

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Numbers

The book of Numbers tells the story of Israel in the wilderness, journeying toward the Promised Land from Mount Sinai. As Moses led Israel from Egypt to Canaan, God tested his people in the crucible of the wilderness to see if they would be faithful to him as a unified nation. Numbers documents their successes and failures. Israel's disobedience resulted in the Lord's judgment, always counterbalanced by his patient persistence in raising a new generation to fulfill his plan. With its many stories and the detailed exposition of God's laws, Numbers gives us a dramatic account of the Lord's nature, his covenant, and his plan for his people.

Setting

After leaving Egypt, the Israelites journeyed to Mount Sinai, where God gave them the law (see Exodus). They remained at Sinai for a year before traveling through the wilderness into Transjordan (the region east of the Jordan River) to camp on the plains of Moab. God tested Israel in the wilderness as the generation that made the exodus from Egypt passed away and a new generation prepared to enter the Promised Land. The book of Numbers instructed the new generation camped on the plains of Moab to obey the Lord.

Israel was shaped and purified during this wilderness sojourn. Through Moses' literary efforts (and those of later scribes and editors), Numbers enabled successive generations to hear that story. It thus became a vital component of Hebrew memory. Numbers was written so that those who learned from history need not repeat mistakes from the past.

Summary

The book of Numbers gets its structure from the three stages of Israel's journey through the wilderness: (1) the nineteen days in which Israel prepared to depart from Mount Sinai ([1:1-10:10](#)), (2) the thirty-nine-year journey from Sinai to the plains of Moab ([10:11-22:1](#)), and (3) the final months of Israel's encampment on the plains of Moab shortly before they entered Canaan ([21:1-36:13](#)).

The two registrations of Israel's men of military age (chs [1-4](#), [26](#)) also shape Numbers. These registrations primarily measured the strength of Israel's fighting force and the number of Levites, with the totals at the beginning of the book and toward the end of the book representing two completely different generations. The first census tallied the rebellious generation that left Egypt, received the law at Sinai, and died in the wilderness. The second registration numbered the new generation of Israelites that entered the Promised Land. The two counts are very close, showing that the second generation completely replaced the first.

Along the way, the Hebrews that left Egypt repeatedly rebelled (chs [11](#), [12](#), [14](#), [16-17](#), [20](#), [25](#)). They all died in the wilderness except for Joshua and Caleb, whose faith was exemplary ([13:30](#); [14:6-9](#)).

Israel's army was tested on several occasions before they entered Canaan (chs [14](#), [21](#), [31](#)), and the story of Balaam is recounted (chs [22-24](#)). Arrangements were made for settling Transjordan (ch [32](#)), the wilderness journey was reviewed (ch [33](#)), and Moses anticipated the occupation of Canaan (chs [34-36](#)).

Numbers is a case study in how Israel maintained—and failed to maintain—covenant regulations in their day-to-day experiences.

Authorship

As with the other books of the Pentateuch, Moses has traditionally been recognized as the author of Numbers. Until the advent of modern scholarship, both Jewish and Christian scholars held to Moses' authorship; the Old Testament, the New Testament, and much ancient Jewish literature also made this assumption. References to Moses' role as author occur throughout the Pentateuch (e.g., [Num 33:1-2](#)). There is no need to exclude Moses out of hand as the primary author—on the basis of content or the level of literacy feasible at the time of the Exodus and conquest—except in passages such as the account of his death ([Deut 34](#)). It is also possible that Moses supervised the compilation of books credited to him or, like the apostle Paul, dictated parts of his writings.

Many scholars postulate various sources from which later editors created the books of the Pentateuch, but this “Documentary Hypothesis” remains speculative (see Genesis Book Introduction, “Authorship”). Even allowing for later modifications by scribes and editors, Numbers substantially represents itself as Moses’ work.

Date and Geography

The geographical, cultural, and linguistic data related to Numbers fit either an early date or a late date (1400s or 1200s BC) for the Exodus and conquest (see Exodus Book Introduction, “The Date of the Exodus”).

