Fall 2024 – Adult Sunday School

Three Rivers Presbyterian Church

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**Lesson 14 – Numbers**

(All Scripture English Standard version unless otherwise noted; *italics*, underlining, color & ‘greyscale’ mine)

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*Survey of the Old Testament*

ot501-14

<https://www.biblicaltraining.org/learn/institute/ot501-survey-of-the-old-testament/ot501-14-numbers>

**I. Introduction** (00:13):

We're now in the book of Numbers, which is the fourth book of the Pentateuch. In Hebrew, it's called *BaMidbar*, which means, or is translated, "*in the wilderness*," but this time it's the *fifth* *word* in the *first verse* of the book, not the *first* *word* for some reason.

The opening words are, "*and Yahweh spoke to Moses BaMidbar in the wilderness of Sinai in the Tent of Meeting*." Note again, the presence of the conjunction, "*and*," and it's very important because it connects Genesis, with Exodus, with Leviticus, and now with Numbers. We've got *one narrative unity*. It's intended that Numbers is to be seen as the *sequel* to Leviticus.

The Hebrew name selected for this book captures well the events recorded in it because they happened *in the* *wilderness*. This book more than any other book records the *40 years of wandering in the wilderness* before entering into the *Promised Land* after the death of Moses.

So, we can say *wilderness wanderings*. The book explains why the Israelites had to spend *40 years in the wilderness*. The book also describes the *transition* from the *first generation* who left Egypt, to the *second generation* who will enter the *Promised Land.*

The generation who came out of Egypt to the Red Sea as adults, will not enter into the land except for two, Joshua and Caleb. Not even Moses, not even Aaron will make it in, and it's this next generation that will go in.

In terms of basic *geography*, Israel is camped at Sinai in the beginning of the book, and that *encampment* began in Exodus 19, and it won't end until Numbers 10. This *encampment* is a very big swath of time covered by Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

So, you can think of Exodus 19 all the way through Exodus 40, the entire book of Leviticus, and now Numbers 1-10. In chapter 10, verse 11, it says, "*in the second year, in the second month, on the 20th day of the month, the cloud lifted from the tabernacle of the testimony, and the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai, and the cloud settled down in the wilderness Paran. They set out for the first time at the command of the Lord by Moses*."

Here we can see that *journeying* is the *theme* of the book, and you can see it in this outline right here. So, we've got basically 1-10, 10-20, 20-25, and 26-36. Those are the 4 big chunks. I always tell the people I'm training if they have to get examined like in ordination, you just think of these big block outlines in, for your answers, and so this is it.

In chapter 1, through the half of 10, Israel's going to prepare for the journey to get out of town. In chapters 10 and a half through 20 and a half, they're going to journey from *Sinai* to *Kadesh*, a new location. Then from 20:14 to 25:18 from *Kadesh* to *Moab*, that's where they're going to battle *Sihon* and *Og*. Then in 26 to 36, they're going to prepare to enter the land.

All right, this is an *11-day journey* that took a short *40 years*. It really sounds a lot like my life. That was my doctoral studies. It was a five-year journey that took 12 years.

**II. Outline and Contents** (03:31):

Now the *purpose* of the Book of Numbers, this is an important thing. The *purpose* of the book of Numbers overall is *to contrast the faithfulness of God, with the faithlessness and the rebellion of the Israelites*. This is very much the *theme* that we see running across the *former prophets* Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The *faithfulness of God* to sustain, maintain, and provide for His people in light of the continuing and relentless *unfaithfulness of God's people*.

**A. Preparing for the journey from Sinai** (04:06):

The *former*, that is *God's faithfulness*, is seen in God keeping His covenant promise to make Israel a numerous people as shown by the 2 *censuses*. The *latter* is attested by the record of Israel's *grumbling* about their living conditions, *rebellion* against God's leadership, and *refusal* to enter the land. Thus, the people *tested* God at every level while God is *providing* for their every need.

So, you really have this sense that God continues to protect and to provide for them and even bring them to the land. They're like coming, kicking and screaming. They're complaining about leadership, they're complaining about water, and they're afraid to go in the land. They just say, "*no, no, no*,”. They're the ultimate or the paradigm rebellious kid.

The English book name *Numbers* likely comes from the *census* that they took. So, they were counting the people. Those are in chapters 1 and chapters 26. So, in chapter 1, they count the people of that *first generation*, basically the male military figures. So, anyone who was eligible to fight, they count those there. In chapter 26, they count the *second generation*. Those that have come up and raised in the wilderness.

In terms of the *theme*, the *divine presence* that we're tracing through these books, the book of Exodus laid the foundation for the *theme* of *divine presence*, especially as it relates to *God's name, God's presence over the Red Sea, God's presence on Sinai*, and G*od's presence in the tabernacle.* Even the 70 elders got to go up and see God's feet and eat with Him in the middle part of the book. The book of Leviticus provides the *system* that allows for a *holy* God to dwell among an *unholy* people. So *priestly mediation*, and a *sacrificial system*.

The Book of Numbers sets forth, the *consequences* *for living in God's presence*, *without faith in God's provision and obedience, to the terms of the covenant*. Failure to enter into God's rest and death in the wilderness are the result of their disobedience.

In terms of *genre* like Exodus and Leviticus, Numbers continues the *theological history* of the wanderings in the wilderness, in combination with some *law* and *legal* material. There's going to be some interesting stuff here. Some battles, some rebellions, some grumbling, that kind of thing. Now let's look further about some of the content that occur under these headings.

In the *first section*, preparing for the journey of Sinai in chapters 1-10, we have the *census* *of the men of war*. We'll note that the largest number in terms of *census* was the *Tribe of Judah* at 603,550 fighting men. Over half a million from the *Tribe of Judah*.

