

1. A New Order (4Q 2009—People on the Move: The Book of Numbers)

Biblical material: Gen. 15:14–16; Lev. 10:1–11; Numbers 1–4; Jer. 23:23, 24; John 14:15–18, 23.

Quotes

- There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to institute a new order of things. *Niccolo Machiavelli*
- They (who) seek to establish systems of government based on the regimentation of all human beings by a handful of individual rulers. . . call this a new order. It is not new and it is not order. *Franklin D. Roosevelt*
- Revolution is not the uprising against preexisting order, but the setting up of a new order contradictory to the traditional one. *Jose Ortega y Gasset*
- The world can therefore seize the opportunity to fulfill the long-held promise of a New World Order where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind. *George Bush*

Questions

With all the negative experiences recorded in Numbers, why bother reading it? What can we learn from the parts that seem so strange to us in our time? How would you have dealt with the Israelites? What do we learn about how God operates in less than ideal circumstances? How does this help us understand the great controversy better?

Bible discussion

Numbers 1-4 gives a great deal of specific directions that hardly seem terribly relevant to us today. However the underlying theme is order and organization—this motley crew, this undisciplined multitude that came out of Egypt needed strong leadership and clear instructions. It is informative as to how God deals with people who operate at a certain level of relationship—one that is very much command-oriented.

Genesis 15:14-16 makes it clear that what is happening is very much within the plan of God. Whatever choices human beings make, God relates to the situation and plans accordingly. The captivity and Exodus is no accident, as is the time given to the pagan tribes to repent.

Leviticus 10:1-11 records the incident of Nadab and Abihu offering strange fire (noted also in Numbers 3:4) and the severe consequences. How we understand the meaning of such stories is a major theme that recurs frequently in Numbers.

Jeremiah 23:23, 24 explains that the true God is more than a local deity, something that may have been hard for those brought up with the local and various gods of Egypt.

John 14:15–18, 23, points to what God really wants—a deep and personal experience with each of us, living right there with us. Such a perspective needs to be set against the situation often found in Numbers that references God as rule-based and even dogmatic—an approach necessary bearing in mind the kind of people he was dealing with, and their recent experience.

Comment 1

The Hebrew name for what we call the Book of Numbers was originally “God spoke,” after the first word of the book. It was then changed to “in the wilderness,” which is also a good general description. However the original name is surely better since it clearly expresses God’s intervention and revelation on behalf of his people. This is truly the description of a people on the move—though not always in the direction that God wanted!

Most of all God wanted to take this people who had long been enslaved and liberate them into his truth. However in dealing with people used to “just obeying orders,” God has to work with them where they are, and help them to come to the point of understanding, rather than just blind obedience.

In the Book of Numbers it’s easy to get sidelined by all the side-issues. The overarching theme must always be: how does this fit into the issues of the great controversy, and what does it say about God? Sadly the actions of his people often only serve to confirm the challenges God faces in not only getting his message across, but being allowed to come in and resolve the issues: to heal the damage of sin, and to persuade us to love and trust.

Comment 2

“Well, now we come to Numbers. God’s people on the verge of entering the Promised Land, and God doing all He can for them generously, as always. The people grumbling, as almost always. And finally, He waits forty years for a whole generation to die off. That reminds me of Ellen White’s comment that, ‘Men and women of mature age are generally as insensible to new impressions as is the hardened rock; but youth is impressible, and a right character may then be easily formed.’ 4T 575. Notice ‘generally.’ Don’t you know some folk who would be considered quite elderly by our present human standards, who still are thrilled by a new idea and capable of weighing it? I just love to see that. I can think of somebody who is in his mid-nineties who still responds with enthusiasm to a new idea. But people of more mature years are generally as insensible to new impressions as is the hardened rock. God waits for the young people. Forty years. But, as you know from the record, they were no better than their fathers. Many strange experiences happened during those forty years.” A Graham Maxwell, *Picture of God in All 66, Tape ‘Numbers.’*

Ellen White Comments

Next to Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu had stood highest in Israel. They had been especially honored by the Lord, having been permitted with the seventy elders to behold His glory in the mount. But their transgression was not therefore to be excused or lightly regarded. All this rendered their sin more grievous. Because men have received great light, because they have, like the princes of Israel, ascended to the mount, and been privileged to have communion with God, and to dwell in the light of His glory, let them not flatter themselves that they can afterward sin with impunity, that because they have been thus honored, God will not be strict to punish their iniquity. This is a fatal deception. {CC 100}