

Reformation Fellowship Notes • August 12, 2018
Teacher: David Crabtree
Handout #1
Numbers 1 & 2

I. Introduction

A. Why study Numbers?

1. Claim: most neglected book in OT.
 - a) There is a reason for this claim.
2. I want to revisit this book.
 - a) Last time I looked at it as historical narrative.
 - b) This time I want to look at it as a source of cultural literacy.

B. Cultural literacy in Israelite culture

1. What is Cultural Literacy?
 - a) A concept developed by E. D. Hirsch in the 1980s
 - (1) Cultural Literacy is when one is well-versed on the vocabulary, concepts, images, values, and stories shared by a culture.
 - (a) It facilitates our ability to communicate and understand.
 - (b) It is knowing the cultural language of a society.
2. I want to become culturally literate in the culture of ancient Israel.
 - a) I want to be able to look at the OT through the cultural lenses of Jesus and the apostles.
 - b) I wish I could smell the smells, hear the sounds, taste the tastes, hear the stories, understand the words of the ancient Israelite.
 - (1) I can't. This is unrecoverable.
 - c) But I can gain some of this knowledge.
 - (1) I can glean as much as possible from that culture's core texts.
3. The Pentateuch was THE core document of ancient Israel.
 - a) Israelites would have been intimately familiar with all the books of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy).
 - b) It contains cultural information, and stories that they would all have known very well.
 - c) Jews today read through the Pentateuch every year.

C. I am teaching through the Pentateuch.

1. I taught through Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers several years ago.
 - a) I was looking at them primarily as historical narratives.
 - (1) I wanted to become familiar with the history of God's people.
 - b) This time I want to look at these books as a guide to understanding the culture of ancient Israel.
 - (1) I want to understand the values, the concepts, the customs, the language, the stories of ancient Israel.
 - (2) This means I have to look at each book as a work of literature.

- (a) How is each book constructed and why?
 - (3) I want to understand the laws and the religious practices.
- D. Becoming culturally literate is like learning a language.
1. A lot of tedious detail must be learned before it is of any use at all.
 - a) Patience
 - b) Trust the process
 2. It is like we are learning Swahili together.
 - a) A very foreign language
 - b) Learning from a non-native speaker
 3. That is what I was trying to do in Exodus.
 - a) But Exodus had more inherent interest.
 - b) Numbers less so
- E. I don't know what we will find.
1. But the first handful of chapters are not action packed.
 - a) There are some very important passages in the last 2/3 of the book.
 2. It is not purely historical narrative.
 - a) Chronology was more clearly one of the main organizational principles in Exodus.
 - b) Numbers mixes historical narrative with sections of law.
 3. Organization of the book is not clear.
 - a) Welhausen thought it was just the junk drawer of the OT.
 - b) I have found three proposed organizational schemes.
 - (1) Hard to determine
 - (2) But important
 - (a) We all know that context is important.
 - (b) The role of a passage in the overall organizational scheme is what determines the context.
 - c) I will deal with organizational issues as necessary.
- F. What is the setting?
1. 1445 BC or 1290 BC
 2. The people of Israel are at the foot of Mount Sinai.
 - a) God led them out of slavery in Egypt a year earlier.
 - b) They made their way through the desert to Mount Sinai.
 - (1) God offered to make them His people.
 - (2) God spoke to them.
 - (3) God told them what He requires.
 - (4) God gave Moses other instructions.
 - (a) But the people panicked and made a golden calf to worship.
 - (b) God wanted to destroy them.
 - (c) Moses convinced God to forgive them.
 - (5) God forgave them and reaffirmed his covenant with them.

c) God had the Israelites build a tabernacle so that he could be with them.

G. What is Numbers about?

1. Exodus was about God making for Himself a people.
 - a) God made a contract with them.
 - b) They immediately violated the agreement.
 - c) But God relented and reestablished his relationship with them.
2. In Numbers, we see that they had not become changed people.
 - a) They continued to be rebellious.
 - b) That rebelliousness runs very deep.
 - (1) That whole generation is allowed to die out.
 - (2) It is a new generation that God leads into the Promised Land.
 - c) That rebelliousness could not be tamed; it had to be allowed to die.
 - d) The book covers 40 years, but nearly the whole book deals with just the first and last years of that 40-year span.

II. Numbers 1:1-19

- A. This is happening 12 months after they left Egypt.
 1. First day of the second month of the second year since the exodus
 - a) Chapters 7-9 occurred the first two weeks of the first month.
 - b) This was before chapters 1-6.
- B. God spoke to Moses in the tabernacle.
 - a) I am assuming that the tabernacle has merged with the tent of meeting.
 - (1) The tent of meeting preexisted the tabernacle.
- C. "Take a census"
 1. They took a census earlier to collect money for the tabernacle (Exodus 38:25-26).
 2. Now they are taking a census to find out how many soldiers they can field.
 3. The number they arrive at is exactly the same.
 - a) Exodus 38:26: 603,550 (a couple of months earlier)
 - b) Numbers 1:46: 603,550
 4. It is probably two halves of the same census.