Again, the highlighting of *Judah* began all the way back in Genesis 49, with the *blessing of Jacob*. It's going to continue in *Deuteronomy* with some other things as well, and then it's also going to continue in the Davidic line, in the *Book of Judges*, and then throughout.

We've also got the *separation* of the Levites from the congregation, and the *purity* of the camp established so they can move out. That's what happens. So, it's the *census*, it's the *separation* *of Levites*, and then the *concern for the period of the camp* in that section.

**B. Sinai to Kadesh** (07:21):

In *section 2*, the *first journey*, this is from *Sinai to Kadesh*, God provides *quail* for a hungry people. They're tired of the *manna*, so they eat *quail* until they get sick. Then there's the *sending out of the 12 spies* for them to see the land. They come back and they bring a very favorable report about the condition of the land.

Yes. You know, *there are houses we have not built, and vineyards we have not grown, and great things there, but the people are huge. We're like grasshoppers in their presence. There's no way we can conquer them*. Then it starts a *rebellion*, and the Lord gets very mad, and it's contrasted with Joshua and Caleb who bring back a positive report saying, "*Yes they're bigger than us, but the Lord's with us, we can do this*."

Those were men of faith. They knew that what they saw with their eyes wasn't necessarily what was really the reality behind the matter. The *invisible realm* was more real than the *visible realm* to them. Then we have the *rebellion* *of the people*, the *40 years of wandering*, and more *rebellion*, and then it climaxes is with *Moses' failure at Meribah*.

We touched on that programmatic text in Exodus, and it's a *doublet* of that. It's not the same one, but it's a different one. Miriam dies here, Moses dies, so sorry. It's actually really interesting as bracketed by the death of Miriam, then you've got the waters of Meribah again, and then you've got the death of Aaron at the end of that. So, it's really not only is it the end of that *first generation*, but it's an end to that *first generation* *of leadership* too. So, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Moses, knowing that he won't get into the *promised land*.

Here's the account of *Meribah*. Numbers 20:2ff*:*

*Now there was no water for the congregation. They assembled themselves together against Moses and Aaron, and the people quarreled with Moses and said,* [see, that's what the same word quarreled is, they entered into a lawsuit with Moses, right, and said], *"Would that we have perished when our brothers perished before the Lord, why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness that we should die here, both we and our cattle?*"

It's an exact *restatement* of Exodus, they haven't learned a thing in a year's time.

"*And why have you made us come out of Egypt to bring us up to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates. There is no water to drink*."

Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the *assembly*, to the entrance of the *Tent of Meeting*, and fell on their faces. And the *glory of the Lord* appeared to them. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, "*Take the staff, assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water*" or *to give its water*. So, to speak to the rock.

"*So, you shall bring water out from the rock for them and give a drink to the congregation and their cattle*." And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he had commanded him. [Now, here we go]. Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "*Hear now you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock*?" And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, or a second time, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank and their livestock as well.

And then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "*Because you did not believe in Me to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you should not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them*." These are the *waters of Meribah* where the people of Israel *quarreled* with the Lord, and through them, He showed Himself *holy*.

Okay. Now I want to concentrate on a couple of things. One is that the actions here are slightly different than Exodus 17. They're *quarreling* for lack of water, and so they're impugning the *divine presence* again, and they're questioning His *holiness*.

What is *holiness*? That's an important thing to think about. We normally think of *holiness* as moral purity. Wouldn't you say that's the general concept? *Be holy as I am holy*; moral purity. But I want you to understand this; *moral purity* is the *fruit of holiness*. It's not *holiness* itself. *Holiness* is *consecration*. That is being 100% devoted to something. So, if I'm going to be *holy* in my marriage, I'm going to be 100%, not 99%, not 98%, but 100% devoted to my wife.

What that does is it *promotes moral purity* in the marriage. If you're 100% *consecrated*, that kind of thing. This is why the Lord can call the ground *holy*. It's not that it's morally pure. It's 100% *set apart* for Him to stand on.

So, this comes from a guy named Peter Gentry, the same author of *Dominion and Dynasty* who's done a lot of work on this. I think it's very good where he talks about *holiness* is not being *set apart from*, but it's being *set apart too*. It means you're subsequently *set apart from* other things. I'll use the illustration of marriage again, since *holiness* is a major *theme* we have been talking about.

In my *holiness* in marriage, I'm not set apart *from* my wife, I'm set apart *to* her. For that reason, I'm cut off from other women. The first thing is the *consecration*. The second thing is the *result* of *that* *consecration*. Somehow, we got it switched and it was like a word study fallacy that went on and got perpetuated. Somehow it just became an issue of *moral purity*.

So, in Isaiah 6, when the angels are declaring the seraphim, *Holy, Holy, Holy,* they're saying He's *devoted, devoted, devoted* to His people 100% and they're idolaters, which is the opposite of *holiness*, because they're not completely devoted to the Lord. So, remember that. He's saying, because you did not believe in me to uphold me as *holy* in the eyes of the people, that is, 100% committed to them.

It meant that Moses just had to go out and to speak to the rock, and God would say, "*I'm committed to you, here's some water*." But Moses went out and it appears in anger and struck the rock *twice*, or *a second time* saying that there needed to be judgment again. But no, that's not the case. Then it says at the very end, "*though He showed himself holy to people*." God didn't show Himself *morally pure* to the people He showed Himself *completely committed* to their needs. So that's a huge paradigm shift. I was slapped in the face when I got that, because the tradition in which I grew up in to be *holy* is to be *morally pure*, but God is not asking you to be that because you can't, against a crushing weight, but you can be *totally devoted* to him.

In that way, *holiness* comes through *sanctification*. You know, that moral, the moral, I'll call it not *holiness*, the *moral transformation* comes in the process of *sanctification*. So that's an important text because it comes up several times like Moses begs the Lord earlier and in the beginning of Deuteronomy, begs him, the Lord says *back off*, right? *Don't ask me about it again*. At the end of Deuteronomy says, *Hey guys, I'm not getting here because of you*. He's really, he's really mad about this for the whole time He's miffed, and so it's a serious little thing.

