

**ROBERT
A. WATSON**

NUMBERS 9:12

part in the work at the Tent of Meeting, ²⁵ but at the age of fifty, they must retire from their regular service and work no longer. ²⁶ They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work.

**THE EXPOSITOR'S
BIBLE: THE BOOK
OF NUMBERS**

Robert A. Watson

The Expositor's Bible: The Book of Numbers

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I

INTRODUCTORY

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To summon from the past and reproduce with any detail the story of Israel's life in the desert is now impossible. The outlines alone remain, severe, careless of almost everything that does not bear on religion. Neither from Exodus nor from Numbers can we gather those touches that would enable us to reconstruct the incidents of a single day as it passed in the camp or on the march. The tribes move from one "wilderness" to another. The hardship of the time of wandering appears unrelieved, for throughout the history the doings of God, not the achievements or sufferings of the people, are the great theme. The patriotism of the Book of Numbers is of a kind that reminds us continually of the prophecies. Resentment against the distrustful and rebellious, like that which Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah express, is felt in almost every portion of the narrative. At the same time the difference between Numbers and the books of the prophets is wide and striking. Here the style is simple, often stern, with little emotion, scarcely any rhetoric. The legislative purpose reacts on the historical, and makes the spirit of the book severe. Seldom does the writer allow himself respite from the grave task of presenting Israel's duties and delinquencies, and exalting the majesty of God. We are made continually to feel the burden with which the affairs of the people are charged; and yet the

book is no poem: to excite sympathy or lead up to a great climax does not come within the design.

Nevertheless, so far as a book of incident and statute can resemble poetry, there is a parallel between Numbers and a form of literature produced under other skies, other conditions—the Greek drama. The same is true of Exodus and Deuteronomy; but Numbers will be found especially to bear out the comparison. The likeness may be traced in the presentation of a main idea, the relation of various groups of persons carrying out or opposing that main idea, and the Puritanism of form and situation. The Book of Numbers may be called eternal literature more fitly than the *Iliad* and *Æneid* have been called eternal poems; and the keen ethical strain and high religious thought make the movement tragical throughout. Moses the leader is seen with his helpers and opponents, Aaron and Miriam, Joshua and Hobab, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, Balak and Balaam. He is brought into extremity; he despairs and appeals passionately to Heaven; in an hour of pride he falls into sin which brings doom upon him. The people, murmuring, craving, suffering, are always a vague multitude. The tent, the cloud, the incense, the wars, the strain of the wilderness journey, the hope of the land beyond—all have a dim solemnity. The occupying thought is of Jehovah's purpose and the revelation of His character. Moses is the prophet of this Divine mystery, stands for it almost alone, urges it upon Israel, is the means of impressing it by judgments and victories, by priestly law and ceremony, by the very example of his own failure in sudden trial. With a graver and bolder purpose than any embodied in the dramatic

masterpieces of Greece, the story of Numbers finds its place not in literature only, but in the development of universal religion, and breathes that Divine inspiration which belongs to the Hebrew and to him alone among those who speak of God and man.

The Divine discipline of human life is an element of the theme, but in contrast to the Greek dramas the books of the exodus are not individualistic. Moses is great, but he is so as the teacher of religion, the servant of Jehovah, the lawgiver of Israel. Jehovah, His religion, His law, are above Moses. The personality of the leader stands clear; yet he is not the hero of the Book of Numbers. The purpose of the history leaves him, when he has done his work, to die on Mount Abarim, and presses on, that Jehovah may be seen as a man of war, that Israel may be brought to its inheritance and begin its new career. The voice of men in the Greek tragedy is, as Mr. Ruskin says, "We trusted in the gods; we thought that wisdom and courage would save us. Our wisdom and courage deceive us to our death." When Moses despairs, that is not his cry. There is no Fate stronger than God; and He looks far into the future in the discipline He appoints to men, to His people Israel. The remote, the unfulfilled, gleams along the desert. There is a light from the pillar of fire even when the pestilence is abroad, and the graves of the lustful are dug, and the camp is dissolved in tears because Aaron is dead, because Moses has climbed the last mountain and shall never again be seen.

