

Lessons in the Wilderness I

Introduction to Numbers; The Census of the Exodus Generation; The Census of the Exodus Generation; The Order of Encampment and Marching; Sons of Aaron and the Rest of the Tribe of Levi; Keeping the Camp of the Lord Pure; the Nazarite Vow; the Priestly Benediction

Introduction to Numbers

- **Title**
 - Hebrew, *Bamidbar* or “wilderness”
 - Greek, *Arithmoi* or “numbers”
- **Period:** second month of second year to the eleventh month of the fortieth year
- **Themes**
 - **“Israel on the Move”**
 - Special focus on **the role of the Levites** in moving the Tabernacle, etc.
 - **Results of Faithlessness** → death of the Exodus generation (except for Joshua and Moses, even Moses will not be totally exempt)
- **Structure**
 - **Listings of military-aged men** (20 years and older)
 - Chapter 1ff. Census of the Exodus generation
 - Chapter 26: Census of the New Generation
 - **Geographic**
 - Israel Prepares at Sinai (1:1–10:10)
 - Marching to Transjordan (10:11–22:1)
 - Camping in the Plains of Moab (22:2–36:13)

The Census of the Exodus Generation (1:1–4:49)

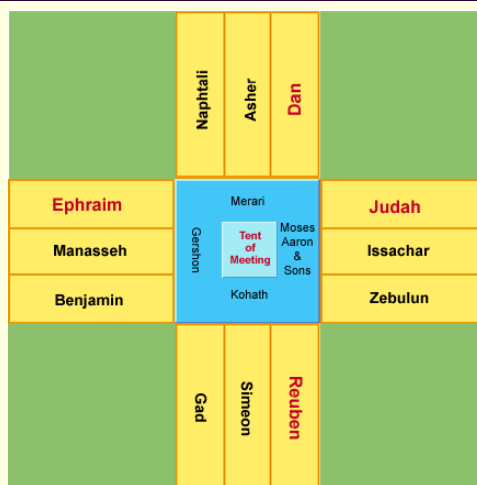
- **The First Census of Israel** (1:1–54): **603,550 military-aged men!**
- The Order of Encampment and Marching (2:1–34)
- The Sons of Aaron (3:1–4): **4, 2 living**
- Levites Chosen and Given to Aaron's Sons (3:5–13)
- The First Census of the Levites (males a month or older, 3:14–39): **22,000**
 - Gershonites and their duties (3:18–26)
 - Kohathites and their duties (3:27–32)
 - Merarites and their duties (3:33–39)
- The Redemption of the First-Born (3:40–51): **22,273 males from the rest of Israel**
- Duties of Levitical Clans Detailed
 - The Duties of the Kohathites (4:1–20)
 - The Duties of the Gershonites (2:21–28)
 - The Duties of the Merarites (4:21–33)
- Census of the Levites (twenty-five to fifty years, 4:34–49): **8,580 old enough to serve**

10/28/2009

16. Lessons in the Wilderness I

3

The Order of Encampment and Marching (2:1–34)



- Israel with YHWH in its midst
- The priests and Levites are camped around the Tabernacle with the other tribes arrayed around them
- Israel moved as a community towards the Promised Land, just as the Church moves forward as a community led by God and directed by his prophet

10/28/2009

16. Lessons in the Wilderness I

4

Sons of Aaron and the Rest of the Tribe of Levi

- The book of Leviticus is primarily about the duties of the priests (Aaron's family) and secondarily about extending their holiness to all of Israel
- Numbers, reflecting "the camp on the move," focuses on the rest of the Levites, who had the primary responsibility for packing and transporting the Tabernacle and its furnishings
- Levites Chosen and Given to Aaron's Sons (3:5–13)
 - Take the place of the rest of the firstborn of Israel, which the Lord claimed when he slew the firstborn of Israel
 - Given to YHWH, they are in turn "given" to Aaron and his descendants, much as portions of the sacrificial offerings were given to support them
- The First Census of the Levites (males a month or older, 3:14–39): **22,000**
 - Gershonites and their duties (**accessories made of fabric**, 3:18–26)
 - Kohathites and their duties (**sacred things made of gold and bronze**, 3:27–32)
 - Merarites and their duties (**wooden items and supporting structures**, 3:33–39)
- The Redemption of the First-Born (3:40–51)
 - 22,273 firstborn male Israelites – 22,000 male Levites = 273
 - These 273 had to be "paid for!"