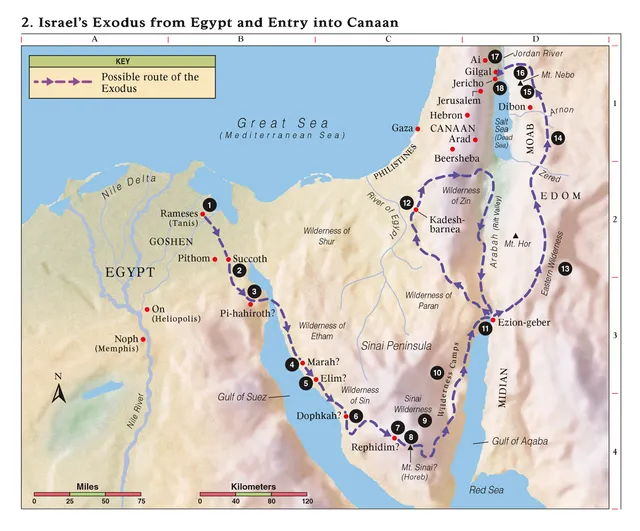
**C. Kadesh to Moab** (14:49):

Then we get to this next section, the journey from *Kadesh to Moab*, and the *Plains of Moab*, where Aaron dies. There's the *bronze serpent*, where the people are afflicted and snakes are biting them because of their disobedience. The *defeat of Sihon and Og*, and then *Balak King of Moab* who is hiring *Balaam* to curse Israel. So that's the *Balaam incident* and the world-famous talking donkey. A great thing.

Which is funny because at the beginning, in Genesis 3, we have a talking snake, and hear more towards, we have a talking donkey. I like the illustrations there.

**D. Preparing to enter the Promised Land** (15:44):

Then the very last part in Numbers 26-36, we have the *second census* of the men in war. There are 601,730. Again, the largest tribe is *Judah*. So, the Lord is *prospering* Judah. Joshua is chosen to succeed Moses. Then there're more *rules on offerings* *and feasts, war against Midian,* the Trans-Jordanian tribes. Then Reuben, Gad, and the half Tribe of Manasseh occupy their Trans-Jordanian territory. I'll draw this crude picture here of Sea of Galilee, Jordan River, Dead Sea, the Mediterranean Ocean over here, Egypt down here.





The 12 tribes occupy this area over here. All the way down, down, down. Then part of the area over here, there's Edom and Moab down here. Then there are some Amorites up here. These are called Trans-Jordanian tribes because this is Jordan, they're on the other side of the Jordan. So, it's [inaudible 00:16:46] and the half Tribe of Manasseh are going to be over there. You'll see in the Book of Judges, there's going to be some hostility and fighting back and forth. Lots of things happen at the fords of the Jordan. It becomes important at that particular place.

Also, here we have in this particular section that there are *cities designated for Levites to live in*, and there are *cities of refuge*. Why do Levites need cities? Levites needs cities because they do not have an *inheritance of land* in this section at all.

It means if you look at a map and I have a map that we’ll look at tomorrow, when we talk about Joshua, Judges, and the conquest, you'll see that there's *no allotment* to Levi. That's what it means that Levi has *no inheritance*, but there are still 12 tribes. So, Levi's *allotment* is the Lord. His *portion* is the Lord and he gets special clothes. We've mentioned that. So, Levi's *inheritance* is the Lord himself, clothes to handle that, to simplify that. The Lord takes care of their salary. The Lord takes care of their provisioning through the sacrificial system, the ties, and the offerings. The reason we still have 12 tribes is because we don't have a tribe of Joseph either. We have a tribe of Ephraim and Manasseh, but Ephraim and Manasseh are not one of the original 12 patriarchs.

*Ephraim* and *Manasseh* are Joseph's two sons that Jacob adopts by putting them on his knees, and then the switch blessing, and we get how it works. It comes back to haunt him. Joseph was not the oldest. But he got the first-born blessing, and now his two sons, it works out the same way. He's saying, *wait, dad, wait*. He goes, *I know what I'm doing*.

So even though he is older, that's how that works out. So that's how we still have 12 tribes, but no tribe for Levi, no allotment for Levi. The Levitical cities are scattered around, and then the Levites would come at the age of 30 once every 3 months to serve in the tabernacle, and then they go back for the other 9 months to farm and to do all their stuff they did to make their own living.

A Levite will play a big role at the end of Judges to Levi and his concubine, and stuff like that. And then finally, *cities of refuge*. These are cities designated by God that when there was a case of *manslaughter*, that is the accidental killing of someone. Let's say, you're out chopping wood together, your Axe handle flew off, clunked the guy right in the head, and he died, it's not intentional. That guy could run to one of these *cities of refuge*, where the avenger of blood, the next-of-kin relative couldn't come and get him. Then you would have to stay there until the high priest died, and there was a change of the high priesthood. That was just a way of not spilling innocent blood in the land, even though there'd be hostilities. It was a place that God provided. So, *cities for Levites*, so they could be provided for. *Cities of refuge*, so manslaughter victims could have a place of refuge and escape, and not experience an unintentional death like that.

**III. Numbers 13-14** (19:43):

Let’s look at the specific issues in Numbers 13-14. That's where the 12 spies spend 40 days in the land, and so let me just summarize some of that for you. The *wilderness* experience was designed as a period of *testing* like Adam in the garden and Jesus in the *wilderness*, after his *baptism*. Listen to Deuteronomy 8:2, "*and you shall remember the whole way that Lord, your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness, that He might humble you. Testing you to know what's in your heart, whether you would keep His commands or not*." That's what the *wilderness* period is.

