

NUMBERS

I. Background

A. Title

1. Hebrew titles: “And these are the words” (1:1) OR “In the wilderness” (בְּמִדְבָּר *bemidbar*)
2. Western title: numbering of the people in their two main generations; (αριθμοι “*Arithmoi*” in LXX or “*Numeri*” of Vulgate) based on chpts. 1,26)

B. Theme

1. Major Theme: God’s provid-ence and His people’s pilgrimage
“Trust and obey, for there’s no other way”

The turning point of the narrative is Israel’s unbelief in 14:45 and their refusal to enter into God’s promised provision of the land. This event divides the book into two parts, 1-14 and 15-36.

2. Continuing themes of

- a. God’s holiness; Numbers “maintains a unified sacerdotal interpretation of God’s will for his people which is set forth in a sharp contrast between the holy and the profane.” —Childs in Hamilton, p. 315.
- b. Worship; the critics say that most of the material of Numbers comes from the P document

C. Time Span: 40 years, from 13 months after Sinai to entering the promised land. The first half of the book is as much topical as chronological: 7:1 (Tabernacle matters) and 9:1 (Passover matters) precede 1:1 in time.

D. Setting: most of the time around Kadesh-Barnea, 13



II. Outline

Short outline based on locale and internal chronological notations (Jensen. *Numbers: Journey to God's Rest-land*)

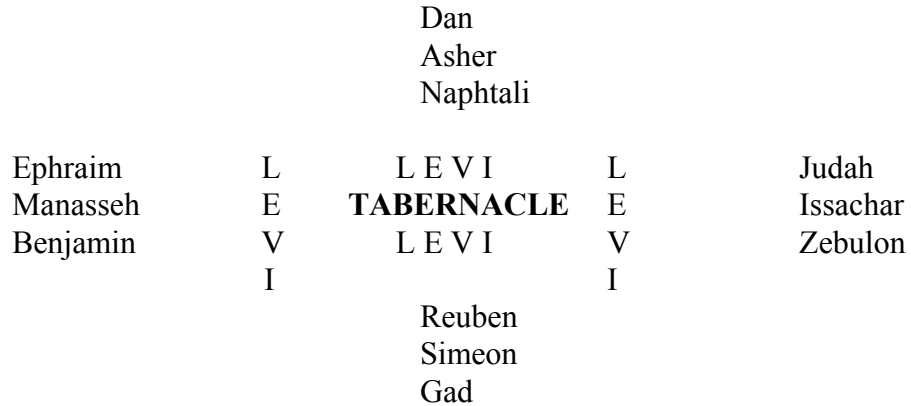
- A. Preparation for the journey (Sinai) — 1-10
- B. The journey (to Moab) — 11-21
- C. At the gateway (Moab) — 22-36

Longer Outline (Geisler)

Israel's departure under the guidance of God, chpts 1-10

1. The Position of the People — 1-4
 - a. First census for the draft
 - (1) Age 20+ for 11 tribes = 603,550
 - (2) Levites, who guard tabernacle, got religious exemption, 1:47, and are not counted here. Their census is in 3:15 and 4:34-49.

- b. Centrality of God in the midst of His people — the tabernacle — 2
- c. Five symmetrical groups for marching and encampment - ch. 2



Significantly, Judah is on the east, the pentateuchal symbol of the source of deliverance. Leaders Moses and Aaron will also camp on the east side (3:38). Judah will lead the nation in its advance through the wilderness.

Judah is counterbalanced by Rachel's sons who bring up the rearguard.

- d. Levitical responsibilities — 3-4

(1) Substitution: 22,000 Levites in one tribe (3:39) for 22,000+ first born of other tribes.

(a) The 273 first born without Levitical substitutes were redeemed at the price of 5 shekels of Ag each (Lev. 27:6)

(b) Substitution by laying on hands, 8:10,11,16,18

(2) Age limit for service: 30-50 (4:46,47; cf. 8:24 where younger age, possibly for apprentices); ctr. later days of David = ages 20-50 (II Chron. 31:17)

Jesus is about age 30 when he begins his ministry of intercession (Lk. 3:23). Then, to fulfill all righteousness, He is ceremoniously anointed by a Levite according to Numbers 8:6,7:

Numbers 8:6-7 "Take the Levites from among the children of Israel and cleanse them *ceremonially*.⁷ "Thus you shall do to them to cleanse them: Sprinkle water of purification on them..."

