

Introduction to Numbers

Exodus (meaning exit) was probably written by Moses, like the rest of the Pentateuch. There is no agreement among scholars as to the date when the events of the exodus took place. A common view is that the exodus occurred in c. 1446B.C., though some scholars believe it took place around 1260B.C.

Introduction to Leviticus

Author

As with the other books of the Pentateuch, Moses was probably the author of Leviticus. In Leviticus, Moses continues the story of Exodus.

The Theological Message of Leviticus

Leviticus stresses that God is holy and his people must therefore be holy (11:44). The word “holy” basically means “set apart.” In Exodus, God reveals himself to be completely morally pure in his character and incomparable in his being. He sets himself apart from other gods by being for Israel, redeeming them from sin and slavery.

The holy God sets apart his people as holy—from other nations for ministry to the world (Ex. 19:5–6). He is their God, and they are his people (Ex. 29:45; Gen. 17:7). In Leviticus 20:26, God declares, “You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.”

God sets Israel apart from sin by graciously accepting sacrifices in place of their sins and impurities. Leviticus 1–7 outlines how through particular sacrifices God forgives common daily sins (burnt offering), specific sins that affect community life (sin offering), and sins that require restitution (guilt offering). It also shows how Israel may offer gifts of gratitude to God for daily provision (grain offering) and for fellowship with him (peace offering). Leviticus 16 describes how God forgives all sins committed in a whole year through the offering of two goats (16:15–16, 21–22). God’s acceptance of these sacrifices in payment for the people’s sin makes what Leviticus calls “atonement” with God possible, leading to reconciliation, fellowship, and oneness. His grace makes forgiveness possible for all who approach him with wholehearted devotion.

God sets Israel apart for service by choosing the Levites to be his priests (chs. 8–10) and by teaching the people how to be an ethically sound community (chs. 17–27). The Levites must cultivate inner holiness and serve God as he commands. They are set apart for his work; they cannot perform their ministry however they choose (10:1–3).

Week 3 – February 2, 2020

Weekly Overview

The people must reflect God's character. Thus, they must love one another and any foreigner who resides with them (19:18, 33–34). They must protect women and children from sexual predators and protect themselves from sexual sins of all types (18:1–23). They must rest every week, let the land rest every seven years, and let the economy rest from debt and land acquisition every 50 years (ch. 25). They must be different from the surrounding nations so that those nations will desire God.

God sets Israel apart for covenant blessing (26:1–13) by holding them accountable to the covenant's standards (26:14–39). He promises to discipline them when they sin so they can return to him and his work. Although sin cannot be ignored in the covenant relationship, God provides a means for restoration of covenant fellowship. Even if he disciplines them by removing them from the Promised Land, he will eventually bring them home when they repent (26:40–45).

Above all, God sets himself apart as the one true God. He sets himself apart by his power (10:1–3), forgiveness (1:1–7:38; 16:21–22), provision (ch. 19), instruction (chs. 17–27), and promises (26:1–13, 40–45). He redeemed Israel for fellowship with him (26:13) and for the world's sake. Greater kindness or security could hardly be expected. Yet, as time passes and Israel struggles to be holy, God does more. He sends his son, Jesus, the perfect teacher, priest, sacrifice, and sanctuary (Hebrews 7–10). Whoever believes in him has eternal life (John 3:16), and he provides them with an everlasting home (John 14:2, 6). They are his holy community, his kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2:9–10).

Outline

- Five Major Offerings (1:1–6:7)
- Handling of the Offerings (6:8–7:38)
- The Establishment of the Priesthood (8:1–10:20)
- The Laws on Cleanness and Uncleanness (11:1–15:33)
- The Day of Atonement Ritual (16:1–34)
- The Handling and Meaning of Blood (17:1–16)
- The Call to Holiness (18:1–22:33)
- Holy Times (23:1–25:55)
- Blessings and Curses (26:1–46)
- Vows and Dedication (27:1–34)

Introduction to Numbers

Author

Moses is the author of the book of Numbers, which is the fourth of five volumes in the Pentateuch. Its English name comes from the censuses in chapters 1–4 and 26. Numbers tells of Israel's journey from Mount Sinai to the borders of the Promised Land, summarizing some 40 years of the nation's history.

