

Answers to tough questions in Numbers

1. The size of Israel's population provokes questions about the accuracy of the numbers in Numbers. Did that many people wander in the wilderness? How did they survive? How did they manage themselves?

Twice during the wilderness wanderings a census of the people of Israel was taken (1:46; 26:51). Each time the resulting total count of fighting men exceeded 600,000. These numbers indicate a population for Israel in the wilderness of around 2.5 million people at any time. Viewed naturally, this total appears too high to sustain in wilderness conditions.

Before concluding that Moses inflated the numbers, several factors must be considered. First, the Lord supernaturally took care of Israel for forty years (Deuteronomy 8:1-5). Second, God also spelled out sanitary practices that prevented the kind of health crises that might have occurred under those conditions. Third, while Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years, they moved camp only about forty times. Spending about a year in each campsite preserved some grazing for the herds while keeping the people's pollution to a manageable amount. Each census was meant to be an accurate accounting of God's people. They ought to be taken at face value.

2. Chapter 21, verses 4 through 9, records an infestation of fiery serpents that attacked the people. Moses was instructed by God to create a bronze serpent and hang it on a pole. When bitten people looked at the serpent on the pole, they were healed. Wasn't this some kind of idol worship?

The circumstances leading up to the casting of the bronze serpent were all too familiar. The people were tired and discouraged. Angry with God, they complained to Moses. They were convinced that things couldn't get any worse, but God showed them otherwise. He sent fiery serpents among the people, and some of the Israelites died. Others suffered painful bites.

Realizing their mistake, the people came in repentance to Moses and begged for help. They were not worshiping the bronze serpent but were acting in faith, in obedience to God's and Moses' directions.

3. Why does a pagan and greedy prophet like Balaam receive so much attention in the biblical story?

Balaam, whose story is recorded in 22:2-24:25, does seem to receive special treatment. Even though Balaam claimed to know the Lord (22:18), Scripture consistently refers to him as a false prophet (2 Pet 2:15, 16; Jude 11). Apparently, God placed such a priority on the message that the character of the messenger became a secondary consideration. The Lord used Balaam as His mouthpiece to speak the true words He put in his mouth. God had a purpose for Balaam despite the pagan prophet's own plans.

4. What are modern readers to do with Balaam's talking donkey (22:22-35)?

Several observations come to mind when a question like this is asked. First, the question assumes that ancient readers had fewer problems with talking donkeys than modern people do. This incident was not recorded as a commonplace occurrence but as something unusual and noteworthy. Second, one can just as easily wonder why God didn't (or doesn't) use talking animals more often—we would all probably be better off. Third, why not recognize God's sense of humor in this account? Fourth, God's display of patience and persistence in these events ought to provoke in us a sense of humble worship. Fifth, the incident, unusual as it may be, should be accepted at face value as true.