(3) Division and coordination of Levitical labors — 4

- (a) Kohathites = transporters of furniture on poles
- (b) Gershonites = transporters of tents and curtains
- (c) Merarites = transporters of boards and poles

2. Precepts from God — 5-6

a. Restitution as a trespass payment, 5:6-8

- (1) Seek confession, atonement, restoration
- (2) 20% of original value added to repayment to the offended party
- (3) No avoidance of restitution, v. 8; not only is man offended, but sin always offends God, v. 6.

b. “Trial by Ordeal” in the case of suspected adultery, 5:11-31, altho it is not a typical “ordeal” since the normal “trial” is dangerous with a potentially good ending, while this trial is seemingly innocuous of itself, with a potential bad ending

- (1) “First polygraph test” M.R. DeHaan, *Chemistry of the Blood*
- (2) Inquisition before the Lord: presumed innocent until proven guilty (19,22) = protective measure for women

(3) Ingestion of curses of the oath

- (a) Holy water and holy dust, v. 17 (cf. Gen 3:19)
- (b) Curses, 23,24

(4) Penalty

- (a) Penalty apparently affects woman’s reproductive capabilities (note effects on belly and thigh; cf. v. 28), her highest sense of fulfillment
- (b) Unless she confesses before the priest, no death penalty for circumstantial guilt; two witnesses required for death
- (c) No penalty prescribed for a mistaken husband, although his love and faithfulness are on trial before the community. This trial enables the wife to tell the jealous husband to “put up or shut up.”

3. The Nazirite vow (chpt. 6) = the “separated/consecrated ones,” (נַזִּיר *nazar*) a close synonym for holiness (קֹדֶשׁ *qodesh*)

This form of biblical separation is positive as well as negative: separation unto God from worldly influences.

Jesus would be called a Nazarene (Mt. 2:23), probably based on another Hebrew word, נֶצֶר *netser* (Is. 11:1).

- a. “...disciplined in his appetites, distinctive in his appearance, discreet in his associations.” —Hamilton, p. 324.
 - b. Remarkably similar to demands on the high priest, Hamilton, p. 325. The Nazirite vow makes provision for more than just the priests/Levites to be wholly committed to God’s service (Ex. 19:5,6).
 - c. Male or female (cf. universalism of apostolic Pentecost)
 - d. Generally for a specific time. The vow could be temporarily suspended, 6:9.
4. Priestly triune benediction (repeated several times in the Psalms) 6:22-27
- a. = The Lord’s Prayer of the OT
 - b. “Blessing” is God’s idea (Gen. 1:28)

The blessing is directed toward individuals (singular pronoun, “you”) “light of Thy countenance” implies smile of God’s favor
Triple blessing reinforces the importance, like “holy, holy, holy”

5. The Provision for cleansing — 7-9a
- a. Chpt. 7, the longest in the Pentateuch. Tribal offerings for the Tabernacle
 - b. Chpt. 8, dedication of the lampstand and the Levites (8:7). Cf. the anointing of Jesus (as High Priest) in Lk. 4/Is. 61:1,2 and Acts 10:38.
 - c. Substitute Passover
 - (1) For distance or uncleanness, 9:10
 - (2) For emergencies only, 9:13

Significantly, this practical provision was supplied by God at the initiation of the congregation. The law in general was not always rigid or rigidly applied if the spirit of the law could be observed.

6. The Pilgrimage toward the promised land — 9b-10

a. More than one year at Sinai (10:11)

b. Silver trumpets, 10:1-10

- (1) For calling of special feasts/convocations or summons to war; cf. “trump of God” in I Thess. 4; cf. 1Cor 15:52
- (2) Long one piece trumpets have been found buried with a Pharaoh from ca. 1350

7. 10:11 — “Second year, second month, twentieth day;” = 13 months of organizing the people, establishing/instructing them in the covenant, and building the tabernacle at Sinai

8. Hobab’s “eyes” enlisted, 10:29-32; ben-Reuel, he will be the head of the Kenites in the promised land, Judges 1:16
Sailhamer thinks Reuel is the father of Jethro (Judges 4:11). But the term for “father-in-law” may be defined more broadly to include other in-laws like a brother-in-law. Judges 4:11 should then be taken in the light of Num 10:29 (*EBC* II:784 note).