The archaeological evidence from Sinai, the Negev, and Transjordan (Edom, Moab, and Ammon) also contributes significantly to discussion about the historical background of the conquest. Scholars are unable to identify exact locations for many place-names mentioned in the wilderness itinerary, and there are problems with various other sites named in Numbers.

Literary Issues

Title of the Book. The name “Numbers” derives from this book’s interest in statistics (see chs [1–4](#), [26](#)). This title is the English translation of the Latin title *Numeri* and the Greek *Arithmoi*, the names given to this book by the Latin Vulgate and Greek Septuagint translations of the Old Testament. The registration accounts show with mathematical precision that the Israelites who left Egypt were not the same people who crossed the Jordan into Canaan. In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Numbers is called *bemidbar* (“in the wilderness”), the fourth word of [Num 1:1](#) in the Hebrew text. This title is certainly appropriate, since it reflects the book’s geographical setting and chronological framework.

Literary Genres. The book of Numbers includes a variety of common literary genres, such as narrative (e.g., [10:11–14:45](#)), poetry (e.g., chs [23–24](#)), and law (e.g., chs [4–6](#)). It also contains detailed lists of facts and figures, such as registration tallies (e.g., chs [1–4](#)), offerings (e.g., ch [7](#)), and travel itineraries (e.g., ch [33](#)). The NLT compiles various prose lists into concise tables of names and numbers (chs [1–2](#); [13, 34](#)).

Literary Sources. The Hebrew Bible identifies ancient sources that Moses (and perhaps later editors) consulted, such as *The Book of the Wars of the Lord* ([21:14–15](#)), the “Song of the Well” ([21:17–18](#)), and the “Song of Heshbon” ([21:27–30](#)). Chapters [23–24](#) contain many poetic lines from the non-Israelite prophet Balaam; [31:32–47](#) seems to be based on an actual record of war spoils; and chapter [33](#) appears to derive from a written diary.

Text. The Hebrew text of Numbers is very well preserved, except for a few sections of poetry in chapters [21–24](#) that are difficult to interpret. The generally good condition of the Hebrew text is evident when comparing the Hebrew Masoretic Text (AD 900s) with much earlier fragments of Numbers found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (150 BC—AD 125); there are only a few insignificant variations between the two. Greater differences exist between the Masoretic Text, equivalent sections in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint), and the Samaritan Pentateuch, but they represent deliberate differences of interpretation, not just variant readings of the manuscripts.

Meaning and Message

Numbers explains how God provided for his people's needs, and it documents the Israelites' repeated disobedience as they rebelled against the Lord's commands. The Israelites did not wander in the wilderness for forty years because they were lost, but because of their faithlessness and rebellion.

Numbers highlights Israel's struggle with God. As often as God called the Israelites to adhere to the law, they disobeyed him. The Israelites could count on God's provision for their physical necessities and for guidance and instruction through their chosen leaders. Yet God's constant provision was often met with lack of faith. Numbers illustrates the swift judgment of a holy God, while teaching that the Lord is faithful and patient.

As in ancient Israel, all communities of believers need unwavering leadership, and Numbers continues to warn those who too easily forget God's holy nature. Specific episodes from Numbers are used in the New Testament as powerful object lessons:

- In [1 Corinthians 10:1–11](#), the apostle Paul warns his readers to avoid idolatry, immorality, and grumbling so that they will not perish like the Israelites in the wilderness. God is not pleased with such behavior, and followers of Christ must not put God to the test ([1 Cor 10:9](#)).
- The author of Hebrews identifies repeated instances of Israel's hardhearted and disobedient spirit and says that God responded to this waywardness with swift and certain wrath ([Heb 3:7–4:11](#)). These verses, which draw heavily on the language of [Psalm 95](#), are saturated with terms that reflect God's judgment of Israel's sin.
- [Jude 1:5](#) teaches Christians about faithfulness by summarizing Numbers.

The same God who liberated his people from Egypt destroyed that rebellious generation because they did not believe and obey. Like ancient Israel,

Christians must learn from the mistakes of the past and live in faith and obedience to their Lord.