In respect of content, one point shows likeness between the Greek drama and our book—the vague conception of death. It is not an extinction of life, but the human being

goes on into an existence of which there is no definite idea. What remains has no reckoning, no object. The recoil of the Hebrew is not indeed piteous, and fraught with horror, like that of the Greek, although death is the last punishment of men who transgress. For Aaron and Moses, and all who have served their generation, it is a high and venerated Power that claims them when the hour of departure comes. The God they have obeyed in life calls them, and they are gathered to their people. No note of despair is heard like that in the *Iphigenia in Aulis*,—

"He raves who prays
To die. 'Tis better to live on in woe
Than to die nobly."

Dying as well as living men are with God; and this God is the Lord of all. Immense is the difference between the Greek who trusts or dreads many powers above, beneath, and the Hebrew realising himself, however dimly, as the servant of Jehovah the holy, the eternal. This great idea, seized by Moses, introduced by him into the faith of his people, remained it may be indefinite, yet always present to the thought of Israel with many implications till the time of full revelation came with Christ, and He said: "Now that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the bush, when he called the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. For He is not the God of the dead, but of the living." The wide interval between a people whose religion contained this thought, in whose history it is interwoven, and a people whose religion was polytheistic and natural is seen in the whole strain of their literature and

life. Even Plato the luminous finds it impossible to overpass the shadows of pagan interpretations. "In regard to the facts of a future life, a man," said Phædo, "must either learn or find out their nature; or, if he cannot do this, take at any rate the best and least assailable of human words, and, borne on this as on a raft, perform in peril the voyage of life, unless he should be able to accomplish the journey with less risk and danger on a surer vessel—some word Divine." Now Israel had a Divine word; and life was not perilous.

The problem which appears again and again in Moses' relation with the people is that of the theocratic idea as against the grasping at immediate success. At various points, from the start in Egypt onwards, the opportunity of assuming a regal position comes to Moses. He is virtually dictator, and he might be king. But a rare singleness of mind keeps him true to Jehovah's lordship, which he endeavours to stamp on the conscience of the people and the course of their development. He has often to do so at the greatest risk to himself. He holds back the people in what seems the hour of advance, and it is the will of Jehovah by which they are detained. The Unseen King is their Helper and equally their Rhadamanthine Judge; and on Moses falls the burden of forcing that fact upon their minds.

Israel could never, according to Moses' idea, become a great people in the sense in which the nations of the world were great. Amongst them greatness was sought in despite of morality, in defiance of all that Jehovah commanded. Israel might never be great in wealth, territory, influence, but she was to be true. She existed for Jehovah, while the

gods of other nations existed for them, had no part to play without them. Jehovah was not to be overborne either by the will or the needs of His people. He was the self-existent Lord. The Name did not represent a supernatural assistance which could be secured on terms, or by any authorised person. Moses himself, though he entreated Jehovah, did not change Him. His own desire was sometimes thwarted; and he had often to give the oracle with sorrow and disappointment.

Moses is not the priest of the people: the priesthood comes in as a ministering body, necessary for religious ends and ideas, but never governing, never even interpreting. It is singular from this point of view that the so-called Priests' Code should be attributed confidently to a caste ambitious of ruling or practically enthroned. Wellhausen ridicules the "fine" distinction between hierocracy and theocracy. He affirms that government of God is the same thing as rule of priest; and he may affirm this because he thinks so. The Book of Numbers, as it stands, might have been written to prove that they are not equivalent; and Wellhausen himself shows that they are not by more than one of his conclusions. The theocracy, he says, is in its nature intimately allied to the Roman Catholic Church, which is, in fact, its child; and on the whole he prefers to speak of the Jewish Church rather than the theocracy. But if any modern religious body is to be named as a child of the Hebrew *theocracy*, it must not be one in which the priest intervenes continually between faith and God. Wellhausen says again that "the sacred constitution of Judaism was an artificial product" as contrasted with the broadly human indigenous

