

Asking Our Hard Questions of the Bible

April 24, 2006

Rebels in the Desert

- I. Introduction
 - A. Announcements
 1. Open with prayer
 2. Any new people? If so, summarize need to bring paper, pen, and Bible (various versions OK for comparison, but NRSV will be main one for reading, NASB for studying).
 3. Get list of names and how to contact (email preferred)
 4. 90 minutes on 4th Mondays at 7 p.m.
 5. Read passages (volunteers)
 - B. Does anyone have any questions for us to consider for next time?
 1. .
 2. .
 - C. In many of our previous studies, I've talked a lot about the importance of understanding the context of a passage in order to understand its meaning.
 1. Today we will have another emphasis (though context is important as always.)
 2. Hebrew writing is not the same as our contemporary American writing. In order to get the full meaning, we need to understand some things about their style.
 3. So, in today's study we will pay special attention to these two things:
 - a. The symbolic meaning of numbers.
 - b. The repeating patterns of events/descriptions.
 - D. During the Holy Week between Palm Sunday and Easter would seem a pretty obvious time for network television to broadcast one of the many movies made about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
 1. Instead they showed The 10 Commandments.
 2. In fact it was shown twice: the classic one with Charlton Heston and a new made-for-tv version.
 3. Did anyone here watch one or both? What did you think?
 - a. (Classic version made some changes to appeal to 1950s romantic tastes—dancing girls, romance between Moses and Pharaoh's bride-to-be, Joshua and the slave girl forced to be a concubine to Jewish collaborator, etc.)
 - b. What about the new 2006 version? It is supposed to be truer to the Scripture. Was it?
 - E. The reason I bring this up is that we are going to look at a part of the life of Moses tonight—the 40 years of wandering in the desert with the Hebrews who had been freed from slavery in Egypt.

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1. This study is not in answer to a particular question, unless it would be a general one like, “besides the 10 Commandments what does Moses have to do with us as Christians?”
 2. Our goal today will be to learn what the Bible teaches us in the Old Testament about Moses and the meaning of what happened between Mt. Sinai and the Promised Land.
- II. Our discussion today will be focused on the O.T. book called Numbers. (By the way, the book gets its name from the census figures that are included in the book.) At any rate, it’s appropriate, I think to begin by talking about the meaning of numbers.
- A. In the Bible, numbers are not always used simply for mathematical purposes.
 1. There are many numbers that have a consistent symbolic meaning.
 2. Some of the most well known are the numbers 7, 10, 12, 40, and of course the infamous 666.
 - B. The number seven is used to indicate a completeness, but especially a completeness that relates to God.
 1. We see it right away in the book of Genesis.
 2. **Genesis 2:2-3** “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day God rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it the Lord rested from all the work of creating that God had done.”
 3. The 7th day was especially God’s day of rest because everything was done. So the number became associated with completeness and with God.
 - C. (We’ll skip 10 for the moment.) The number 12 relates to the whole of a human group in its relationship to God.
 1. There were 12 tribes in Israel and 12 disciples of Jesus.
 2. In Revelation there are 24 elders: 12 for the Jews and 12 for the Gentiles.
 3. Also in Revelation 7 there are 144,000 saved from Israel. This is 12 x 12 x 1,000, an intensification of the number 12. Jehovah’s Witnesses mistakenly read this as a mathematical number, rather than a symbolic one meaning “many, many from every tribe will certainly be saved.”
 - D. The number 40 is one of Dick Nailen’s favorites. It has to do with a time of testing and judging.
 1. In Noah’s time it rained 40 days and 40 nights. It was judgement on the earth.
 2. Jesus was 40 days in the wilderness, just as Moses was 40 days on Mt. Sinai receiving the 10 Commandments.
 3. And Moses with the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness.
 - E. And then there is the mystery of the number 666.
 1. This relates back to the number 7. If 7 is God’s number of completeness, 6 is incompleteness. It is falling short.

