

Notes on the Pentateuch – No. 4

The Book of Numbers

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The Old Testament book of Numbers is named after the four important censuses of the Israelites which it records. It could also appropriately be called “The Book of Wanderings” since it traces the wanderings of Israel from Sinai to Canaan. Likewise, it could appropriately be called “The Book of Murmurings” because several times it records occasions of rebellion and unbelief that caused God’s people to murmur against Him. This book is classified as one of the books of Law in the Old Testament, which accurately describes some of its content. However, most of the book is the history of the Hebrews in the Wilderness, on their way to Canaan. Numbers must have been written near the end of the journey to Canaan, perhaps about 1,400 BC. Moses has universally been accepted as its author by conservative scholars and no good reasons exist to even consider others as its author. The time span covered by the book is in excess of 38 years.

The theme of Numbers is “service”: how the Levites are to serve in and around the tabernacle, consequences of failing to serve, and readying an army to serve in the coming battles. The purpose is three-fold:

1. To further reveal God’s covenant to Israel.
2. To document the important events of the Wilderness Wanderings.
3. To demonstrate the consequences of rebellion against God and the rewards of obedience.

Numbers contains a wealth of miraculous activity which modernists ridicule as “myths” and “impossibilities.” However, the New Testament writers and the Lord Himself attribute complete historicity and authenticity to the events recorded in Numbers (e.g., John 3:14; 19:36; 1 Cor. 10:8–10; 2 Pet. 2:25; Jude 11; Rev. 1:14, etc.). We personally have more confidence in the Lord, John, Peter, and Paul than in the modernists.

Besides being an extremely important historical account of an interesting period in the development of the Jews as a nation, Numbers is also a book of many practical principles. It teaches that murmuring, complaining, and “fussing” are intolerable to God. The same evil traits are condemned in the New Testament as well (1 Cor. 10:10; Phi 2:14). Such a spirit indicates unbelief. In Numbers, it is made clear that God is a God of precision and order. This great book shows that to rebel against God’s appointed leaders is to rebel against God Himself (Num. 12). The folly of trusting only in one’s own strength is shown (Num. 13–14).

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