

Department of English Bible Exposition

## **THE BOOK CALLED "NUMBERS"**

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Too many Christians, have been diverted from giving the fourth book of the Bible the amount of study that it deserves by the unattractiveness of its title and the dull impression which they have received from a glance at its opening chapters.

An unfortunate habit has developed in American publishing in recent years, of giving books flashy titles, which often tell nothing about their actual contents. These titles may help in securing sales for a book when it first appears, but probably in the long run they cause less attention to be paid to it than would be the case if the title pointed clearly to the real subject of the book. In relation to the Book of Numbers, something even worse has occurred. A dull title has been affixed, which gives little idea of the subject of the book as a whole, and therefore has been doubly effective in keeping Bible students from reaping the rich treasures which the book contains.

### NAMING THE BOOKS OF MOSES

A truly scientific approach to the Bible, as to any other subject requires that we examine each separate feature carefully in order to determine exactly what it means and how dependable and authentic it is. It thus becomes important for us to ask whether the names of the Old Testament books are, like their contents, a part of the inspired Word of God. Many of our English titles are taken from the Greek translation and were not in the Hebrew Old Testament at all. It would seem most likely that there were no titles on any of the books when first written, and that the titles were added later. This is certainly true in the case of the Pentateuch. The Jews have ordinarily spoken of these five books

as the Law of Moses, and sometimes have referred to them as "the five fifths." In our printed Hebrew Bibles, the heading placed before each book of the Pentateuch simply consists of one or more of the words with which it begins. This seems hardly consistent with the idea that these headings were titles put in by the original author. It would look rather in the direction of their being merely identifying labels, added by some later copyist.

The Greek translation of the Pentateuch, which is known as the Septuagint, was made in Egypt at some time between 300 and 200 B.C. In it new titles are placed over the five books of Moses. Four of these titles are good descriptions of the books, and some of them are decided improvements over the headings used in the Hebrew Bible. It is quite different, unfortunately, in the case of the Book of Numbers.

Printed Hebrew Bibles place over the Book of Genesis a Hebrew word which means "in the beginning." This is simply the first word of the book. The Greek translation bears the title Genesis, "beginning," which in this case is almost an exact translation of the Hebrew word and is also a good description of the actual contents of the book.

Similarly, in our printed Hebrew Bibles, the second book of Moses bears as a heading the two Hebrew words with which it begins. These words may be translated "and these are the names." Sometimes the book is designated simply by the second of these words and called "Names." This Hebrew title, however, gives no idea of the contents of the book. While the book begins by naming the sons of Jacob who went down into Egypt, this is purely introductory. In the Greek translation a descriptive title was substituted, consisting of the Greek word *Exodos*, which means "going out." This title is an excellent description of the contents of the book, and is clearly an improvement over the Hebrew designation.

In the Hebrew Bible, the title of the third book consists of its first word, "and he called." This gives practically no idea of its contents. In the Greek translation the word *Leuitikon* was substituted, indicating that the book contains

directions or the activities of the Levitical priests and their Levitical assistants.

Skipping over the fourth book for a moment, we note that the fifth book is designated in the Hebrew by means of its first two words "and these are the words." This is very similar to the title of Exodus, "and these are the names," or of Leviticus, "and he called." The Greek version has substituted the title *Deuteronomion*, which means "Second Law." The book consists almost entirely of the addresses which Moses gave to the people shortly before their entrance into Canaan, reiterating and repeating the great Law of God, which had already been presented in Exodus and making certain changes in it to fit their circumstances after they would settle in the promised land. Thus, the Greek title aptly describes the contents of the book, and is very appropriate.

In three of these four instances, the Greek title is clearly an improvement over the Hebrew title, while in the case of Genesis the two are substantially identical. In all four cases, our English Bibles use a simple transliteration of the Greek word. Surely it would have been better if these titles had been translated into English instead of being merely transliterated from the Greek.

Although the word genesis is something used in common English to mean "beginning," it would probably be easier for the mass of English speaking people if the word had been translated into English, and the book entitled "The Book of Beginnings."

Similarly the word exodus is occasionally used as a common term in modern English, but it would be more easily understood by many of our people if the book were entitled "The Departure of the Israelites from Egypt," or perhaps still better, "The Deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt."

*Leviticus* designates the third book fairly well, but it might be even better if we were to lengthen the title a little and call it "The Levitical Legislation," or "Rules for the Priests."

Most English readers have little idea what the name Deuteronomy means. It is “all Greek” to them. Would it not have been better if in English this book had borne such a title as “Moses’ Farewell,” or “The Final Advice of the Great Leader”?

#### PROBLEM OF NAMING “NUMBERS”

Returning to the fourth book, we find that the situation is altogether different. In the Hebrew Bible, it is not its first word, but its fourth, that is used as a title. This word forms an admirable description of the contents of the book. The Greek translators gave it a descriptive title, which instead of fitting excellently, as in the case of the other four books, is not at all well selected. In English, instead of transliterating the Greek title, we have in this sole instance translated it, thus compounding the injury done by the poor selection of the title in the Greek.

