

NUMBERS

I. Background

A. Title

1. Hebrew titles: “And these are the words” (1:1) OR “In the wilderness” (בְּמִדְבָּר *bemidbar*)
2. Western title focuses on the numbering of the people in their two main generations; (ἀριθμοὶ “*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.

A synthetic outline of the book has three parts:
(see the synthetic outline with different headings on the next page)

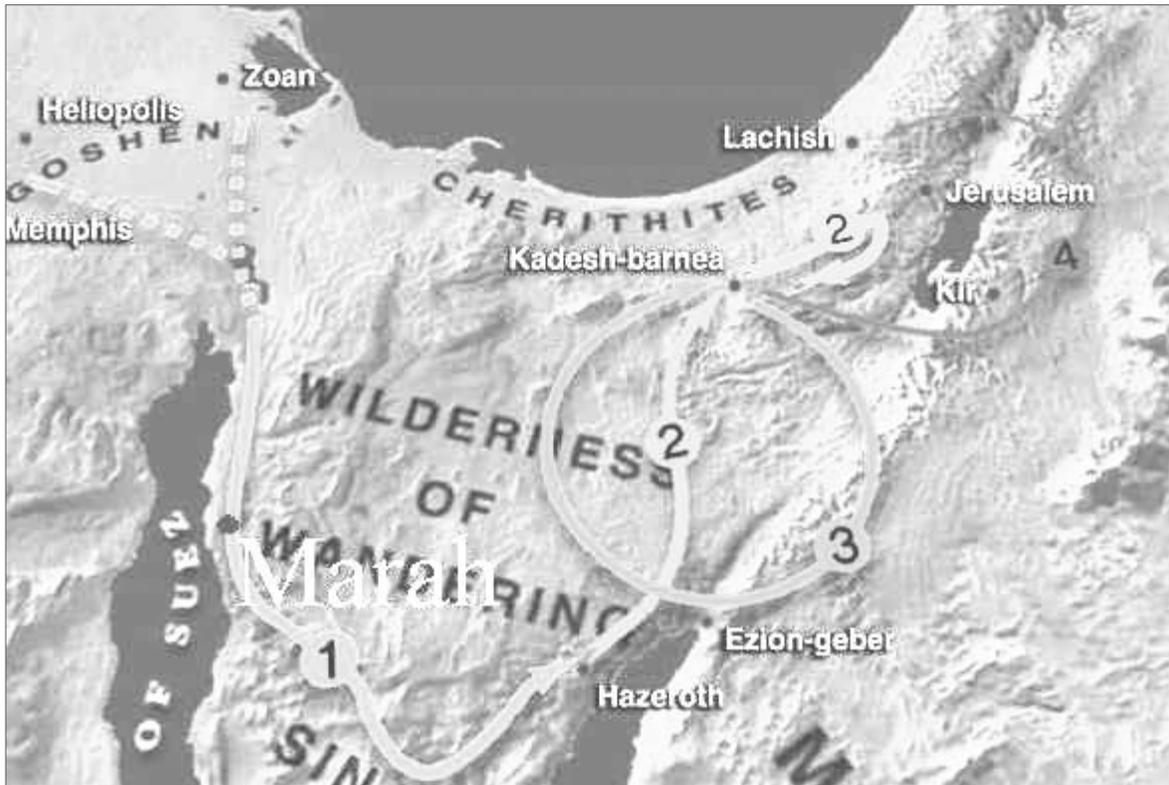
1. Law Code, chpts. 1-10
2. Wilderness Wanderings, 11-21
3. Initial Conquest, 22-36

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, 13:26



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 | (= completion of Mosaic law for 1 st Gen) |
| B. The journey (to Moab) | 11-21 | (= wilderness wanderings) |
| C. At the gateway (Moab) | 22-36 | (= victory in Transjordan) |

Longer Outline (Geisler)

- A. 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

NORTH

		Dan		
		Asher		
		Naphtali		
Ephraim	L	L E V I	L	Judah
Manasseh	E	TABERNACLE	E	Issachar
Benjamin	V	L E V I	V	Zebulon
	I		I	
		Reuben		
		Simeon		
		Gad		

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 offspring 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 (Luke 3:23). Then, to fulfill all righteousness, He is ceremonially 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” acc. to 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 (symbol of LIFE) and holy dust (symbol of DEATH),
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,” (נָזִיר *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 (Exo 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. Num 6:23 = The Lord's Prayer of the OT
 - b. "Blessing" is God's idea (Gen 1:28), here expressed in terms of
Protection / Pardon / Peace
 - 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: 89 vss = 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, 9
 - (1) For distance or uncleanness, 9:10 (= anti-legalism)
 - (2) For emergencies only, 9:13 (= anti-antinomianism)

Significantly, this practical provision was supplied by God at the initiation of the congregation. The law in general was not always rigid nor 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. 4:16; 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

B. Israel’s Disbelief in the Lord — 11-14

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

a. Fire (11:1-3) and quail (11:31). This passage parallels the next passage of fiery judgment (21:6) where fiery serpents bite the people. In chpt. 11, the people bite the quail in their unchecked lust.

