebrew itself says 30,000 Philistine chariots but the sceptor again says more realistically 3,000 at some point there must have been a copying error.

But this is a rather different thing isn't it? We're talking about sensors here. So what are we to make of these numbers? And I have to say that there isn't a fully satisfactory solution as yet to understand this.

[18:48] Here are some of the solutions that have been proposed. First of all some people defend and say the numbers are correct and that this number 22,273 refers only to those born after leaving Egypt.

And yet in the context that wouldn't make a lot of sense because the number of firstborn Israelites is being compared with the number of the Levite clans.

And anyway it doesn't meet the other objections. One ingenious theory is that the numbers aren't data at all.

They're symbols like the numbers in Revelation and it compares the stars as the hosts of heaven with the clans as the hosts of the Lord on earth and tries to use the names of the tribes as numbers to come up with these numbers.

But one has to say it's not very convincing when you look at it. if they're symbolic numbers nobody's ever really come up with a proper explanation of what they might mean.

[20:06] In some ways the simplest explanation might be that they accidentally got multiplied by ten. You'll notice that all the numbers although it says they were numbered one by one all the numbers are given in fact to the nearest ten.

There are no actual units in these numbers. But even that has difficulties for most of the other numbers and they are just one odd number numbers of chariots or something like that there is textual evidence other another text of scripture which gives a different number you know you can work out what's the correct one which is a copying error or from the Greek translation the sceptor one can realise that a copying error has been made after that translation was made the problem we have with this explanation here well there were two problems basically first of all there is no textual evidence for it at all there are no other numbers that we can compare with the sceptor again numbers agree with the numbers in the Hebrew Masoretic text text and also we're not just talking about copying an odd number here we've got the whole list of numbers that are repeated twice and given as total at the end as well and you know that wouldn't just be a random copying error that would be a systematic miscopying or editing and so although it's possible that they've simply got miscopied and multiplied by 10 mistransmitted and multiplied by 10 that is one possible explanation

what most of the scholars who thought hard about this go for is that in the suggestion that in fact these are mistranslations so let me just say a little bit about that you'll notice when we read it that these are listed as it says they're listed by name according to the records of their clans and families and the word for a thousand

LF can also mean a military unit or a clan or a family and so the simplest suggestion here was that when it says Reuben's clan was 36,500 it could mean something like there are 36 families or military units and that the total number of men was actually only say 500 so it would read it as 36,000 families sorry 36 families consisting of 500 men and I say this is the answer actually or the suggestion of most of those evangelical scholars and I should say all those people who I quoted are evangelicals people who believe in the inerrancy of scripture but even this isn't a fully convincing case because if you take that simple explanation then the army size comes out too small comes out in fact is about 6,000 which is probably too small so one has to say in the end as I say and I have to say this it's not entirely possible to understand the numbers

I think I am convinced by the arguments that we shouldn't read them as being 603 thousand an army of 603 thousand for those reasons I've said it seems far too many but exactly what the solution is I'm not able to tell you definitively but what I can say is that assuming that one of these last two solutions is correct that we still can get a lot of useful stuff out of the numbers because we can look at the sizes of the tribes we can look at the changes of the sizes of the tribes for the first census to the last and if I get that far in numbers I might actually do that when I get there which is quite interesting in itself and we can see even from these numbers we read out that the tribes are all roughly of comparable sizes some are a bit bigger than others Judah is rather bigger than the others which is perhaps why they got the lead role as it were and of course as we know later Judah came to rather take over many of the other tribes so that's the problem of the numbers and I'm afraid I unable to offer you a completely convincing explanation but let's move on the Israelites had to move on they couldn't stay there stuck in the desert let's move on and say what we can get from these chapters positively and usefully let's look at the camp and let's look at the march and I'd just like to look at four things about this first few chapters first of all and most obviously each tribe has its place it's not actually it doesn't actually say that in the numbers text but if you look at who the tribal founders were you find that the tribes are actually arranged by the mothers of the tribe of the tribal founders so Issachar