The Greek title of the book is *Arithmoi*, the word from which our English word *arithmetic* is derived. Probably less damage would have been done if this word had been transliterated, so that most English readers would simply take it as a meaningless title and look into the book to see what it contains. Unfortunately, the misleading title has been translated, and the average reader gains the impression that the book is simply a dry list of statistics. It is true that its first two chapters describe the taking of a census, and another census is described in chapter 26. Yet if a few chapters were taken out, there would be less numbers remaining than in many another book of the Bible.

The Hebrew title, “in the wilderness,” aptly describes the contents of this book, since it deals with the wilderness journey of the Israelites from Mt. Sinai to the borders of the promised land. It begins with the preparation for the journey; it goes on to tell of many interesting and important events along the way; finally, it describes the preparations for entrance into Canaan itself.

What a shame that in the one case where the Greek has made a poor selection of a title, this title should not only have been taken over into the English version, but actually

translated instead of being merely transliterated, as was done in the other four cases. This has doubtless led to much neglect of a book which, as a matter of fact, is as vital and important for the Christian today as any book in the entire Old Testament.

This may seem to be a rather extreme statement, but proves not to be so when we examine the situation. Genesis describes the creation of the world and the beginning of the conditions which face us here. This is very interesting and worthwhile, and yet its interest to us may seem to be somewhat indirect. We face a situation; it is valuable to know how it came about, but we are more interested in knowing what to do about it now.

Exodus describes how the Israelites were delivered from Egypt. This illustrates, in many ways, the experience of the Christian in being delivered from the domain of sin and redeemed by the death of Christ. Exodus is extremely important to the non-Christian who desires to learn how he may be redeemed. It is valuable in strengthening the understanding of the Christian as he looks back over the marvelous salvation which the Lord has given him. This crucial event in the life of every Christian is strikingly typified in Exodus by the Passover, with its shedding of the blood of the lamb without spot or blemish, and the placing of the blood of the lamb on the lintel of the door. Nevertheless, for the Christian, all of this represents something that is already in the past. Vital and important as it is for him, it is the background of his present life rather than the situation which he now faces.

#### CHRISTIAN APPLICATION OF "NUMBERS"

The Book of Numbers, however, describes the journey of people who have already been redeemed and delivered from Egypt, as they went their way toward the promised land. It exactly corresponds to the situation of the Christian in this age. He has been redeemed through the blood of Christ. He has left Egypt. He has been brought out from the control of the powers of sin and of darkness. However, he has not yet entered the promised land. There is still a rest awaiting

the people of God, a rest toward which we are pushing forward. The Christian is on a pilgrim journey. He is pressing forward to the great prize ahead of him. This was exactly the situation of the Israelites in the Book of Numbers. No other book of the Old Testament contains so much that is exactly parallel to the pilgrim journey of the Christian in the present age.

A correct understanding on this point can be of real value for every Christian. Many a Christian thinks of himself as back in the experience described in the early part of Exodus. He is constantly worrying about his past sins, fretting about whether he really is a child of God or not. He needs to realize that if he has truly looked to Christ for salvation and been born again by simple faith in Him, he has been delivered from Egypt and is now a child of God, headed for the promised land. He needs to learn to possess the possessions which God has given him, and to rejoice in them. He must never forget that his sins are under the blood; Jesus has died for him; the transaction is completed; he is now launched on his pilgrim journey.

Other Christians tend to make the opposite mistake. They think themselves to be already in the promised land. This can lead to an exaggerated idea of the extent of one's sanctification, or to undue discouragement along the way. We need to realize that we are pilgrims, and that this world is still Satan's territory. We must constantly look to Christ for protection and guidance. The Book of Numbers is the book that typifies our present situation. All through it we find illustrations marvelously planned to show us what we need.

The Christian, then, needs to study this wonderful book. In its first part, 1:1 to 10:10, he reads of the preparation of the Israelites for their wilderness journey. All of this is meaningful for his own life. It shows the orderliness, separation from uncleanness, and constant reliance on divine protection and leadership, which are so vital if he is to go forward in his pilgrim journey.

The actual journey begins in 10:11, and the plains of

Moab are reached in 22:1, These chapters are full of lessons for us (cf. 1 Cor, 10:1-11). In the mistakes and rebellions of the Israelites we see the very errors into which we ourselves may fall, if we fail to keep our eyes fixed on our Leader. At every stage the divine provision for nourishment and protection is wonderfully illustrated, typifying the supernatural assistance so necessary for our own pilgrim journey.

The Balaam incident (22:2-25:18) is rather unique, and yet it illustrates the type of spiritual opposition which we must face, and shows how capably our Lord can turn back the clever plans of Satan to destroy us.

In the final section of Numbers, the promised land is just ahead, Israel is forbidden to settle where it is. Plans must be laid for entering Canaan. The Christian, also, must not become satisfied with the present age. He is a citizen of another kingdom, and must always keep this in mind. Detailed study of this part of the book shows that it, like the earlier section, is filled with lessons that we need to ponder and to heed.

What a shame that an ill-chosen title should have hindered Christians from receiving the many rich blessings and important lessons which God has placed in this marvelous fourth book of the Bible!

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