Well, Joshua and Caleb report, and Joshua, the son of Nun, and Caleb, the son of Josephine, were among those who had spied out the land. They tore their clothes at the hearing of the 10 spies report and said to all the congregation of people, "*The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, He will bring us into the land and give it to us. A land flowing with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord and do not fear the people of the land for they are bred for us. Their protection is removed from them. And Lord is with us, do not fear them*."

So, notice that his confidence in the *divine presence*, *The Lord is with us*, they don't have to fear them. So that's, again, another continuing *theme of the* *divine presence* is so important. So, here's the Lord's *judgment* in 14:21*ff*, "*But truly, as I live says the Lord, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, none of these men who have seen my glory and my signs I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these 10 times and have not obeyed my voice. None of them should shall see the land that I support to give to their fathers. And none of those who despise me shall see it*."

14:33*ff*, "*And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness 40 years and shall suffer for your faithlessness until the last of your dead bodies lie in the wilderness. According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land. 40 days. A Year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity 40 years and you shall know my displeasure*."

Then we already talked about the fact that Moses and Aaron are precluded from entering the *Promised Land* for similar disobedience. The book of Numbers as the *gospel promised beforehand*, so let's wrap this up. Remember the Book of Numbers, we’ve got people, Israel wandering in the wilderness as an *unfaithful son* that’s disobedient to the Lord.

**IV. The Gospel Promised Beforehand** (22:17):

But *Jesus is the* *true and better Israel* who passed through the test in the wilderness 40 days and 40 nights without food and water. Israel had manna, quail and water from a rock and failed to obey. They saw all of God's great signs and wonders and failed to obey. They were the ones who marched through the Red Sea, and saw Pharaoh's entire army drown before their eyes, while they didn't lift one bow, one arrow, one sword, or ride one chariot.

They were completely defenseless except they had the Lord who was the warrior, and He fought for them. They had total provision and couldn't believe. Jesus had no provision and was faithful. The presence of God is no longer smoke and fire on and above the *tabernacle*. Now it is the *presence of the holy spirit* in each and every *believer*. After Pentecost with the saint of the spirit, every individual believer is *a mini tabernacle wandering in the wilderness*.

1 Corinthians 6:19. "*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy spirit within you? Whom you have from God, you are not your own.”*

**VII. Conclusion** (23:51):

And so we are, in some sense, at this point, *we* are the *true and better tabernacle* because the work that Jesus has done, and we live very much like in a time, similar to Israel's *wilderness wanderings*. We live in a time like Abraham, between *promise* and *fulfillment*. God said, *I'm going to give you this land. You're going occupy it and be fruitful, multiply,* but he never was given a piece of it. So, he lived between *promise* and *fulfillment*, wandering, believing, and hoping. Israel had this *promise*. They were *wandering, wandering, wandering*, but they haven't had it *fulfilled* yet. We lived very much like that. We live in the times of Abraham and the *wilderness*. We do not live in the time of the occupation of the *land*. That's a Revelation 21-22 reality. So right now, we are, it's the same trying to think about, *we are the wandering Tabernacles of God's presence in the wilderness of this world*. It's a great way to think about life.

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| **Numbers, Book of** |

Numbers supplies the fourth book of the Pentateuch, traditionally attributed to Moses (hence the common name, Fourth Book of Moses). The association with Moses places the book’s events in the late second millennium BC, and the putative first audience would be the generation of Israel that followed Joshua across the Jordan River. Each subsequent audience should then see themselves as the heirs of this first audience.

**Essential Features of the Book of Numbers**

***Composition.*** The question of how Numbers came to be composed is part of the larger question of how the Pentateuch came to be written and ascribed to Moses. A full review is not possible here, but several remarks are appropriate. First, the theories about the history of composition are driven by perceived tensions and contradictions, which lead to the conclusion that potentially disparate sources were put together with varying levels of success at smoothing (see, e.g., Friedman). If a sympathetic literary approach could show that the perceived tensions are actually compatible with a coherent reading, these tensions lose value as evidence for the composition process. Such literary approaches need not lead to a traditional position: for example, Roger Whybray argues for a single author, probably in the sixth century BC (the time of the Babylonian exile). Second, many of the reconstructed histories of composition point to features of the text that might seem more at home in an era much later than that of Moses, perhaps even as late as the exilic or postexilic eras. If, however, the material fits better with the period preceding Rehoboam’s rule, then that also limits the role of a long process of composition. (For more discussion, see Wenham, *Exploring*, 159–85; Vogt, 130–36.) Third, the presentation in Ezra 3:2; 7:6, 10; Neh. 8:1–8 (to name no others) implies that the Torah is a known entity, and that Ezra is to expound and enforce something that already exists, rather than to create something new. The role of the Torah as canon means that it was to be read aloud in the regular worship gatherings of Israel and Judah, and this usage suggests that genuine inconsistencies are unlikely, and also that its authority is unlikely to be arbitrary (for a sociological defense of invoking the canon, see C. J. Collins, *Reading*, 201–4*)*.

In any case, there is no disputing that Jews in the Second Temple era, as well as the early Christians, read Numbers as part of a coherent Pentateuch that originated from Moses, and that their use of the book reflects that reading.