9. Benediction and appeal to Immanuel, vv. 35-36

D. Israel’s disbelief in the Lord — 11-14

1. Discontentment with the provision of God — 11-12

a. Fire (11:1-3) and quail

- (1) 62 bushels of quail! during annual mid-April migration, 11:32
- (2) Herodotus (ca. 400 b.c.) mentions that the Egyptians he saw would capture the quail and dry them on the ground, v. 32

(3) “Graves of lust,” v. 34 cf. Ps. 106:15

soul.
Psalm 106:15 And He gave them their request, But sent leanness into their

b. 70 elders, 11:10ff. (cf. Ex. 18:25)

–spirit of prophecy, vv. 25-30

–Moses longs for the days of God’s rule under the new covenant rather than his present, single mediatorial rule (v. 29; cf. Joel 2:28, etc.)

This issue of leadership introduces the further challenge to his leadership in the next chapter.

c. Moses’ domestic life (ch. 12). Zipporah is apparently deceased, and his new Cushite wife draws criticism

(1) God had forbidden only marriages with Canaanites (Ex. 34:16)

(2) Moses never married an Israelite, and exemplified in his person the fellowship so far as could exist between Israelite and Gentile

(3) Miriam’s plague might be a reflection on the complexion of the Cushite.

(4) The leprosy particularly suggests God’s sign of leadership against doubters that God introduced in Ex. 4:6. The other sign in Exodus 4:3 comes back in Numbers 21:6 when the whole nation challenges Moses’ leadership.

12:7: Moses is “faithful in God’s household”

2. Disbelief of God’s promise — 13-14

–The spies were sent in response to the people’s temerity in requesting them (Dt. 1:22,23)

–Moses intercedes, 14:11

E. Israel’s discipline from the Lord — 15-36

1. The passing of the old generation — 15-21

a. It has been estimated by Leon Wood that there would have to be about 7 burials per hour over those 40 years. Significant deaths mentioned are those of Miriam and Aaron in chpt. 20.

- b. Offerings and provision for sins, chpt. 15, come as result of the rebellion, even as there were new regulations introduced after the golden calf incident. “The law was added because of transgressions until...” (Gal. 3:19ff.)
- (1) Sins of ignorance (15:24) vs “sins with a high hand” (=Hebrew of 15:30f.)
 - (2) 15:29 (9:14): one law for all; no respect for persons of rank
 - (3) Sabbath breaker: preceding context of presumptuous sin (v. 30f.); probably an overly ambitious entrepreneur (cf. Ex. 16:23)
 - (4) Fringes and borders of blue, 15:37-41 cf. Mt. 23:5
- c. Chpt 16: Korah of the Levites challenges Aaron’s sole right to the priestly leadership (Jude 11), while Dathan and Abiram of the tribe of Reuben challenged Moses’ authority
- (1) Vivisepture: Judgment of being cut off from the land of the living. Some of Korah’s children not taken in judgment, 16:32 cf. 26:11
 - (2) Aaron’s blossoming rod/scepter (17:2), as opposed to rods of other tribes. Almond tree a symbol for early blessing; cf. Jer. 1:11,12
Aaron exercises grace in interceding for his opponents even as did Moses.
- d. Reaffirmation of Levitical priesthood as God’s gift to the nation, 18:6,19.
- Offerings established by the “covt of salt,” 18:19
- Permanent substance
 - Preservation of relation
 - Purification
 - Palatable food cultivates communion
- e. “Holy water” (cf. 5:17) in the tabernacle for cleansings, (19:9), especially for pollution by contact with dead bodies which is a prominent theme in the preceding chpts.
- Sailhamer has observed from the original Hebrew that the language changes from “ashes and cleansing”(19:9) to the “dust” of the heifer being sprinkled over “living” water (19:17). These two words are the key words/themes of the fall narrative in Gen. 3:19,24 where sin and death become major problems.