The Theological Message of Numbers

Biblical writers usually treat Numbers as a cautionary tale. For instance, citing some of the events in Numbers, Paul writes that these things are "examples for us, that we might not desire evil" (1 Cor. 10:1–13). Psalm 78:40–43 states that the people of the narratives in Numbers tested God and forgot his great power (cf. Ps. 106:16–18). Yet biblical writers also focus on the few positive elements found in Numbers, such as the military victories God gave Israel (Deut. 2:16–3:11; cf. Num. 21:21–35). One might expect God to reject the Israelites for their rebellion displayed in the book, but he does not. Instead, he disciplines the people and starts afresh with those who trust him and follow his will.

Numbers 1–10 opens the book on a hopeful note. The people God redeemed and instructed in Exodus and Leviticus include a sufficient number of soldiers and priests (chs. 1–8). They celebrate the second annual Passover, demonstrating their belief in God's ongoing forgiveness of their sins (ch. 9). God's presence then leads them by the pillar of cloud and fire (10:11–13) to leave the desert of Sinai, where they had encamped for about two years, and begin their journey toward the land of Canaan, their new homeland (ch. 10). God has kept all his promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–9), Moses (Exodus 3–4), and Israel (Exodus 1–19).

But Numbers 11–12 recounts the sin that undermines this positive start and reminds readers of the golden calf episode in Exodus 32. The people are ungrateful. They do not accept God's daily provision of food as sufficient for them, and they pine for quail and other delicacies they had while enslaved (Num. 11:1–30). God disciplines them by sending a plague (11:31–35). Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses for marrying a Cushite (African) woman and question his position of authority (12:1–2). God disciplines them through rebuke and illness (12:3–16). Moses is his chosen leader, and they must respect God by respecting Moses. Furthermore, his marriage reflects God's love for all people, not just Israel.

Worse, in Numbers 13–14 Israel disobeys God's command to enter the Promised Land, and God declares that the root of this sin is lack of faith in him (14:11–12). Moses asks God to forgive the people based on God's character revealed in Exodus 34:6–7 (Num. 14:13–19). God agrees but also disciplines the people. He denies the older generation entry into Canaan; they will die in the desert (14:20–45). Nevertheless, God still provides food, water, and leadership for them. He disciplines but does not abandon them.

Sadly, even Moses fails. Having withstood earlier threats to his leadership (chs. 16–17), he takes credit for God’s miraculous provision of water in 20:1–13. So God disciplines Moses; he will not lead Israel into Canaan. Showing his love for God, however, Moses accepts this discipline and continues his ministry.

In spite of the Israelites’ persistent failure to obey the Lord with thankful hearts for his supernatural provision as they journey toward the land of Canaan, God’s covenant faithfulness keeps him from abandoning them. Numbers 21–36 describes God’s continuing provision for Israel. He starts anew with the young people, giving them several victories (chs. 21–24). When they commit idolatry, he purges them of this singularly dangerous sin (ch. 25). He gives further instruction about life in the Promised Land (chs. 26–36). A new generation is in place. The open question is, will this generation walk in the ways of the Lord or fall into disobedience and rebellion as their parents had in the past?

Numbers perhaps can be best read alongside the book of Hebrews. Both books warn readers to stay faithful to their Redeemer. Both stress the dangers associated with straying from God. Both emphasize that God disciplines those he loves. Both highlight faith in God as the primary response to his goodness. Both offer hope beyond discipline. Both stress that the God who saves is the God who disciplines and reconciles his people.

Outline

- Israel Prepares to Enter the Land (1:1–10:10)
- Marching from Sinai to Kadesh (10:11–12:16)
- Forty Years near Kadesh (13:1–19:22)
- Marching from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab (20:1–21:35)
- Israel in the Plains of Moab (22:1–36:13)