element, the real idea of man's relation to God; and when a priesthood, as in later Judaism, becomes the governing body, God is, so far, dethroned. Now Moses did not give to Aaron greater power than he himself possessed, and his own power is constantly represented as exercised in submission to Jehovah. A theocracy might be established without a priesthood; in fact, the mediation of the prophet approaches the ideal far more than that of the priest. But in the beginnings of Israel the priesthood was required, received a subordinate place of its own, to which it was throughout rigidly confined. As for priestly government, that, we may say, has no support anywhere in the Pentateuch.

The Book of Numbers, called also "In the wilderness," opens with the second month of the second year after the exodus, and goes on to the arrival of the tribes in the plains of Moab by the Jordan. As a whole it may be said to carry out the historical and religious ideas of Exodus and Leviticus: and both the history and the legislation flow into three main channels. They go to establish the separateness of Israel as a people, the separateness of the tribe of Levi and the priesthood, and the separateness and authority of Jehovah. The first of these objects is served by the accounts of the census, of the redemption of the first-born, the laws of national atonement and distinctive dress, and generally the Divine discipline of Israel recorded in the course of the book. The second line of purpose may be traced in the careful enumeration of the Levites; the minute allocation of duties connected with the tabernacle to the Gershonites,

the Kohathites, and the Merarites; the special consecration of the Aaronic priesthood; the elaboration of ceremonials requiring priestly service; and various striking incidents, such as the judgment of Korah and his company, and the budding of Aaron's almond twig. Lastly, the institution of some cleansing rites, the sin offering of chap. xix. for example, the details of punishment that fell upon offenders against the law, the precautions enjoined with regard to the ark and the sanctuary, together with the multiplication of sacrifices, went to emphasise the sanctity of worship and the holiness of the unseen King. The book is sacerdotal; it is marked even more by a physical and moral Puritanism, exceedingly stringent at many points.

The whole system of religious observance and priestly ministration set forth in the Mosaic books may seem difficult to account for, not indeed as a national development, but as a moral and religious gain. We are ready to ask how God could in any sense have been the author of a code of laws imposing so many intricate ceremonies, which required a whole tribe of Levites and priests to perform them. Where was the spiritual use that justified the system, as necessary, as wise, as Divine? Inquiries like these will arise in the minds of believing men, and sufficient answer must be sought for.

In the following way the religious worth and therefore the inspiration of the ceremonial law may be found. The primitive notion that Jehovah was the exclusive property of Israel, the pledged patron of the nation, tended to impair the sense of His moral purity. An ignorant people inclined to many forms of immorality could not have a right conception of the Divine holiness; and the more it was accepted as a

commonplace of faith that Jehovah knew them alone of all the families of the earth, the more was right belief towards Him imperilled. A psalmist who in the name of God reproves "the wicked" indicates the danger: "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself." Now the priesthood, the sacrifices, all provisions for maintaining the sanctity of the ark and the altar, and all rules of ceremonial cleansing, were means of preventing that fatal error. The Israelites began without the solemn temples and impressive mysteries that made the religion of Egypt venerable. In the desert and in Canaan, till the time of Solomon, the rude arrangements of semi-civilised life kept religion at an everyday level. The domestic makeshifts and confusion of the early period, the frequent alarms and changes which for centuries the nation had to endure, must have made culture of any kind, even religious culture, almost impossible to the mass of the people. The law in its very complexity and stringency provided a needful safeguard and means of education. Moses had been acquainted with a great sacerdotal system. Not only would it appear to him natural to originate something of a like kind, but he would see no other means of creating in rude times the idea of the Divine holiness. For himself he found inspiration and prophetic power in laying the foundation of the system; and once initiated, its development necessarily followed. With the progress of civilisation the law had to keep pace, meeting the new circumstances and needs of each succeeding period. Certainly the genius of the Pentateuch, and in particular of the Book of Numbers, is not liberating. The tone is that of theocratic rigour. But the reason is quite

clear; the development of the law was determined by the necessities and dangers of Israel in the exodus, in the wilderness, and in idolatrous, seductive Canaan.