Judah and Zebulun were the three sons of Leah Benjamin Ephraim and Manasseh well Benjamin was the son of Rachel and Ephraim and Manasseh of course were her grandsons by Joseph Asher Dan and Naphtali were sons of the maidservant Zilpah and Bilhar and I didn't write down which is which one of them's I think Zilpah I believe is Rachel's maidservant and Bilhar was Leah's but they were one was a maidservant of Zilpah and one was a maidservant of Bilhar and the southern tribes were well Gad was the son of Zilpah and Reuben and Simeon were the other sons of Leah so they were arranged kind of in a certain logic to the clan order by the mothers of the tribal founders but each person each tribe each soldier had their place in the camp each tribe has its assigned place each tribe is an essential part of the people of God it is both protected by and protects the rest of the community and this is of course a military formation formation well it's clear from the census it says it's the census of those who are able to bear arms over 20 years old it's a military formation this you might have thought well sorry

[27:40] I'll come to that in a minute I just wanted to make the point that each person there is named counted each person there is in the record each person is there both by right but also by obligation by right because they are a child of descendant of Jacob but also there is an obligation because these people are interdependent and that tells us itself doesn't it in the new covenant those called by the Lord Jesus can't be just hangers on they can't be just passengers along for the ride this is a formation of people at war and that's the next point here that the camp is organized on military lines now of course it's not just soldiers all the people would have been there there would have been men women and children together but not withstanding that the camp is organized for defense the census was just of those men of military age this camp is organized set out for people in dangerous hostile territory and that's worth noting itself you might have thought after

God had destroyed Pharaoh's chariots that the people would just sort of amble along blithely saying well doesn't matter does it I mean whatever happens the Lord's going to look after us the Lord will get us there in the end and make sure it's all right but that is not what God tells Moses to do and that's not what Moses tells the people to do he tells them to organize themselves be on the alert this is a camp organized to pass through enemy territory the Lord's command here in chapters one and two is to get on station to guard the perimeter to train and to organize for war and if you look at the first few verses of chapter 10 you'll see that they had a system of military signals that's worked by blasts of the trumpet which

I guess is where we get the trumpet in revelation that signals the return of the Lord they had a system of military signals based on trumpet blasts and it's easy for us Christians isn't it to forget that we're on a war footing here the Israelites themselves often forgot as when we move on later to the middle chapters of the book we'll see but Paul was quite clear on the point wasn't he he said no one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs he wants to please his commanding officer now before the CIA turn up and say listening to the recordings and say I'm advocating some sort of violent revolution let me make it clear of course that as the scripture says we fight a different kind of war we find we fight with different kinds of weapons and so 2

Corinthians 10 says this for though we live in the world we do not wage war as the world does the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world on the contrary they have divine power to demolish strongholds we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ we fight not with a sword and a metal bronze sword or spear but with the sword of the spirit and we don't use steel armor we use the spiritual armor that's described of course in Ephesians I haven't read it out but we are on a war footing and the war footing of the Israelites shows that we're not to just be lackadaisical about this we're not to just carry on and say oh the Lord will look after us that's not what

God commands us to do he tells us to be on our guard to be on watch that's what Jesus told the disciples wasn't it watch with me they didn't of course they fell asleep when Jesus sent out the disciples the second time the first time he sent them out without a sword but he said now this second time you need to be on watch you need to be prepared you need to be well you need to be organized yourselves for war the church of Jesus Christ is organized for combat and the third point I'd like just to notice here is that the camp faces the tent of meeting to chapter two you'll go back briefly to the map plan the

[33:36] Levite clans were camped around the tent of meeting the tabernacle in the middle with the priest to the east and the three Levite clans on the north west and south but the the camp itself the people were told to camp facing the tent of meeting now at first sight that might seem a little bit strange that's not the obvious organization for military purposes is it I mean I'm sure they did keep sentries we know they sent out spies and scouts so they did keep a watch of course on the perimeter and yet the people were told to face camp to camp facing the tent of meeting in the center where the king would normally pitch his tent in a conventional military camp the king the commander would pitch his tent in the center but at the center of this camp there is indeed a tent but it's the tent of the

Lord why were they to camp facing the tent of meeting well because the presence of God amongst them was to be their national focus their commander was not some king but the Lord himself in fact if the Lord was not present at the center of the camp then the whole thing was pointless there's just a vacuum at the center just nothingness at the center there had to be access they had to keep their vision as it were on the tent of meeting on the presence of the Lord on the holy things they didn't lose track lose sight of what it was that they were fighting about and yet actually access to the tent of meeting was very restricted you might at some time like to read chapter 3 verses 2 to 10 we haven't got time to read it now but the job of the

