

OUTLINE STUDIES IN THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

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CHAPTER SIX

NUMBERS

The title of this fourth book of the Bible is probably derived from the numbering of Israel of which we have the record in the opening chapters. But it hardly indicates the object of the book, for the census forms but a small portion of it.

The book contains much important matter both of a historical and legislative character. The key word is *pilgrimage*; the key verse, Numbers 10:29: **“We are journeying unto the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you; come thou with us, and we will do thee good; for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.”**

Numbers falls into three clearly marked parts:

First, *the departure from Sinai*, the account of the organization of the tribes, incidents by the way, and arrival at Kadesh-barnea, chapters 1-13.

Second, *unbelief and rebellion upon the report of the spies*, chapters 13-19. For thirty-eight years thereafter the people marched and counter marched in the wilderness until the generation which came out of Egypt was dead, except Caleb and Joshua. The period is passed over in almost total silence. The nation was under the divine rebuke, and is treated as if its relations with God were suspended.

Third, *the second arrival at Kadesh*, chapters 20-36. This portion of the book is crowded with great events, the death of Miriam, and Aaron, Balak and Balaam; the refusal of Edom to allow a passage through his territory, and the wearisome journey around Edom, and the final appearing of Israel in the plains of Moab opposite Jericho. Among the principal topics the following may be mentioned:

1. *Census of the army, and the probable number of Israel.*

The quota raised from each of the tribes included all the able-bodied males from twenty years old and upward. It was an army which, in the condition specified, was a universal conscription. Altogether it amounted to 603,550 men. The same number is given in Exodus 38:26.

Some are disposed to estimate three non-combatants for each soldier, others four; in which cases the whole host of Israel would consist of about 1,810,000, or about 2,414,000. Others still reduce the number to one million and a half. But at any rate, a vast host was that which wandered here and there in the peninsula of Sinai for forty years.

Skepticism interposes a grave objection to the inspiration of this record. After swelling the numbers of Israel to the uttermost, and after exaggerating the sterility of the wilderness, and the scanty supplies to be had from any quarter in the whole region of territory, it asks: How could such a multitude in such a place for so long a time be maintained in life? Leave God out of the account, and the difficulty is insoluble. Arithmetic triumphs. Bring Him into it and all is plain. Reflect whether that Infinite Being who swings the world upon His arm and feeds the creatures thereof with His hand could not support twice the number for twice the time. The question resolves itself into this: Was God with His people or not?

2. *Organization of Israel*, chapters 2-4. The notion might be entertained from a hasty reading of this history, that the journeys of the wilderness were marked by confusion and disorder. No mistake could be greater.

God was their Leader, and He is the Author of order, not of confusion. There was an appointed place of worship; an appointed ministry of worship; appointed seasons of worship. The civil and military arrangements in Israel were its complete as the religious. Scarcely had the redeemed people put the Red sea between them and the land of their bondage when they were thoroughly organized.

The army was divided into four grand sections or corps, with three tribes to each division, and with a commander for each. Each grand division had its standard, each tribe its ensign. It is not possible to determine what these standards were. Tradition has it that they represented the cherubim—the lion, the ox, the man, the eagle.

In the encampment they formed a sort of hollow square, with three tribes lying on each side of the square. The Tabernacle was in the center of the square. On the march, six tribes were in the van, and six in the rear, with the Tabernacle in the center between these two great divisions. The position of the sanctuary was thus a central one, always central. God was in the midst of His people, their Protector and Helper, Psalm 46:5. The Levites were organized into three divisions corresponding with the three sons of Levi, Gershom, Kohath, and Merari, and their special duties assigned them. Thus order reigned throughout the entire multitude.

3. *Laws of Numbers*. A few as specimens are here given.

(1) *Laws touching personal habits, and conduct or deportment toward one another*, chapter 5. Here are very wise sanitary regulations which municipal governments would do well to imitate. England for many years struggled to destroy leprosy among its people, and succeeded only when it completely isolated all lepers. Moses enacted such a law three thousand years before England. No wonder Israelites who observe Moses' law as to personal habits are the healthiest of people.

(2) *Law of the Nazarite*, chapter 6. The Nazarite was not an order, monastic or otherwise; but he was one who took a vow in order to a more complete consecration to God. The vow was voluntary, and limited as to time.

Three things the Nazarite practiced:

- Abstinence from wine, i. e., renunciation of the enjoyments of life;
- Unshorn hair, i. e., subjection (I Corinthians 11:10);
- Keeping himself undefiled from contact with a dead body, i. e., renunciation for the time of the obligations arising from natural relations.

“The Nazarite was to be a living type and image of holiness.”