Opening with an account of the census, the Book of Numbers evidently stood, from the first, quite distinct from the previous books as a composition or compilation. The mustering of the tribes gave an opportunity of passing from one group of documents to another, from one stage of the history to another. But the memoranda brought together in Numbers are of various character. Administrative, legislative, and historical sources are laid under contribution. The records have been arranged as far as possible in chronological order; and there are traces, as for instance in the second account of the striking of the rock by Moses, of a careful gathering up of materials not previously used, at least in the precise form they now have. The compilers collected and transcribed with the most reverent care, and did not venture in any case to reject. The historical notices are for some reason anything but consecutive, and the greater part of the time covered by the book is virtually passed over. On the other hand some passages repeat details in a way that has no parallel in the rest of the Mosaic books. The effect generally is that of a compilation made under difficulties by a scribe or scribes who were scrupulous to preserve everything relating to the great lawgiver and the dealings of God with Israel.

Recent criticism is positive in its assertion that the book contains several strata of narrative; and there are certain passages, the accounts of Korah's revolt and of Dathan and Abiram, for instance, where without such a clew the history

must seem not a little confused. In a sense this is disconcerting. The ordinary reader finds it difficult to understand why an inspired book should appear at any point incomplete or incoherent. The hostile critic again is ready to deny the credibility of the whole. But the honesty of the writing is proved by the very characteristics that make some statements hard to interpret and some of the records difficult to receive. The theory that a journal of the wanderings was kept by Moses or under his direction is quite untenable. Dismissing that, we fall back on the belief that contemporary records of some incidents, and traditions early committed to writing formed the basis of the book. The documents were undoubtedly ancient at the time of their final recension, whensoever and by whomsoever it was made.

By far the greater part of Numbers refers to the second year after the exodus from Egypt, and to what took place in the fortieth year, after the departure from Kadesh. Regarding the intermediate time we are told little but that the camp was shifted from one place to another in the wilderness. Why the missing details have not survived in any form cannot now be made out. It is no sufficient explanation to say that those events alone are preserved which struck the popular imagination. On the other hand, to ascribe what we have to unscrupulous or pious fabrication is at once unpardonable and absurd. Some may be inclined to think that the book consists entirely of accidental scraps of tradition, and that inspiration would have come better to its end if the religious feelings of the people had received more attention, and we had been shown the gradual use of Israel

out of ignorance and semi-barbarism. Yet even for the modern historical sense the book has its own claim, by no means slight, to high estimation and close study. These are venerable records, reaching back to the time they profess to describe, and presenting, though with some traditional haze, the important incidents of the desert journey.

Turning from the history to the legislation, we have to inquire whether the laws regarding priests and Levites, sacrifices and cleansings, bear uniformly the colour of the wilderness. The origins are certainly of the Mosaic time, and some of the statutes elaborated here must be founded on customs and beliefs older even than the exodus. Yet in form many enactments are apparently later than the time of Moses; and it does not seem well to maintain that laws requiring what was next to impossible in the wilderness were, during the journey, given and enforced as they now stand by a wise legislator. Did Moses require, for instance, that five shekels, "of the shekel of the sanctuary," should be paid for the ransom of the first-born son of a household, at a time when many families must have had no silver and no means of obtaining it? Does not this statute, like another which is spoken of as deferred till the settlement in Canaan, imply a fixed order and medium of exchange? For the sake of a theory which is intended to honour Moses as the only legislator of Israel, is it well to maintain that he imposed conditions which could not be carried out, and that he actually prepared the way for neglect of his own code?