***Structure and message.*** Numbers in its present form serves as a portion of the Pentateuch, and any discussion of structure and message must start there. The name “*Pentateuch*” reflects the traditional division of the Torah into five books. Nevertheless, this division may obscure the connection between the books—namely, the *narrative flow* of the Pentateuch:

1. (Genesis) Backstory: creation, fall, Abraham’s family winds up in Egypt

2. (Exodus–Numbers) Journey from Egypt to the border of Canaan

Exodus: From Egypt to Sinai

Leviticus: Encamped at Sinai

Numbers: From Sinai to the Jordan River

3. (Deuteronomy) Exhortation: before crossing the Jordan River

The connection between Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers is so strong that Hendrik Koorevaar has argued that we should treat them as one book. On the other hand, there are clear boundaries at the *beginning* and *close* of each book—but Koorevaar’s point helps to manage some of the perceived difficulties of Numbers. The *differing components* of the books also serve to distinguish them. The author (or compiler) has inserted into his accounts of events in Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers the *laws* that will govern Israel’s corporate life, but in *differing proportions*: in Leviticus the *laws* dominate, in Exodus they are a major feature, and in Numbers they figure largely but not overwhelmingly. Genesis has very little of these laws, though a number of its events do explain the place of certain Israelite practices, and it offers the historical justification for Israel’s claim to the land. Deuteronomy is largely *sermonic* in form, consisting of addresses preached by Moses to all Israel just before his death and not long before the conquest of the land under the leadership of Joshua. Its flavor is *motivational*, urging Israel’s faithful and heartfelt obedience to the covenant laws given during the previous forty years; its *theology* is focused on convincing Israel to trust and obey, and to conquer the land.

The two most common outlines for the book follow either the *geography* or the *chronology*. The *geographical outline* observes the role of *travel*:

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| --- | --- |
| **Text** | **Contents** |
| 1:1–10:10 | Preparing to depart Sinai |
| 10:11–25:18 | Departing Sinai for the promised land, traveling |
| 26–36 | Preparing to enter from the plains of Moab |

The *chronological outline* makes the two *census-takings* the key structuring device (see Olson, 5–6; Sakenfeld, 8–11):

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| --- | --- |
| **Text** | **Contents** |
| 1–25 | The old generation of rebellion |
| 26–36 | The new generation of hope |

This *chronological* approach finds the first section, dealing with the generation that left Egypt, to be largely pessimistic about their faith and loyalty (they do, after all, rebel at the report of the ten scouts [chaps. 13–14]). Their children’s generation is the focus of the second section, and “*new life and hope, not rebellion and death, characterize this new generation’s story*” (Olson, 5).

Certainly, the two *census-takings* (or military numberings) are key structural features, serving as key events in the overarching narrative of the Pentateuch. Further, the *itinerary* in Num. 33 recaps the Egypt-to-plains-of-Moab narrative from the perspective of locations. It is therefore simpler to say that the *demands of the narrative* provide the principle that explains the contents and organization that we find in Numbers. This principle also explains the sound insights of the *geographical approach* to structure; that structure derives from the *itinerary*, as the *chronological approach* does. The *geographical approach* captures better the nature of the *narrative* in the book.

The *main action* in 1:1–10:10 is predominately *instructions*, with the leading event being God speaking. Then in 10:11, *movement* gets under way. Then in 26:1 the action is again largely *divine speech*, delivering instructions (which begin with a *census*, as in chap. 1).

Within this *narrative framework*, the rebellion in Num. 14 is a decisive *turning point*, involving God’s refusal to allow any members of the first generation (besides Joshua and Caleb) to enter the land, and his sentence that they must remain in the desert until that generation has all died out (another thirty-eight years). At the same time, because God heeds Moses’s appeal on behalf of the people (14:19), he sustains Israel’s existence and reaffirms his commitment to bless the world through them (14:20–21). The ten unfaithful scouts die immediately, but the majority of Israel remains alive to manage their families and flocks during the desert sojourn (14:37). Hence, while the overall evidence tells against Dennis Olson’s structure for the book, many of his literary observations merit careful consideration. For example, this may be one reason why so few incidents from the additional thirty-eight years are recounted in Num. 15–20: the ratio of *narration time* to *elapsed time* drops off precipitously. Perhaps, then, the main thing to say about this period (other than the reaffirmation of the Aaronic priesthood [chaps. 16–17]) is that the generation died off. The narrator returns to recounting more details, with a higher *narration-time* to *elapsed-time* ratio, in 20:1, as the desert sojourn is ending.

**Hermeneutics of Numbers**

Numbers assumes the events and instructions of Genesis–Leviticus, and this can create problems in that it sometimes seems to offer different prescriptions for the sacrifices. Since the *primary use* of the Pentateuch is for *public reading* and *exposition*, it is unlikely that a flat contradiction will be the best explanation for these differences. For example, Num. 15:1–31 specifies *grain* and *drink offerings* that are supplements to the sacrifices; Lev. 1–7 does not include them. Although Jacob Milgrom (118) suggests that this difference reflects a development from the wilderness to a more agricultural setting, it is simpler to suppose that the Numbers texts elaborate those in Leviticus. Deuteronomy takes for granted the basic story line of Numbers, with some amplifications and slightly differing emphases in places. For example, Deut. 2:5 adds to Num. 20:14–21 the divine command to Israel not to contend with Edom; Numbers makes no mention of a similar command concerning Moab (Deut. 2:9).

Other texts in the Hebrew Bible cite the events in Numbers as facts with enormous significance. For example, the Transjordan tribes must fulfill their pledge and are praised for doing so (Num. 32:16–27; Josh. 1:12–18; 22:1–9). Caleb reminds Joshua of the special role the two men have as the faithful spies (Num. 14:24, 30; Josh. 14:6–15). Joshua obeys the requirement to allocate the land fairly (Num. 34:17–18; Josh. 14:1), and to set aside Levitical cities, including cities of refuge (Num. 35:1–8; Josh. 20–21; cf. also 1 Chron. 6:54–81). The cities of refuge find no further explicit mention in the rest of the canon (although such cities as Hebron and Shechem do figure in). Several passages in Psalms also reflect on the events in Numbers: for example, Pss. 78:15–16 and 95:8 link the water episodes (Exod. 17:6–7; Num. 20:10–13) as standard instances of both the people’s unbelief and God’s provision. Psalm 78:25–31 recalls God’s sending of quail to supplement the manna (Num. 11:4–35): there must be something wrong with people who dislike that kind of food! Doubtless the suggestion of the cravers that the conditions were better in Egypt supports the psalm—their craving for something other than what God has provided will lead back to slavery by glamorizing the hideous conditions of their servitude. Psalm 95:10 recalls the forty years of discipline that Numbers recounts; and Ps. 106:24–33 remembers several episodes, such as the rebellion and its sentence (14:26–35), the incident with the Baal of Peor (25:1–15), and the water conflict at Meribah, which turned out poorly for Moses (20:1–13). The psalms repeatedly mention the rebellion and its punishment, together with the water conflicts, because their lessons about the dire consequences of unfaithfulness are worth hammering home.