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2. It is also the number of humankind, because God created Adam/Eve on the 6th day.
 3. Tripling the number 6 simply intensifies it, and may be an allusion to the Trinity. 777 would be the Holy Trinity and 666 would be the false, counterfeit trinity of the Beast of Revelation.
- F. Now let's look back at our number for today: 10.
1. This is another number that has to do with completeness, though it doesn't necessarily have the connotation of holiness that the number 7 does.
 2. It is found in many ancient and modern civilizations, and it probably derived from the fact that we have 10 fingers and 10 toes. Since that is all we have, 10 took on the meaning of "all."
 3. Can anyone think of some uses of the number 10 in the Bible?
 - a. In Genesis, Noah is the **10th generation** from Adam and Eve. It shows the idea of completeness before the Flood (not necessarily that there were exactly 10 generations. The meaning is more important than the number.)
 - b. In Exodus 7-12, there are **10 plagues** in Egypt. (Though in other places in the Bible there are listed only 7.¹ Again it is the meaning that is important, not the counting.)
 - c. **10 commandments** (Exodus 20, Deut. 5). They are a summation of the fullness of the commandments. There are actually 613 commandments given in the O.T.
 - d. The instructions God gave for building the Tabernacle repeatedly called for **10 of an item** or items that were measured by **units of 10**.
 4. There are many other occurrences, especially in the O.T.
 - a. For example, Joseph (Gen 50) and Joshua (Josh. 24) each lived to be **110, that is 10x10 plus 10**, meaning a long, full, blessed life.
 - b. There are many places where armies are described as having **10,000** soldiers. That isn't necessarily an exact head count, but a large number, the whole of the army 10x10x10.
 - c. Remember, in each of these instances the Bible is trying to tell us the meaning of the numbers and not necessarily the counting of them.
 5. Sometimes the meaning is conveyed to us in a slightly more subtle way. The number 10 isn't always spelled out for us. We aren't told in Exodus that there were 10 plagues in Egypt. We have to count them.

¹ Psalm 78, Psalm 105

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6. The same is true for our study today in the book of Numbers. (Open Bibles.)
 - a. How many have read this book?
 - b. It is one of the 5 books of the Pentateuch (which means 5 books), and is the central core of the Torah (Jewish Scriptures).
 - c. When Jesus refers to “the Law and the Prophets,” the Law is the Pentateuch, including the book of Numbers.
- G. In the book of Numbers there are 10 times described in which the Israelites rebelled against God by attacking or grumbling against Moses.
 1. Several such “rebellions” had been described in Exodus, too.
 2. But there are only 4² in that book, and the last one is the scene depicted in the 10 Commandments movie, when they make and worship a golden calf.
 3. It happens just before Moses appears with the commandments on those stone tablets.
 4. In fact, all the rebellions in Exodus happened *before* God gave them the 10 Commandments. None are described after that in Exodus.
 5. Exodus ends with the Tabernacle (Temple Tent) being fully set up and God’s glory visibly settling on it.
 6. If all we had was the record in Exodus, we would be left with the impression that the people were troublesome up until God gave the 10 Commandments, and the worship of God was established in the Tabernacle.
 7. Numbers picks up where Exodus leaves off and shows that the happy ending of Exodus soon became a tragedy.
- H. Numbers begins with the people setting out from Mt. Sinai *after* they have already received the 10 Commandments.
 1. In the first 10 chapters they are organized, they are taught about worship, they have the assurance of the presence of God with them.
 2. Then they set out on what is expected to be a glorious and triumphant march into the Promised Land.
 3. But it all goes wrong—again and again and again.
- I. In Numbers a special point is made by listing, not 4, but 10 rebellions.
 1. Based on what we’ve said regarding the meaning of numbers, what do you think that point could be? (Completeness. The meaning of the number is that their rebellion was endemic; they were completely rebellious. All grumbling all the time.)
 2. **Deut. 9:5-7** describes it rather well. (Someone read: stiff-necked people).

²Ex. 15:24 (Marah, bitter water), Ex. 16:1-3 (quail and manna, people “starving”), Ex. 17:1-2 (water from the rock, people thirsty), Ex. 32:1-4 (golden calf).