It is beyond our range to discuss the date of the compilation of Numbers as compared with the other Pentateuchal books, or the age of the "Jehovistic"

documents as compared with the "Priests' Code." This, however, is of less moment, since it is now becoming clear that attempts to settle these dates can only darken the main question—the antiquity of the original records and enactments. The assertion that Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers belong to an age later than Ezekiel is of course meant to apply to the present form of the books. But even in this sense it is misleading. Those who make it themselves assume that many things in the law and the history are of far older date, based indeed on what at the time of Ezekiel must have been immemorial usage. The main legislation of the Pentateuch must have existed in the time of Josiah, and even then possessed the authority of ancient observance. The priesthood, the ark, sacrifice and feast, the shewbread, the ephod, can be traced back beyond the time of David to that of Samuel and Eli, quite apart from the testimony of the Books of Moses. Moreover, it is impossible to believe that the formula "The Lord said unto Moses" was invented at a late date as the authority for statutes. It was the invariable accompaniment of the ancient rule, the mark of an origin already recognised. The various legislative provisions we shall have to consider had their sanction under the great ordinance of the law and the inspired prophetism which directed its use and maintained its adaptation to the circumstances of the people. The religious and moral code as a whole, designed to secure profound reverence towards God and the purity of national faith, continued the legislation of Moses, and at every point was the task of men who guarded as sacred the ideas of the founder and were themselves taught of God. The entire law was

acknowledged by Christ in this sense as possessing the authority of the great lawgiver's own commission.

It has been said that "the inspired condition would seem to be one which produces a generous indifference to pedantic accuracy in matters of fact, and a supreme absorbing concern about the moral and religious significance of facts." If the former part of this statement were true, the historical books of the Bible, and, we may say, in particular the Book of Numbers, would deserve no attention as history. But nothing is more striking in a survey of our book than the clear unhesitating way in which incidents are set forth, even where moral and religious ends could not be much served by the detail that is freely used. The account of the muster-roll is a case in point. There we find what may be called "pedantic accuracy." The enumeration of each tribe is given separately, and the formula is repeated, "by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of the names from twenty years old and upward, all that were able to go forth to war." Again, the whole of the seventh chapter, the longest in the book, is taken up with an account of the offerings of the tribes, made at the dedication of the altar. These oblations are presented day after day by the heads of the twelve tribes in order, and each tribe brings precisely the same gifts—"one silver charger, the weight thereof was an hundred and thirty shekels, one silver bowl of seventy shekels after the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mingled with oil for a meal offering; one golden spoon of ten shekels full of incense; one young bullock, one ram, one he-lamb of the first year for a burnt offering; one

male of the goats for a sin offering; and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, five he-lambs of the first year." Now the difficulty at once occurs that in the wilderness, according to Exod. xvi., there was no bread, no flour, that manna was the food of the people. In Numb. xi. 6 the complaint of the children of Israel is recorded: "Now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all: we have nought save this manna to look to." In Josh. v. 10 ff. it is stated that, after the passage of the Jordan, "they kept the passover on the fourteenth day of the month at even in the plains of Jericho. And they did eat of the old corn of the land on the morrow after the passover, unleavened cakes and parched corn in the self-same day. And the manna ceased on the morrow after they had eaten of the old corn of the land." To the compilers of the Book of Numbers the statement that tribe after tribe brought offerings of fine flour mingled with oil, which could only have been obtained from Egypt or from some Arabian valley at a distance, must have been as hard to receive as it is to us. Nevertheless, the assertion is repeated no less than twelve times. What then? Do we impugn the sincerity of the historians? Are we to suppose them careless of the fact? Do we not rather perceive that in the face of what seemed insuperable difficulties they held to what they had before them as authentic records? No writer could be inspired and at the same time indifferent to accuracy. If there is one thing more than another on which we may rely, it is that the authors of these books of Scripture have done their very utmost by careful inquiry and recension to make their account of what took place in the wilderness full and

precise. Absolute sincerity and scrupulous carefulness are essential conditions for dealing successfully with moral and religious themes; and we have all evidence that the compilers had these qualities. But in order to reach historical fact they had to use the same kind of means as we employ; and this qualifying statement, with all that it involves, applies to the whole contents of the book we are to consider. Our dependence with regard to the events recorded is on the truthfulness but not the omniscience of the men, whoever they were, who from traditions, records, scrolls of law, and venerable memoranda compiled this Scripture as we have it. They wrought under the sense of sacred duty, and found through that the inspiration which gives perennial value to their work. With this in view we shall take up the various matters of history and legislation.