**Numbers in the NT**

NT authors draw on Numbers in several modes: they accept its story of Israel’s journey from Sinai to the Jordan River and refer to episodes in that story (generally for analogical purposes); they use terms and concepts influenced by Numbers; they build on the messianic ideas found here and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible; and they cite or allude to particular texts in the course of their arguments, some of which require their own treatment.

***Story.*** In 1 Cor. 10:1–11 Paul lists a series of things that happened “*as examples*” (v. 6, *typoi*; v. 11, *typikōs*), and the series includes several incidents from Numbers:

• “*the Rock*” (1 Cor. 10:4; cf. Num. 20:7–11)

• “*overthrown in the wilderness*” (1 Cor. 10:5 ESV; cf. Num. 14:16, 29, 37)

• “*desire evil*” (1 Cor. 10:6 ESV; cf. Num. 11:4; Pss. 78:24–31; 106:14–15)

• “*sexual immorality*,” “*twenty-three thousand fell*” (1 Cor. 10:8; cf. Num. 25:1, 9)

• “*snakes*” (1 Cor. 10:9; cf. Num. 21:6–9)

• “*grumble*” (1 Cor. 10:10; cf. Num. 14:2)

Generally, these citations follow the way the Hebrew Bible has already referred to the incidents. This survey will add a few remarks to that discussion above and note some further examples.

The *narrative of Eldad and Medad* (11:26–29) provides the template for reporting an incident in the Gospels, in which Jesus must caution his disciples against narrowness as well (Mark 9:38–40; Luke 9:49–50, both of which use the same verb “*stop*” as in the LXX of Num. 11:28 [*kōlyō*]).

An incident of high prominence for NT writers is the *report of the ten unfaithful spies*, and the penalties that derived from it (Num. 14:29, 32). For Israel, the enduring message was to be sure that they, and those who lead their corporate life, are seeking genuine faithfulness (as Pss. 78; 95; 106 insist). The crucial distinction is between *membership* in the people, and *actual belief* in the Lord’s promises (Num. 14:11). NT writers invoke the same principle in admonishing their young congregations: Paul warns his audience in Corinth not to imitate the example of the unbelieving (1 Cor. 10:5, 10, echoing Num. 14:2, 16 LXX). Hebrews similarly cautions its Jewish Christian readers to hold fast to their faith, likening their potential apostasy to the unbelief of that generation of Israel (Heb. 3:16–19; see also Jude 5). In traditional theological terms, this relates to the distinction between the *sign* and the *thing signified*: the *sign* should foster true faith and faithfulness, but one may have the *sign* and, tragically, lack the *signified*.

Another event is the *rebellion led by Korah*. The *second census* mentions this rebellion as a significant event, noting under its entry for the families descended from Reuben that the Reubenites Dathan and Abiram allied themselves with the Levite Korah (Num. 26:9–11). Some have inferred from the way that other texts mention the incident, that two originally discrete rebellions have been combined here (e.g., Milgrom, 415), but the evidence does not support this inference. For example, Deut. 11:6; Ps. 106:17 mention only Dathan and Abiram; but Ps. 106:18 goes on to refer to fire and their “company” (ʿ*ēdâ*, cf. Num. 16:5), which points to Korah’s group as well. Logically, the nonmention of something is not the same as its denial; and the rhetorical purpose of Deut. 11:6 in context is more strengthened by reference to Dathan and Abiram’s complaint and disposal than to Korah’s. Ben Sira’s account (Sir. 45:18) mentions all three. The NT refers only to Korah (Jude 11). Generally, these treat the incident as a noteworthy rebellion; the punishment on the rebels should serve as a warning against carrying out anything even remotely like it. Psalm 106 also celebrates God’s persistent devotion to preserving Israel as a people.

It is possible that in 1 Cor. 10:4 Paul alludes to the water conflict at Meribah (Num. 20:2–13), perhaps with the earlier water conflict mixed in (Exod. 17:1–7): “*They drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ*” (1 Cor. 10:4 ESV). The Greek term “*rock*” (*petra*) occurs in the LXX of both incidents (Exod. 17:6, and cf. Ps. 104:41 [ET 105:41]; Num. 20:8, 10, 11). By Paul’s placement (right after exodus and manna, 1 Cor. 10:3) the earlier account is more likely, but the additional “*followed them*” might suggest that there is some sense in which both rocks are in view. Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner (724) document the rabbinic notion that the same rock accompanied Israel in the wilderness, but it is not certain that such a “*legend*” was available in the time of Paul (see the cautious conclusions in Thiselton, 727–30). For our purposes, we can simply note that *if* Paul alludes to a “*legend*” of some sort, that does not imply that he *believed* it as historical, any more than my referring to Paul Bunyan in an argument would imply I believe the legends about him. Paul’s point is that the Corinthian Christians are in danger of committing an analogous kind of rebellion against the gracious Savior in their disrespect toward Paul.

As for Num. 21:4–9, perhaps the best-known allusion is Jesus’s likening of his own being “*lifted up*” (*hypsōthēnai*) to Moses’s “*lifting up*” of the serpent in the wilderness; the point of similarity is the benefit that comes to the one who would look with faith (John 3:14–15; cf. Wis. 16:7, 12). Although the Greek verb “*lift up*” does not appear in the LXX of our passage, Jesus’s statement is a fair paraphrase for what Moses is to do (“*set it on a pole*,” Num. 21:8–9 ESV) and fits well with the Johannine theme of Jesus anticipating his manner of death (John 3:14; 8:26; 12:32, 34), in which the humiliation of the cross is actually an exaltation.