2. The final march in the final year of wanderings, 20,21

- a. “Return to ‘Go,’ but do not collect \$200” — the return to Kadesh-Barnea, portal to the promised land, before marching up the Jordan valley (ch. 20ff.). Moses is sentenced to die in the wilderness for smiting the rock (which had already been smitten, Ex. 17:5,6 cf. I Cor. 10:4).
- b. Fiery serpents, or “Clean your plate without grumbling!” ch. 21; cf. Lk. 10:7.
 - (1) rejection of gracious bread from heaven leads God to “give them up” to the natural product of the chaotic desert: burning serpents that sting with the curse of death
 - (2) The serpent on a staff had been a sign for unbelievers (Ex. 4:3)
 - (3) as the disobedient had switched the object of grace into something loathesome, so now God overcomes the curse to switch the image of the detestable accursed serpent into something beneficial and life-giving.
 - (4) Compare Jesus’ use of this symbol to denote His bearing the curse, John 3:14ff. Cf. II Cor. 5:21, Gal. 3:13
 - (5) the brass serpent later became an object of idolatry and was destroyed by Hezekiah, II Kings 18:4.
- c. Journey to Pisgah (south around Edom cost an extra 180 miles, 20:14-21, and around Moab, Dt. 2:9).

See Sailhamer’s comparison of the unbelieving nation to unbelieving Moses, *PaN* 399-400. Moses displays faithlessness (20:12) as they approach the challenge of Edom (20:14), even as 40 years earlier the nation had faced the attack of the Amalakites (14:40ff.).
- d. “Book of the Wars of the Yaweh” (21:14,15) = real primary source ctr. critics’ hypothetical sources
- e. Victory over Sihon (of Amorites, from Arnon to Jabok) and Og (of Bashan). See map.

3. Events in Moab, Numbers 22 – Deuteronomy

- a. Balaam — 22-25

R.K. Harrison (*Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, p. 293) cites an

ancient text found at a pagan sanctuary in modern Jordan by one Balaam ben Beor claiming ability to pronounce curses.

–Two miraculous events in this narrative, both with the tongue: talking ass, and blessing from the cursing heart of Balaam

–22:3 Both times, Israel is “too numerous” as a result of God’s blessing. God’s enemies try to thwart the blessing.

–Balak, like Pharaoh, makes three attacks on God’s people, all of which backfire. See *PaN*, 406 “As in the case of Pharaoh’s three attempts, after Balak’s third attempt the author turns to the question of the birth of God’s chosen deliverer, the prophecy of the star that was to arise out of Jacob (24:12-25).”

(Note God’s promise to Abraham about the stars.)

- (1) God holds Balaam within the bounds of the Abrahamic covenant, especially Gen. 12:3
“God lets the magician go on his way. He does not bar the road before him; He does not strike him down in His wrath; He will merely direct the word that Balaam is to utter. Here our story gives expression to something that is very important in the faith of the OT; God does not guide history and the destiny of men by continually opposing men in the projects that they have taken in hand. On the contrary, He lets them act. To all appearance, they are acting simply according to His plan.” —von Rad in Hamilton, p. 359.
- (2) Unwitting Messianic prophecy: 24:17, cf. Gen. 49:10
 - (a) “Star of heaven” equals the seed of Abraham (Gen. 22:17)
 - (b) 24:20 — the Messiah (or Messianic line?) will destroy the pesky Amalakites, something that Saul was unable to do (Agag in I Sam. 15:9).
 - (c) BarKochba Rebellion, 134 a.d.
- (3) Where external attempts at cursing fail, appeal to inward corruption prevails, ch. 25.
 - (a) Theme of Sons of God mingling with daughters of men?
 - (b) Turning the tabernacle (“inner room”) into a place of cultic prostitution? v. 8

(c) judgment on revelers in 25:9, apparently on Simeonites, (ctr. this tribe's census number in 26:14 with their earlier census of 1:22,23 and 2:12,13)

(4) NT reference

- (a) Way of Balaam — II Peter 2:15-16 (sin of simony)
- (b) Error of Balaam — Jude 11 (mercenary “prophet for profit”)
- (c) False teaching of Balaam — Rev. 2:14 (heresy)

b. Preparation for the new generation — 26-36

(1) Census of the new generation, 26

- (a) the land to be divided by lot, v. 55.
- (b) Boundaries of the promised land, 34:1-15

(2) The daughters of sonless Zelophehad: chpts. 27,36

(3) Forty-eight Levitical cities, 35

(a) 6 cities of refuge, 3 on each side of Jordan

Accused under city arrest until “atoning death” of the high priest (v. 25 cf. Heb. 7:27ff.)

(b) City property restored to Levites in year of Jubilee, as opposed to one year rule for city property of other tribes

(c) “Plea bargaining?” — 35:31