Recurring now, for a little, to the spirit of the Book of Numbers, we find in the ethical passages its highest note and power as an inspired writing. The standard of judgment is not by any means that of Christianity. It belongs to an age when moral ideas had often to be enforced with indifference to human life; when, conversely, the plagues and disasters that befell men were always connected with moral offences. It belongs to an age when the malediction of one who claimed supernatural insight was generally believed to carry power with it, and the blessing of God meant earthly prosperity. And the notable fact is that, side by side with these beliefs, righteousness of an exalted kind is strenuously taught. For example, the reverence for Moses and Aaron, usually so characteristic of the Book of Numbers,

is seen falling into the background when the Divine judgment of their fault is recorded; and the earnestness shown is nothing less than sublime. In the course of the legislation Aaron is invested with extraordinary official dignity; and Moses appears at his best in the matter of Eldad and Medad when he says, "Enviest thou for my sake? Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them." Yet Numbers records the sentence pronounced upon the brothers: "Because ye believed Me not, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them." And more severe is the form of the condemnation recorded in chap. xxvii. 14: "Because ye rebelled against My word in the wilderness of Zin, in the strife of the congregation, to sanctify Me at the waters before their eyes." The moral strain of the book is keen in the punishment inflicted on a Sabbath-breaker, in the destination to death of the whole congregation for murmuring against God—a judgment which, at the entreaty of Moses, was not revoked, but only deferred—and again in the condemnation to death of every soul that sins presumptuously. On the other hand, the provision of refuge cities for the unwitting man-slayer shows the Divine righteousness at one with mercy.

It must be confessed the book has another note. In order that Israel might reach and conquer Canaan there had to be war; and the warlike spirit is frankly breathed. There is no thought of converting enemies like the Midianites into friends; every man of them must be put to the sword. The census enumerates the men fit for war. The primitive

militarism is consecrated by Israel's necessity and destiny. When the desert march is over, Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh must not turn peacefully to their sheep and cattle on the east side of Jordan; they must send their men of war across the river to maintain the unity of the nation by running the hazard of battle with the rest. Experience of this inevitable discipline brought moral gain. Religion could use even war to lift the people into the possibility of higher life.

II

THE CENSUS AND THE CAMP

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1. THE MUSTERING

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NUMBERS i. 1-46

From the place of high spiritual knowledge, where through the revelation of God in covenant and law Israel has been constituted His nation and His Church, the tribes must now march with due order and dignity. The sense of a Divine calling and of responsibility to the Highest will react on the whole arrangements made for the ordinary tasks and activities of men. Social aims may unite those who have them in common, and the emergencies of a nation will lay constraint on patriotic souls. But nothing so binds men together as a common vocation to do God's will and

maintain His faith. These ideas are to be traced in the whole account of the mustering of the warriors and the organisation of the camp. We review it feeling that the dominating thought of a Divine call to spiritual duty and progress is far from having control of modern Christendom. Under the New Covenant there is a distribution of grace to every one, an endowment of each according to his faith with priestly and even kingly powers. No chief men swear fealty to Christ on behalf of the tribes that gather to His standard; but each believer devotes himself to the service and receives his own commission. Yet, while the first thought is that of personal honour and liberty, there should follow at once the desire, the determination, to find one's fit place in the camp, in the march, in the war. The unity is imperative, for there is one body and one spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling. The commission each receives is not to be a free-lance in the Divine warfare, but to take his right place in the ranks; and that place he must find.