“What does the final form of the text wish the reader to make of these two obviously related but separate censuses? They are similar in that they give totals of Israelite males twenty years of age and up. But the purpose of the two seems different. The first has a religious purpose (a levy for the tabernacle), and the second an administrative or military purpose. The technique was also different. The first census reports only the grand total. The census in Num. 1 numbers the people by tribe, clan, and father’s house, in addition to a count of individual names. That twelve leaders are appointed to help Moses and Aaron in this numbering indicates the much greater scope of this census. The total figure of the census checked with that of the earlier one, so that, although these countings were distinct, they were so close in time that they were related. Data from the first were probably used in the second. They stand as two halves of one act, the religious half

(Exodus) and the military or administrative half (Numbers). Perhaps to remind the Israelites of the religious dimension of all life—even the supposedly administrative details—Aaron is included in the census of Num. 1.” (Ashley, pp. 51-2)

- D. Who was to be counted?
 - 1. Males 20 and up
- E. Who was to do the counting?
 - 1. Moses and Aaron with the help of the head of each tribe

III. Numbers 1:20-46

- A. How were they to be counted?
 - 1. By tribe, clan, and family (father’s family being the nuclear family)
- B. List of the heads of the tribes
 - 1. Numbers has seven lists of the tribes.
 - 2. Three different orders
 - 3. Levites are never included.
 - a) Here it is because the Levites are not included in the army census.
- C. This is clearly a military census.

“The least that can be said is that the pattern used for this census was a military pattern.” (Ashley, p. 49)

- 1. Israel is being prepared for war.
 - a) And this is only shortly after God has occupied the Tabernacle.
- D. Big numbers in the OT
 - 1. This census gives the number of adult males.
 - a) To get total population, multiply by 4.
 - (1) About 2 and a half million
 - b) This number is impossibly large.
 - (1) Not just a subjective sense
 - (2) It does not make sense in the text as a whole.
 - (a) Why were they afraid of the Canaanites, if there were so many?
 - (b) Ashley gives a list of 5 more reasons to question the numbers.
 - 2. Possible explanations
 - a) Number literal and accurate
 - (1) God super-miraculously cared for Israelites
 - (a) beyond the miracles of manna, water, and quail.
 - b) The numbers represent what Israel later became.
 - (1) For example, at a later date the tribe of Reuben had 46,500 men.
 - c) Numbers are gematria.
 - (1) Letters that constitute the numbers can be symbolically interpreted.
 - d) “Eleph” is being used with a different meaning.
 - (1) “Eleph” usually signifies 1,000.

- (2) “Eleph” can mean “clan.”
 - (3) “Eleph” can mean “military unit.”
 - e) Numbers are symbolic, related to astrological phenomena.
 - f) Numbers are purposely hyperbolic.
3. My thinking: somehow the big numbers have become confused.
- a) Maybe in transmission
- E. Significance of the tribes listed
1. The twelve tribes are listed four times in Numbers.
 - a) Always the same twelve
 - (1) Levi is always omitted.
 - (2) In other contexts, the marching order is used.
 2. Numbers
 - a) Judah is largest.
 - b) Manasseh and Benjamin are the smallest.

IV. Numbers 1:47-54

- A. Special role of Levites
1. Not to be counted
 - a) Will not go to war
 2. They have control of the tabernacle of the testimony.
 - a) And furnishings and belongings
 - b) To carry it and to take care for it
 - c) To take down and to set up
 3. Any layman who comes near will be put to death.
 - a) Levites will camp immediately around tabernacle.
 - (1) Other tribes will camp outside that.
 - (a) Every tribe has its set position.
 - (2) So that the wrath of God will not fall on Israel.
 4. In sum: Levites guard and transport the tabernacle.

V. Numbers 2:1-31

- A. Arrangement of camp and order of march
1. Every tribe is positioned relative to the Tabernacle.
 - a) Position of tribe marked by a standard.
 - (1) According to Jewish tradition, standard is the color of the stone representing the tribe on the high priest’s breastplate.
 - b) Tribes camp at a distance from the Tabernacle.
 - (1) In Joshua 3:4, tribes were to march 1,000 yards from the ark of the covenant.
 2. East side of the encampment: camp of Judah
 - a) Most honored position
 - (1) Judah, Issachar, Zebulun

- b) Goes first on the march
- 3. South side of encampment: camp of Reuben
 - a) Next most honored position
 - (1) Reuben, Simeon, Gad
 - b) Goes second on the march
- 4. Middle of the encampment: camp of Levites
 - a) Most protected position
 - (1) Priests and Levites
 - b) March in the middle
 - (1) But not counted in the marching order
- 5. West side of encampment: camp of Ephraim
 - a) Third most honored position
 - (1) Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin
 - b) Goes third on the march
- 6. North side of encampment: camp of Dan
 - a) Fourth most honored position
 - (1) Dan, Asher, Naphtali
 - b) Goes last on the march

VI. Numbers 2:32-34

- 1. Total number of fighting men listed.
 - a) Levites not included.
- 2. Position in camp and march assigned to each family.

VII. Conclusion

- A. Description of camp and march matches exactly the Egyptian expedition pattern.
 - 1. Rectangle
 - 2. Tent in the middle for the king
 - 3. Military expedition
 - 4. Significance
 - a) This is a group of people heavily influenced by the Egyptians.
 - b) They are on a military expedition.
- B. Out of the frying pan into the fire
 - 1. The first thing the Israelites are to do after Sinai is to prepare for war.
 - a) Of course, God just established his presence in their midst, and now they have to get ready for war.
- C. The strange case of the Levites
 - 1. Bad guys?

- a) They do not receive a favorable blessing from Jacob (Gen. 49:5-7).
 - b) They receive no inheritance in the Promised Land.
2. Good guys?
 - a) Moses and Aaron are from Levi.
 - b) They are the first to come to YHWH's defense (Ex. 32:25-29).
 - c) They are given a special role in the life of Israel.
 3. This is something we will have to pay attention to as we go through Numbers.