10/28/2009

16. Lessons in the Wilderness I

5

Levites Old Enough to Serve

- Duties of Levitical Clans Detailed (4:1–33)
 - The Duties of the Kohathites (4:1–20)
 - The Duties of the Gershonites (2:21–28)
 - The Duties of the Merarites (4:21–33)
- Census of the Levites (twenty-five to fifty years, 4:34–49): **8,580**
 - These ages of service change over time—in the wilderness generation they needed to be able to carry the Tabernacle and its furnishings, in the periods of the later Temples their service changed and they could serve longer
- *Many of these duties seem menial or trivial, but all were necessary to move the people of the Lord under his guidance—just as no priesthood duty, or other church service, is unimportant in moving the people of God towards the "promised land" of heaven!*

10/28/2009

16. Lessons in the Wilderness I

6

The Sanctification of the People (5:1–10:10)

- Unclean Persons (5:1–4)
- Confession and Restitution (5:5–10)
- Concerning the Unfaithful Wife (5:11–31)
- **The Nazarite Vow (6:1–21)**
- **The Priestly Benediction (6:22–27)**
- Offerings of the Leaders (7:1–89)
- The Seven Lamps (8:1–4)
- Consecration and Service of the Levites (8:5–26)
- The Passover at Sinai (9:1–14)
- **The Cloud and the Fire (9:15–23)**
- The Silver Trumpets (10:1–10)

10/28/2009

16. Lessons in the Wilderness I

7

Keeping the Camp of the Lord Pure

- Unclean Persons (5:1–4)
 - As in Leviticus 13, there is a dramatic lesson about ritual purity in the person of the lepers and others ritually defiled
 - Remember, however, the equally powerful symbolism of the cleansing of lepers in Leviticus 14
 - Here they are not to “defile their camps, in the midst of whereof I dwell.” (5:3)
- Confession and Restitution (5:5–10)
 - When any trespassed against the Lord or another person, “they shall confess their sin which they have done: and he shall recompense his trespass . . .” (5:7)
- Concerning the Unfaithful Wife (5:11–31)
 - The odd, somewhat time and culture-specific practice of alleviating jealousy assured domestic harmony as well as spiritual purity in the community

10/28/2009

16. Lessons in the Wilderness I

8

The Nazarite Vow (6:1–21)

- **A way of extending the special holiness of the priests to the average Israelite**
- As they were holy or “set apart” by calling, an individual could set him or herself apart to the Lord for a set period of time
 - Think of mission calls with specific dress, grooming, and behavior standards!
- During this period, **not even the death of close family members could separate them from their service to the Lord, much as was the case for the high priest**

10/28/2009

16. Lessons in the Wilderness I

9

The Priestly Benediction (6:22–27)

²²And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ²³Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them,

²⁴The LORD bless thee,
and keep thee:

²⁵The LORD make his face shine upon thee,
and be gracious unto thee:

²⁶The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee,
and give thee peace.

²⁷ And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them.

Traditionally *kohanim*, or descendants of the priests, remove their shoes, wash their hands, cover their heads and hands with their prayer shawls, and with their hands replicating the Hebrew letter *shin*, pronounce the priestly benediction at certain points in a synagogue service or at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount



10/28/2009

16. Lessons in the Wilderness I

10

Consecration and Service of the Levites (8:5–26)

- “Take the Levites from among the children of Israel, and cleanse them.” (8:6)
 - **Ceremonial cleansing = spiritual cleansing**
- “And thou shalt bring the Levites before the Lord: and the children of Israel shall put their hands upon the Levites” (8:10)
 - Compare this with the laying on of hands of worshippers upon sacrificial victims: **Levites = a sacrifice!**
 - Taken instead of the firstborn of Israel, which belong to the Lord since the first Passover
 - **Active service continues from 25 to 50**
- Nature of the Priesthood
 - We call it the Aaronic priesthood after Aaron but it is better called the Levitical priesthood
 - There is no one-to-one comparison between modern and ancient Levitical priesthood duties and responsibilities – we have different cultures, needs, and worship practices but the principles of service are the same

10/28/2009

11

The Cloud, Fire, Trumpets and the Song of Moses (9:15–10:26)

- “And when the cloud tarried long upon the tabernacle many days, then the children of Israel kept the charge of the Lord, and journeyed not.” (9:19)
- “And it came to pass on the twentieth *day* of the second month, in the second year, **that the cloud was taken up from off the tabernacle of the testimony**. And *the children of Israel took their journeys out of the wilderness of Sinai*; and the cloud rested in the wilderness of Paran.” (10:11-12)
- **Prayer of Moses**
 - “And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said:
 - Rise up, Lord,
 - and let thine enemies be scattered;
 - and let them that hate thee flee before thee.
 “And when it rested, he said:
 - Return, O Lord, unto the many thousands of Israel.” (10:35-36)

10/28/2009

12