The enumeration, as recorded in chap. i., was not to be of all Israelites, but of men from twenty years old and upward, all that were able to go forth to war. From Sinai to Canaan was no long journey, and fighting might soon be required. The muster was by way of preparation for conflicts in the wilderness and for the final struggle. It is significant that Aaron is shown associated with Moses in gathering the results. We see not only a preparation for war, but also for the poll tax or tithe to be levied in support of the priests and Levites. A sequel to the enumeration is to be found in chap. xviii. 21: "And unto the children of Levi, behold, I have given all the tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their

service which they serve, even the service of the tent of meeting." The Levites again were to give, out of what they received, a tenth part for the maintenance of the priests. The enactment when carried into effect would make the support of those who ministered in holy things a term of the national constitution.

Now taking the census as intended to impress the personal duties of service in war and contribution for religious ends, we find in it a valuable lesson for all who acknowledge the Divine authority. Not remotely may the command be interpreted thus. Take the sum of them, that they may realise that God takes the sum of them and expects of every man service commensurate with his powers. The claim of Jehovah went side by side with the claim on behalf of the nation, for He was Head of the nation. But God is equally the Head of all who have their life from Him; and this numbering of the Hebrews points to a census which is accurately registered and never falls short of the sum of a people by a single unit. Whoever can fight the battle of righteousness, serve the truth by witness-bearing, aid in relieving one weak, or help religion by personal example and willing gift—every possible servant of God, who is also by the very possession of life and privilege a debtor of God, is numbered in the daily census of His providence. The measure of the ability of each is known. "To whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required." The Divine regard of our lives and estimate of our powers, and the accompanying claim made upon us, are indeed far from being understood; even members of the Church are strangely ignorant of their duty. But is it thought that

because no Sinai shrouded in awful smoke towers above us, and now we are encamped at the foot of Calvary, where one great offering was made for our redemption, therefore we are free in any sense from the service Israel was expected to render? Do any hold themselves relieved from the tithe because they are Christ's freemen, and shirk the warfare because they already enjoy the privileges of the victors? These are the ignorant, whose complacent excuses show that they do not understand the law of Divine religion.

True, the position of the Church among us is not of the kind which the Mosaic law gave to the priesthood in Israel. Tithes are gathered, not from those only who are numbered within the Church and acknowledge obligation, but also from those outside, and always by another authority than that of Divine commandment. In this way the whole matter of the support of religion is confused in these lands both for members of the national Churches and for those beyond their borders. Successfully as the old Hebrew scheme may once have wrought, it is now hopelessly out of line with the development of society. The census does not in any way determine what a national Church can claim. Aaron does not stand beside Moses to watch the enrolment of the tribes, families, and households as they come to be numbered. Yet, by the highest law of all, which neither Church nor State can alter, the demand for service is enforced. There is a warlike duty from which none are exempt, from which there is no discharge. Although the ideal of an organised humanity appears as yet far off in our schemes of government and social melioration, providentially it is being carried into effect. Laws are at work that need no human administration.

By the Divine ordinance generous effort for the common good and the ends of religion is made imperative. Obedience brings its reward: "The liberal deviseth liberal things, and by liberal things shall he stand." Neglect is also punished: the sure result of selfishness is an impoverished life.

The census is described as having been thoroughly organised. Keil and Delitzsch think that the registering may have taken place "according to the classification adopted at Jethro's suggestion for the administration of justice—viz., in thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens." They also defend the total of six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty, which is precisely the same as that reached apparently nine months before. It is an obvious explanation of what appears a perplexing agreement, that the enumeration may have occupied nine months. But the number is certainly large, much larger than the muster-rolls of the Book of Judges would lead us to expect, if we reckon back from them. Nor can any explanation be given that is satisfactory in all respects. We may shrink from interfering with these numerical statements carefully set down thousands of years ago. Yet we feel that the haze of remoteness hangs over this roll of the tribes and all after-reckonings based upon it.