Numbers presents Balaam as a complex person (Num. 22–24; 31:8, 16); he can sound very obedient to God, but ultimately that is undone by his advice to Balak. The further reflections on Balaam in the Hebrew Bible focus on him as the thwarted agent of Balak (Deut. 23:3–4; Josh. 24:9–10; Mic. 6:5; Neh. 13:2), or else as the sinister sorcerer and adviser of corruption (Num. 31:16; Josh. 13:22). NT authors tend to use the latter side (2 Pet. 2:15–16; Jude 11; Rev. 2:14). Mainstream Judaism likewise came to focus on the sinister side of Balaam, calling him “*Balaam the wicked*” and contrasting his disciples with those of Abraham (m. Avot 5:19). Josephus (*Ant.* 4.102–30), by contrast, allows more of Balaam’s complexity to show through. (For a helpful survey, see Savelle.) Authors will emphasize one aspect or the other in light of their particular rhetorical goals; to stress one does not of itself deny the other. To set these two aspects over against each other, as Baruch Levine (2:154) seems to do, is to miss this basic point.

***Concepts and terms.*** The Nazirite institution (Num. 6:1–21) is treated as known in the NT: John the Baptist is apparently to be a Nazirite from before birth (Luke 1:15), and Paul both took a Nazirite vow and sponsored several Jewish Christians who had taken such vows (Acts 18:18; 21:26). There are apparently two types of Nazirites: those who voluntarily become Nazirites by virtue of a “*special vow*” (usually for a limited stretch of time), and those who are dedicated before birth. The instructions in Numbers deal only with the former, but both appear in the biblical narratives. When the angel of the Lord announces to Manoah’s childless wife that she will bear a son, he explicitly says that the child will be “*a Nazirite to God from the womb*”; not only shall no razor come upon his head, but the mother is to “*drink no wine or intoxicating drink, and eat nothing unclean*” (Judg. 13:3–5 ESV). There are slight differences from the expectations outlined in the law: in Num. 6:5 “*no razor* [*ta*ʿ*ar*] *shall pass over* [*‘ābar*] *his head*,” while in Judg. 13:5 “*no razor* [*môrâ*] *shall go up* [*ʿālâ*] *on his head*”; the *mother* is forbidden wine and other intoxicants, with nothing said about Samson’s practices; nor is there an exclusion of all grape products, nor any mention of uncleanness due to contact with a corpse. The birth of Samuel is preceded by his mother’s vow that she will give him to the Lord all the days of his life and “*no razor shall go up on his head*” (1 Sam. 1:11 AT, as in Judg. 13:5). The LXX adds that he shall drink neither wine nor intoxicating drinks. Samuel, therefore, probably fits in the same category of Nazirite from before birth: that is how some rabbis cited in the Mishnah (m. Naz. 9:5) interpret his calling, as does Sir. 46:12 (in Hebrew, not in Greek; see further Chepey).

John the Baptist presents a similar case (Luke 1:13–17): the angel declares that he is appointed for a special calling, and that “*he must not drink wine or strong drink*” (v. 15 ESV), the Greek being very close to the LXX of 1 Sam. 1:11 and Judg. 13:4, 7, 14, and reminiscent as well of Num. 6:3.

The “*voluntary*” Nazirites appear in 1 Macc. 3:49 as *“Nazirites who had completed their days*” (cf. Num. 6:5, 13). It seems likely that Paul had also taken such a vow, after which he “*shaved his head*” (Acts 18:18 AT), although he did this “*at Cenchreae*” and not at Jerusalem (perhaps because his period was over, consistent with Num. 6:18). (In Numbers LXX the word for “*shave*” is *xyraō*, while in Acts 18:18 the word is *keirō*; but the reference to a “*vow*” in Acts, as well as the parallelism between *xyraō* and *keirō* in Mic. 1:16 LXX points to this being a Nazirite vow.) In Acts 21:23–26, Paul agrees to pay the expenses of men who “*have a vow … so that they may shave their heads*” (NASB). The Greek here echoes that of Num. 6:18, so the Nazirite vow is probably in view. Thus, some Jewish Christians continued to employ this institution, while there is little or no evidence that they applied it to gentiles—which also matches the way that m. Naz. 9:1 excludes gentiles (lit., “*worshipers of stars*”) from the institution. Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 2.23.5) records a story from Hegesippus (d. ca. 175–89) about James the brother of Jesus that makes him sound like a Nazirite from the womb (although Chepey, 174–77, discusses the problems with this account that make it hard to accept).

Numbers uses the notion of the divine Spirit resting upon someone and empowering that person for service (11:17, 25), which clarifies what the Spirit is doing on the first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2:3) and in subsequent “*gifts*” (1 Cor. 12:1).

Numbers uses the intuitive concept of sinning “*unintentionally*” (15:22–31). The LXX rendering *akousiōs* has as its opposite *hekousiōs*, which the NT uses to designate not simply a willful sin but one that repudiates divine lordship. The author of Hebrews warns his Jewish Christian audience that they run the risk of committing the equivalent of the high-handed sin, for which there is no effective sacrifice, should they drop away from their Christian faith in order to avoid the trouble that comes from their fellow Jews (Heb. 10:26). He uses the expression “go on sinning *deliberately*” (ESV; *hekousiōs* … *hamartanontōn*), where the Greek corresponds to the opposite of “unintentionally” (but here with the nuance “willfully” or “defiantly”). This author’s overall stance toward his audience mixes this genuine warning with a pastorally warm optimism (Heb. 10:19–25). The usage here resembles that of 2 Macc. 14:3, where the term carries not simply the nuance of “intentionally” but “defiantly” or “willfully.”