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3. In order to fully understand what we are studying today, it's important to remember that these people were a "10." And that does NOT mean they looked like Bo Derek; they were not beautiful.
- III. We are going to split up the 10 passages in Numbers about the rebellions, and each of us will make some notations on a work sheet. Then we will then talk about them together.
- A. (Hand out Rebels in the Desert worksheets.)
 1. Start out with the first 7. There is a natural break there, and we will talk about that later.
 2. Assign at least one person to each selection. Try to put 2 on #2 (Numbers 11:4-5, 18-23, 31-34) and #6, (Numbers 16:1-40).
 3. If not enough people, do one of them together as a group.
 - B. Give instructions regarding what to look for and write down to report back:
 1. Tell me about the people.
 - a. Describe their actions. In what way can it be called "rebellion," either directly against God or against God through Moses.
 - b. What was the reason they rebelled?
 - c. Think a little deeper and try to figure out what their rebellion showed about their attitudes, beliefs?
 2. Next tell me about God. When/if God brought punishment to them, when and why did God stop the punishment?
 3. Finally, tell me about Moses. What did Moses do regarding the people and regarding God?
 - C. Discussion about each. What patterns do you see here?
 1. What kinds of behavior or attitudes or actions are repeated by the people, by God, and by Moses?
 2. There are two critical things to see here: (1) the role of Moses, and (2) the key issue behind these struggles.
 - D. What was Moses' role?
 1. Spoke to God on behalf of the people.
 2. Spoke God's message to the people.
 3. Moses was the intermediary, the intercessor between God and the people.
 4. Do we know anyone like that today? **Read 1st Timothy 2:1-6**
 5. Moses was merely a man, but he was appointed—like Christ—to be the intermediary between God and God's people.
 6. Like Christ, Moses was a blessing from God for the people, but also like it was with Christ, that was the heart of the problem.
 - E. Look at each of these first 7 incidents and comment on who was in charge. Who had authority?
 1. Do you see a struggle over who's in charge? Do you see a parallel with Jesus and his struggles with the Pharisees and others?

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2. For each of them the challenge from the people was “prove that you have God’s authority.”
 3. What was the result of these struggles for authority? (Many people died, constant turmoil, no real faith in God, etc.)
- F. Obviously such a situation could not be allowed to continue. Here we have a break in the narrative. There is a “completeness” at 7. The fullness of the struggle has been described and it’s time to put an end to the disputes over authority.
1. After the rebellions of Korah and his followers and the second rebellion over their punishment (Numbers 16), the scene shifts.
 2. In Chapter 17 Aaron’s authority as Chief Priest is established. And since Moses appointed him, this ratifies Moses’ authority, as well. **Read ch. 17:1-12.**
 3. Why does it say God did this? (So the people will not all die.)
 4. Did the people get the point? (Yes. Afraid they would die.)
 5. Here the number 7 helps us to interpret their answer. It was complete. The question was settled—at least the question about authority.
- G. But that wasn’t the end of the trouble. We haven’t completed our “10” yet. But the rebellions that remain have a different flavor to them.
1. In Numbers 18, there are some instructions given for the priesthood, and in chapter 19 God reminds them of their refusal to go into the Promised Land 40 years earlier.
 2. Now God tells them it’s time to try it again. And once again there are problems.
- H. Let’s look at the final 3 rebellions described in Numbers. Divide into three groups and examine them using the same questions as before.
- I. The rebellion in **Numbers 20:1-3** is different from the first 7, and just to make sure we don’t miss that fact, it is highlighted—bracketed by two eye-catching events.
1. What happens in **Numbers 20:1**? (Miriam’s death.) And in **Numbers 20:25-28**? (Aaron’s death)
 2. Clearly this passage is important, and it is about bad news.
 3. What is different about this rebellion?
 - a. The people’s complaint isn’t about God’s authority, but what? (Food, water. Can God provide? It is a question of faith.)
 - b. What is different about Moses?
 4. What was wrong about what he did? (God said “speak” to the rock, Moses disobeyed and hit it. Moses took credit for the water.)
 5. Moses role changes forever at this very point. What does God tell him will happen because of what Moses did?
 6. There is more to say about this, but first let’s look at the next rebellions.
- J. **Numbers 21:1-9.**