Of the twelve princes named in chap. i. 5-15, as overseers of the census, Nahshon, son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah, has peculiar distinction. His name is found in the genealogy of David given in the Book of Ruth (chap. iv. 20). It also appears in the "book of the generation of Jesus Christ" (Matt. i.) and the roll of Joseph's ancestry

recorded by St. Luke. One after another in that honourable line which gave the Hebrews their Psalmist and the world its Saviour is but a name to us. Yet the life represented by the name Nahshon, spent mainly in the wilderness, had its part in far-off results; and so had many a life, not even named—the hard lives of brave fathers and burdened mothers in Israel, who, on the weary march through the desert, had their sorrow and pain, their scanty joy and hope. Far away is the endurance of those Hebrew men and women, yet it is related to our own religion, our salvation. The discipline of the wilderness made men of courage, women great in faith. Beneath their feet the Arabian sand burned, above them the sun flamed; they heard alarms of war, and followed the pillar of smoke for their appointed time, looking, even when they knew they looked in vain, for the land beyond of which Jehovah had spoken. Unaware of their nation's destiny, they toiled and suffered to serve a great Divine plan which in the course of the ages came to ripeness. And the thought brings help to ourselves. We too have our desert journey, our duty and hardship, with an outlook not merely personal. It is our privilege, if we will take it so, to aid the Divine plan for the humanity that is to be, the great brotherhood in which Christ shall see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. Like a prince of Judah, or a humble nameless mother in Israel, each may find abiding dignity of life in doing well some allotted part in the great enterprise.

The age of service fixed for the men of the tribes may yield suggestions for our time. It is not of warlike service we have to think, but of that which depends on spiritual influence and intellectual power. And we may ask whether

the limits on one side and the other have any parallel for us. Young men and women, having reached the age of bodily and mental vigour, are to hold themselves enrolled in the ranks of the army of God. There is a time of learning and preparation, when knowledge is to be acquired, when the principles of life are to be grasped, and the soul is to find its inspiration through personal faith. Then there should come that self-consecration by which response is made to the claim of God. Neither should that be premature, nor should it be deferred. When an aimless, irresolute adolescence is followed by years of drifting and experimenting without clear religious purpose, the best opportunity of life is thrown away. And this far too frequently occurs among those on whom parental influence and the finest Christian teaching have been expended. The time arrives when such young men and women should begin to serve the Church and the world; but they are still unprepared because they have not considered the great questions of duty, and seen that they have a part to play on the field of endeavour. It is true, no time can be fixed. The public service of Christ has been begun by some in very early youth; and the results have justified their adventure. From the humble tasks they first undertook they have gone on steadily to places of high responsibility, never once looking back, learning while they taught, gaining faith while they imparted it to others. Each for himself or herself, in this matter of supreme importance, must seek the guidance and realise the vocation of God. But delay is often indulged, and the twentieth, even the thirtieth year, passes without a single effort in the holy service. One could wish for a Divine conscription, a command laid on

every one in youth to be ready at a certain day and hour to take the sword of the Spirit.

On the other side also many need to reconsider. No time was fixed for the end of the services to which the Israelites were summoned. As long as a man could carry arms he was to hold himself ready for the field. Not the increasing cares of his family, not the disinclination which comes with years, was to weigh against the ordinance of Jehovah. But service now, however cheerfully it may be rendered in early manhood and womanhood, is often renounced altogether when knowledge and power are coming to ripeness with the experience of life. Doubtless there are many excuses to be made for heads of households who are leaving their young folk to represent them in religion, and pretty much in everything outside the mere maintaining of existence or the enjoyment of it. The demands of public service all round are sometimes quite out of proportion to the available time and strength. Yet the Christian duty never lapses; and it is a great evil when the balance is wanting between old and young, tried and untried.

2. THE TRIBE OF LEVI

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NUMBERS i. 47-54

The tribe of Levi is not numbered with the rest. No warlike service, no half-shekel for the sanctuary, is to be exacted from the Levite. His contribution to the general good is to be of another kind. Pitching their tents about the tabernacle, the men of this tribe are to guard the sanctuary