

# INTRODUCTION

## Why “Numbers”?

What’s in a name? I have read somewhere about commercial fishermen who had scant market for their catch. It was not until the fish could be sold under the name ‘Tuna’ that ‘Horse Mackerel’ really began to sell.

The name of this book, “Numbers,” is about as intriguing and exciting as the title of an income tax form. <sup>1</sup> Perhaps a more descriptive name would be “The Long Way Home,” for the high water mark of its message is Kadesh-barnea where thirty-eight years (Deut. 2:14) were added to the eleven-day (Deut. 1:2) march to the land of promise.

The book both opens and closes with a lengthy and detailed census. This stirs our interest about as much as a couple of chapters of genealogy. Also, because of the great magnitude of the numbers recorded, they pose what seems to be a great challenge to the accuracy, and very inspiration, of the entire passage.

Why, then, study this book?

It will stretch our faith to the glory point. It will yield types of Christ and of our salvation, sanctification and assurance. It will demonstrate the supreme ability of God to guide and provide for His own, His faithfulness both to chasten and reward His people, and the certainty that what He has promised He is able also to fulfill.

This book is rich in typology and illustrations of vital New Testament material. John 3:14 – 16 and Hebrews 9:13 rest on events related only in Numbers. The necessary background for a full understanding of Acts seven, Heb. 6:4 – 8 and Heb. 10:26 – 31, 39 is found in Numbers thirteen and fourteen.

When Paul said, “Now these things happened to them as an example [“type”], and they were written for our learning upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11 - NKJV), <sup>2</sup> he had chiefly in mind this very book of Numbers.

We will not linger long over passages awaiting the tedious and exhaustive work of the scholar, though doubtless they contain many hidden gems of truth. With, regrettably, no knowledge of Hebrew we will attempt to seek out those spiritual truths that may, by prayerful and careful study, with attention to rightly dividing the word of

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew title of the book is “In the Wilderness,” because it records what took place there. – Companion Bible.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations will be from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted. Occasional reference will be made to the King James Version (KJV) and the .New American Standard Bible (NASB). It is strongly suggested that each passage under discussion be prayerfully read before the study is begun, and that a Bible be nearby for checking references noted.

truth, be harvested from existing translations and helps – truths that are ripe for the picking. Our aim is not to deeply analyze the bread of life – but, hopefully, to serve it to those who are hungry, who will enjoy it and share it with others.

As in the entire Old Testament, the prevailing theme of the book is God's relationship to Israel as a nation. As early as Gen. 15:13 – 16 God promised to bring them out of a time of slavery in a land that was not theirs, even stating the time they would be oppressed there.<sup>3</sup> The promise was not to certain individuals, or even a class of individuals, but to the nation fathered by Abraham. Though the generation starting out for Palestine failed almost totally to arrive, God's promise that the *nation* was to enter that land was fully and gloriously carried out by the succeeding generation. The personal salvation of those involved is not in question. Among the "rebels" who perished before they could enter the land there were doubtless many that were personally justified before God. After all, the number included Miriam, Aaron and even Moses himself.

As is the case in the rest of the Old Testament, the salvation of individuals is clearly in focus from time to time. However that topic is secondary here to the overriding theme of God's program and future prospects for the nation that He had early called "My son" (Ex. 4:22). Above all else may we see ever more clearly the things concerning Christ, God's "Only Begotten Son," in this book (Luke 24:27).

### **The Background for the Narrative Before Us**

When Abraham first viewed the land to which God had called him God said to him, "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen. 12:7).

One major problem existed – the land was already in the possession of the Canaanites (Gen. 12:6). Nevertheless God assured him that the entire area was to be given to him and his descendants (Gen. 13:14 – 17). During his lifetime Abraham never enjoyed full possession of that which had been promised to him (Heb. 11:13). God even told him that for 400 years his descendants would be entirely removed to a land that was not theirs (Gen. 15:13). The problem, again, was the Canaanites. They were wicked, and would one day be judged for their wickedness and dispossessed of their homeland, but the time for that had not yet arrived. God was patiently waiting until their cup of iniquity would be full – until they fully deserved the total destruction that would be meted out through Israel's invasion (Gen. 15:16).

During the long years in Egypt the Israelites must have known of the revelation made to Abraham. When Joseph gave commandment concerning his bones he told his brothers, "God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (Gen. 50:24). What Joseph told his

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<sup>3</sup> The seeming contradiction between Gen. 15:13 and Acts 7:6, on the one hand, and Ex. 12:40 on the other is easily explained. The children of Israel were *residents* of Egypt for 430 years, but they were *enslaved and oppressed* for only 400 years. This tells us that between their arrival in Egypt and the time when a new king arose who knew not Joseph (Ex. 1:8) was 30 years.

brothers had been “by faith” (Heb. 11:22). He was not merely longing for their welfare – he knew what God had promised to Abraham and he believed it!

As their slavery became ever more bitter how greatly Israel must have longed for that coming deliverance! How slowly the long years must have dragged by! As the predicted time of their departure drew near they must have begun looking for the coming of the deliverer. Then Moses came on the scene and tried to alleviate their suffering (Ex. 2:11 – 14) – but he was forty years early and serving, at that time, under the wrong master. He failed to even make a dent in the plight of his brethren and had to flee to the backside of the desert (Ex. 2:15). He had spent forty years in Pharaoh’s court learning to be ‘somebody,’ now he spent forty years in the desert learning to be ‘nobody’ (Ex. 3:11) so that he might become a fitting tool in the hands of God to deliver everybody.

Finally the time is right. The specified four hundred years have almost run their course and, behold, Moses is back. This time he has come as the humble servant of Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob! Rapidly now earth-shaking events take place. Pharaoh’s gods are defeated, his power is challenged and broken, his people are judged and, finally, his army is destroyed. The Passover has righted their relationship with God and the crossing of the Red Sea sets them free from the tyranny of Pharaoh. They are given bread from heaven and water from the Rock. They gain their first military victory, which presages those to come. They are granted a covenant with God and have His instructions as to how they are to live pleasing to him. They have a penal system to keep sin in check and a sacrificial system to care for its guilt before God. They also have a tabernacle, making it possible for God to dwell among them and go before them. They have even been instructed as to how they are to conduct themselves in the land. Now, as they are poised only an eleven days journey from the land of milk and honey that Israel has been looking forward to for four hundred years, their anticipation is surely at fever pitch. They could have been singing, as one hymn puts it, I “nightly pitch my tent a day’s march nearer home!”<sup>4</sup>

At this moment of high drama and glorious expectation we open the book of Numbers.

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<sup>4</sup> Hymn # 48 in “The Believers Hymn Book” – Pickering & Inglis, London.