(3) *The ordinance of the red heifer*, chapter 19. Out of the ashes of this sacrifice the water of purification was prepared. It is alluded to in Hebrews 9:13. Throughout the book there is no mention of the laver. The water of purification appears to have taken the place of the laver in some measure during the pilgrim journey of Israel.

4. *Israel's unbelief and failure*, chapters 13, 14. In about two years after quitting Egypt they were at Kadesh, on the borders of the Promised Land. The report of a majority of the scouts created consternation among the people. Giants held the land; the cities were walled and very great, and the inhabitants strong. Thus ran the report.

Panic-stricken, their first thought was to march straight back to Egypt; their next, to stone Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua, the men of faith. Want of courage, downright cowardice, one would say, was the reason of their conduct. But in Hebrews 3:19 it is very differently interpreted. **“So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.”** And this their unbelief struck at all God had declared Himself to be, and promised to do for them.

(1) *It was an impeachment of His word.* He had said He would bring them into the land and give it them for an inheritance. He even had taken an oath to Abraham that He would do so. And they by unbelief said He would not. God said “yes;” they “no.” God said, **“I will, I surely will;”** they said, “Thou wilt not.”

(2) *It was an impeachment of His power.* Were the Anakim stronger than the army of Egypt? Were cities and walls mightier than the Red sea? They had seen the display of His power. Could they not rely on Him for even greater displays of it?

(3) *It was an impeachment of His goodness.* In manifold ways had He showed His love for them.

- He had delivered them from Egypt;
- He had been their Guide through the wilderness journey,
- He had fed them by the way.

And now in full view of Canaan, could His mercy fail? Unbelief, “It ties up the hand of God.”

Twice Jesus marvelled; once at faith, Luke 7:9; at unbelief, Mark 6:6. Luther said, “Nothing damns but unbelief.”

5. *The sin of Moses and Aaron*, chapter 20:1-13.

It has been said that God’s people fail in that for which they are noted.

- Job’s patience gave way;
- Abraham’s faith wavered;
- Moses’ humility broke down.

At first sight it might seem a small matter for which these two eminent servants of God, Moses and Aaron, should be excluded from the land of promise. But if the reader will ponder the narrative of their trespass, and the passages which elsewhere refer to it, he will find that theirs was a most serious offence. Petulance amounting to unjustifiable anger was one element in it, Psalm 106:32, 33.

The patience which had distinguished his course for so long a period suddenly failed, and he “**spake unadvisedly with his lips.**” Disobedience was another element. God had commanded him to “**Speak**” to the rock; whereas Moses struck it twice with the rod. Unbelief was also in the sin. This appears in his action and his words. He called the people “**rebels.**” and yet he was himself at that moment in rebellion, Numbers 27:14; “**For ye rebelled against my commandment.**” “**Must we fetch you water out of this rock?**”

His vexation and anger carried him into such lengths of unbelief and sin! Furthermore, the “**rock**” was a type of Christ, I Corinthians 10:4. Once already it had been “**smitten**” by the divine command, Exodus 17:6, 7. To smite it a second time was to destroy the type; for Christ the antitype dieth but once; death hath no more power over Him. Taking all the circumstances into account, the sin was heinous, for it was rebellion against God. The punishment seems severe, but it was not disproportionate to the sin.

6. *The brazen serpent*, chapters 21:5-9; John 3:14, 15. Evil and its remedy. Many and striking are the analogies between the brazen serpent and the Saviour. A few may be pointed out.

- (1) Poison of the reptiles, sin.
- (2) The remedy, serpent of brass; Christ made in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin.
- (3) The remedy lifted up, Christ lifted up.
- (4) Healed by looking, faith in Christ, saved by a look.

7. *Balaam and Balak*, chapters 22-24. Balaam’s history is one of the strangest of the Bible. A most gifted man, he was utterly without principle, was the slave of the lowest and most despicable of passions—greed.

Three inspired writers (II Peter 2:15, 16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14) stamp his character with unqualified condemnation.

There was in him perversion of splendid endowments, perversion of conscience and total selfishness. Unable to curse Israel and so gain Balak's reward, he insidiously counseled their corruption by unholy alliances with the Moabitish women, and by the licentious rites of idolatry.

His evil counsel worked only too well to Israel's sorrow and hurt. But the avaricious prophet paid dearly for his reward; he fell by the spears of the people he sought to ruin, and died, not as the righteous, but as the fool.

8. *Aaron's death*, chapter 20:23-29. Before his death Aaron, by command of the Lord, was stripped of his priestly robes, which were put upon his son and successor, Eleazar. His priesthood could not pass into the heavens; it would continue only on earth. There is but one priest who has carried His priesthood with Him into the glory—the Lord Jesus Christ, Hebrews 4:14.

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