(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,” (Kivroth HaTa-avah), v. 34, cf. Ps. 106:15

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

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

–spirit of prophecy, vv. 17, 25-30

–cf. 70 disciples of Luke 10 and Spirit of Christ (John 20:22) upon the 11 disciples

–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 (Exo 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 Exo 4:6. The other sign (snakes) 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 timidity in requesting them (Dt. 1:22,23)

–Moses intercedes, 14:11

–mercy comes from power, not weakness, vv. 17,20

C. Israel's Discipline from the Lord — 15-36 = Exile from the Land of Life

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 (= 56,210 deaths/year). 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. Exo 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.
Circumstantial evidence of a conspiracy springs from the fact that the Kohathites and Reubenites were proximate on the south side of the camp.
- (1) Viviseulture: 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 (Cf. 2Cor 6:14-16)
 - (2) Aaron's blossoming rod/scepter (17:2), as opposed to rods of other tribes. Almond tree was a symbol for early blessing (cf. Jer. 1:11,12), and the blossoming rod symbolizes life and fruitfulness from God.
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; cf. Christ's gift to the NT church of leaders (Eph 4:8-11).
- Offerings established by the "covenant of salt," 18:19 (cf. Lev 2:13)
- Permanent substance
 - Preservation of relation
 - Purification
 - Palatable food cultivates communion
- e. "Holy water" (cf. 5:17) from the ashes of the red heifer in the tabernacle for cleansings, (19:9), especially for pollution by contact with dead bodies which is a prominent theme in the preceding chapters.
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, Exo 17:5,6 cf. I Cor. 10:4).
 - b. Fiery serpents, or "Clean your plate without grumbling!" ch. 21; cf. Lk. 10:7, and esp. the grumbling in the context of John 6:41
 - (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 (Exo 4:3)
 - (3) as the disobedient had switched the object of grace into something loathsome,

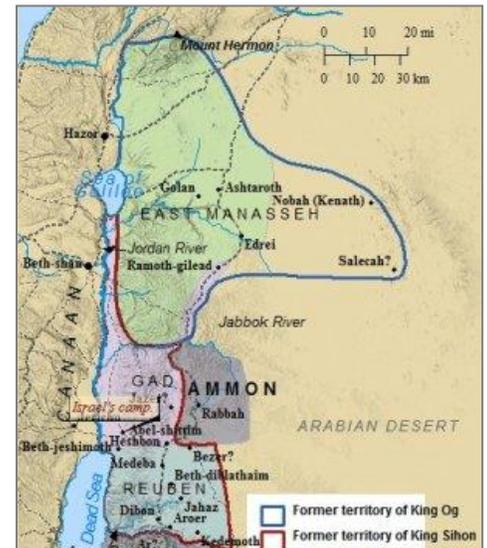
so now God overcomes the curse to switch the image of the detestable accursed serpent into something beneficial and life-giving.

- (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 in contrast to critics' hypothetical sources
- e. Victory over Sihon (of Amorites, from Arnon to Jabok) and Og (of Bashan).



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.

- 1) Two miraculous events in this narrative, both with the tongue: talking ass, and blessing from the cursing heart of Balaam
- 2) 22:3 Both times (in Egypt and now Moab), Israel is "too numerous" as a result of God's blessing. God's enemies try to thwart the blessing.
- 3) 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.)
- 4) 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.

Num 23.23: “What hath God wrought?” –Samuel Morse’s first telegraph, 1844

5) Unwitting Messianic prophecy: 24:17, cf. Gen 49:10

Num 24:17 "I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel, And batter the brow of Moab, And destroy all the sons of tumult."

- (a) “Star of heaven” equals the seed of Abraham (Gen 22:17) and the morning star of Rev 22:16 and 2Pet 1:19.
- (b) 24:20 — the Messiah (or Messianic line?) will destroy the pesky Amalekites, something that Saul was unable to do (Agag in I Sam. 15:9). Amalek was the grandson of Esau (Gen 36:12).
- (c) Bar-Kochba Rebellion, 134 AD

6) Where external attempts at cursing fail, appeal to inward corruption prevails, ch. 25.

- (a) Old theme of Sons of God mingling with daughters of men?
 - i. Israel is in danger of becoming like the pagan nations at this crisis, much like at the golden calf
 - ii. Israel remains protected from her enemies and from their demonic gods, but not from God’s covenant judgment
- (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 (22,000 members) with their earlier census of 1:22,23 and 2:12,13 (59,300 members).

7) 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 (of Manasseh): chpts. 27,36
 - (3) Forty-eight Levitical cities, 35
 - (a) 6 cities of refuge, 3 on each side of Jordan
 - i. Allowed a fair trial before avenger of blood caught up
 - ii. Provided sanctuary for those acquitted of unintentional murder
 - iii. Accused to remain under city arrest until “atoning death” of the high priest brought a new beginning (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