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1. What was the complaint? This wasn't about authority, but what was behind it? (Faith. Can God really provide for us?)
 2. How was intercession made for the people this time? Did Moses save them with his prayers? (No. The bronze snake on a pole.)
 3. The point being made here in Numbers is that the people are no longer saved by the intervention of Moses. He has been disqualified as their intercessor.
 4. From this point on, the Bible makes the clear point that Moses fell short, but God has another plan.
 - a. This is clearly understood by the Gospel writers in the N. T. **Read John 3:13-15, 12:31-33**
 - b. The snake is the well known symbol for sin and it is nailed to a pole.
 - c. The Gospel of John clearly wants us to see that this was a clear image of Christ who was "made sin for us"³ as Scripture says, and was nailed to a cross to atone for our sins.
- K. Let's look at the last rebellion in **Numbers 25:1-13**.
1. There has been another interlude, this time several chapters dealt with the false prophet Balaam, who served idol-worshiping kings and tried to curse Israel. But he was thwarted by God. The only thing we need to know today about Balaam's episode is that the issue was the question of worship of God or worship of idols.
 2. What was the problem and the reason for this last rebellion in Numbers? (Worship of idols.)
 3. This, in fact, would become the key issue for Israel from the moment they entered the Promise Land until the nation was carried away into slavery and captivity again—this time by Babylon—nearly a thousand years later.
 4. Who "interceded" for the people this time? How was the plague stopped?
 - a. Not by Moses, but by a priest named Phinehas (**Read v. 7, 10-13**)
 - b. Here we are given another hint that Moses is no longer the one to intercede before God. Perhaps it will be someone who, like Phinehas, is a priest.
 - c. Again our minds go directly to the New Testament: **Hebrews 3:1-3**
- IV. Some conclusions.
- A. I noted earlier (section I:H) that the Numbers rebellions happened *after* leaving Mt. Sinai.

³2 Corinthians 5:21

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1. Reading this, the writers of the N.T. rightly concluded that the Law leads to sin. **Read Romans 3:19-20, 5:20-21.**
 2. The problem for the Israelites under Moses was that their religion was all external: Tabernacle, God's spirit visible in the pillar of fire and the column of smoke, and the Commandments, which was the Law—enforced from outside themselves—telling them what they should do and how they should act.
 3. This is the Old Covenant, and in theory it should have worked, except for the nature of the human heart. Jeremiah said it well, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”(**Jer. 17:9**).
 4. The New Covenant of faith in Christ is different. It is all internal. **Read Jer. 31:31-33.**
 5. This no longer Law, it is Grace.
 6. God's spirit/Holy Spirit is no longer in the Tabernacle nor the Temple, but the Holy Spirit dwells in us.
 7. Our bodies are the Temple of God, God's law is written on our hearts.**(Romans 2:28, 2Cor 3:3)**
- B. Moses interceded for the people for 40 years.
1. He was called the most humble man on the face of the earth.⁴
 2. Every time the people rebelled, Moses said, “Lord, forgive them.” With a people that were completely rebellious, constantly challenging his authority . . . for 40 years he stood for them before God.
 3. In all that time he failed only once, but once was too much.
 4. God is not just mostly holy. God is completely, always, in every circumstance, now and forever . . . God is holy. There is no room for even the slightest shadow of sin.
 5. One failure ruins it all, so Moses could no longer speak for God.
- C. **Read Hebrews 4:14-16.** Jesus intercedes for us now, and he never failed, not even once.
1. Law fails. Grace succeeds.
 2. This is the essential difference between Christianity and all other religions. They have rules, we have grace—through Jesus Christ—the one who did not fail. (Romans 3:21-26)
- V. Summary
- A. Our goal today was to learn what the Bible teaches us in the Old Testament about Moses and the meaning of what happened between Mt. Sinai and the Promised Land.
1. Have we done that satisfactorily?

⁴Numbers 12:3

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- 2. Have these studies been helpful?
- B. How does what we have studied apply to each of us?
- C. What questions for next time?
- D. Any comments on our format or subject matter so far?
- E. Next meeting: Monday Feb. 27th, 7-8:30 p. m.
- F. Close in prayer