Levite clans was to protect the holy things and to carry them and indeed only the priests were actually allowed to touch the Ark of the Covenant and the other most holy things and this restricted access was as much to protect the Israelites as to protect the holy things themselves the danger was more to the Israelites who might meet death by coming in contact with the holy things rather

than them actually damaging the Ark of the Covenant or something like that among the Levite clans each had a role the Covenant actually carried the Ark and the other holy things but they were only allowed to do that after the priests had covered and purified them the Gershonites carried the canvas the fabric of the tent and the Merarites carried the poles it's all explained in chapter 4 if you want to look at it so the people of

God were to camp facing the presence of the Lord and yet in a sense they couldn't get there they had to camp at a distance they were held at a distance but now there's been a change a change of administration now at the center of the camp there is indeed a king the king Jesus the Lord's anointed and this king doesn't put to death those who approach him on the contrary he invites us to reach out and touch him Luke 24 39 those who touch him find not death but spiritual life and healing Luke 6 19 says that people who touched him found physical healing and yet Jesus was always very careful wasn't he to emphasize that it's not the physical healing is what they really need it's spiritual healing and

[38:15] Jesus invites everyone not to keep their distance but rather to come and touch him to reach out and find spiritual healing at the center of our camp now there is a king and he is the one who leads us to war finally just one more thing the march has order and purpose the camp doesn't stay static they don't stay in the wilderness forever there's no point they're trying to get from the place they've left to the place they want to be they have to march and there are hints of the direction of march in chapter of the order of march in chapter two actually if you look in the last part of chapter ten you find it's described in a little bit more detail again I won't read it but it actually works like on the diagram there so they're marching basically eastward so which is why

Issachar and Judah and Zebulun set out first perhaps there's a hint there that Judah would be eventually the leading tribe and the one from which the king would come from but Judah starts and then in fact it's not quite as described actually in more summary in chapter two because what comes next is the tabernacle the tent of meeting and that is carried by the Merarites and the Gershonites carry the canvas and the Merarites carry the poles it doesn't actually say in chapter 10 where the priests were but presumably they travelled along with the tabernacle or perhaps with the holy things and then actually there's a gap the Levite clans didn't all march together in between the tribes of

Gad Reuben and Simeon marched there's a very practical reason for that this meant that when they arrived at the end of their day's march and set up camp again there was time to set up the tent of meeting and start people getting settled before the Kohathites arrived with the holy things and therefore when they arrived they didn't have to leave them sitting around there was somewhere to put them so it was a practical direction and march and it was designed again to keep the holy things at the centre of their marching they were going only with the presence of the Lord and with the holy things right at the centre following that were the tribes of Benjamin Ephraim and Manasseh perhaps as the descendants of Rachel perhaps they got that favoured place immediately behind the holy things and perhaps the safest place as well

I guess and then there's the rear guard the dangerous station and that was taken by Asher Dan and Nafthali the sons of the main servants not perhaps the clan of higher status clans of higher status but they were given this vital role as Paul says sometimes the less glamorous the less presentable things are given the highest station and this was certainly true here the sons of the maidservant were given that vital task of the rear guard perhaps the least honoured among the brothers but they're given this vital task and again we see that everyone is vital to this march there are no passengers there are no second class citizens in the army of

God resist all attempts all suggestions all theological wins that in any sense indicate that there are first and second class citizens in the kingdom of God every man on this march is vital and as I say even these less presentable tribes as it were given the actually I'm using gendered language here I should be talking about every person on this march is vital because that's certainly the case and even those who perhaps seem to have the less presentable the less glamorous jobs are in fact given that vital role of the rear guard there there are no passengers because this people are on the move they're on the move in hostile territory they're heading to a destination it's an invasion force basically it's what they're about they're about mounting an invasion they're heading for the promised

land there's going to be a lot of obstacles and struggles before they get there but they will make it eventually and the people are those people who are organized for war seeking the city whose builder is

[44:14] God well there was only one hymn really I could finish with isn't there that's 575 I'm sorry these are all a bit Victorian these hymns but it does seem to be the Victorians who particularly understood spiritual warfare there Thank you.