The Greek rendering for the “*tassels*” that devout Israelites were to wear (*sîṣît*, Num. 15:38) is *kraspedon*, properly “fringe.” Jesus wears such tassels (Matt. 9:20; 14:36; Mark 6:56; Luke 8:44), emblematic of his Jewish faithfulness, but he also condemns the ostentatious display of such scrupulosity (Matt. 23:5).

Hebrews 9:4 seems to suggest that “Aaron’s rod” (Num. 17:10 AT) was actually placed inside the ark, and not simply inside the most holy place. If that is so, then for it to fit (Exod. 25:10), it would need to be the length of a familiar walking stick, rather than a staff the height of a man.

The Christian term “*baptism*” has a background in Jewish ceremonial usage, where Sir. 34:30 (NETS) uses this word for washing after contact with a dead body (Num. 19:11–13; cf. also Ezek. 36:25, using the same Hebrew verb for the application of the water, *zrq*; see C. J. Collins, “Baptism,” 13). That shines light on the ceremonial function of baptism as presented in the NT, and why it can be the vehicle of a transition from death to life. Hence, Heb. 10:22 likely refers both to baptism and to Ezek. 36:25 (“clean/pure water”). The previous chapter (Heb. 9:13, 19) evokes the instructions from Num. 19 for cleansing in a straightforward fashion (see Num. 19:6, 9, 17).

Numbers has the first attestation of the expression “*sheep without a shepherd*” (27:17), which describes a body of people helpless and vulnerable for lack of a responsible leader. Such a leader, however, has more than a military function; he serves as a “*shepherd*,” which can be used for a civic leader but also suggests the importance of leading the people in carrying out their calling as a holy congregation (e.g., Ezek. 34:23). “*Sheep that have no shepherd*” became a common way to describe Israel without such consecrated leadership (1 Kings 22:17 ESV; cf. Ezek. 34:5; Zech. 10:2; Matt. 9:36 // Mark 6:34). The Hebrew of these texts varies a little, which indicates that the phraseology is not fixed. Further, the Greek renderings are likewise not identical, and the Gospels use the explicit verb *echō* (“have”) where the underlying Hebrew or Aramaic would use the dative (cf. Num. 27:17 MT and Peshitta for the Gospel texts). These other texts are therefore not “quotations” of Num. 27:17 as such; rather, they employ the same proverbial image.

***Messianic expectation.*** Many take Num. 24:17 (“A star will come out of Jacob”) as messianic, and this reading is common in the NT era (see J. J. Collins, *Scepter*, 71; Alter, 814; Wenham, *Numbers*, 179), and this may explain Jesus’s self-designation (Rev. 22:16). The earlier oracles of Balaam anticipate Israel’s eventual dominion over other nations, especially over those that opposed Israel (cf. 23:24; 24:8–9). This oracle takes the subject further, not only in listing some of the surrounding nations but also in referring to what seems like a particular person from Israel who will accomplish these things (24:17). This is highly consistent with earlier material that can be considered messianic, in the sense that it envisions an Israelite ruler (“scepter”) who will subdue the gentiles into his empire (e.g., Gen. 49:10; see further Alexander, *Genealogies*, and *Observations*). This oracle, however, stresses the victory over the adversaries and leaves the topic of bringing God’s light to them for other texts.

***Specific texts.*** A handful of particular texts cite or allude to phrases in Numbers in an incidental fashion, and in some cases call for special comment.

Numbers 9:12 contains the prohibition against breaking the bones of the Passover sacrifice (cf. Exod. 12:46), and similar wording also appears in Ps. 34:20. John 19:36 interprets the fact that the Roman soldiers did not finish Jesus off by breaking his bones to be the fulfillment of “the Scripture”: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” Psalm 33:21 LXX is quite close to the Greek in John, with its passive “be broken” (*syntribēsetai*); this would emphasize that Jesus died as a righteous sufferer, whom God would certainly vindicate. At the same time, the LXX of Exod. 12:46 is also quite close, with its singular “bone” (*ostoun*), in which case the Gospel writer portrays Jesus as the Passover lamb. For the argument that John has combined both themes in John 19:36, see Köstenberger (“John,” 503–4). The degree to which Passover imagery lies behind John’s presentation of Jesus is, however, controversial, since “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29) alludes to Jesus as the sin-bearing sacrifice using the Greek word for “lamb” found in places such as Isa. 53:7 (*amnos*) rather than the words found in Exod. 12:3–5 (*probaton* and *arēn*). The Passover is not an atoning sacrifice (see further C. J. Collins, “Eucharist,” 21–23).

Numbers 12:7 describes Moses as “faithful in all my house.” Hebrews 3:2, 5 use this phrase both to affirm Moses’s role as a faithful servant in God’s house and to identify Jesus as more than that—namely, the Son, who is also the builder of the house (3:3–6). To liken Jesus to the builder of the house, and then to note that the builder of all things is God, is consistent with this author’s application to Jesus of biblical passages about God (as in 1:10–12). Hebrews does not play down Moses in order to promote Jesus; rather, it stresses that Jesus is the one whom Moses faithfully served, so that its audience of Jewish Christians will continue to follow Jesus without fearing that they are abandoning Moses.

In Num. 15:35–36 Israel executes a transgressor “outside the camp.” The writer of Hebrews invites his readers to join Jesus in his place of reproach “outside the camp” (13:13), echoing the way the sentence on Jesus treated him (wrongly) as a blasphemer. Luke’s narration of Stephen’s death also echoes this theme (Acts 7:58).

Numbers 16:5 LXX reads, “The Lord knows those who are his.” The MT has “make known” (*wəyōda*ʿ), a *hiphil*. The LXX (*kai egnō*) apparently read it as a *qal wayyiqtol* (*wayyēda*ʿ) or perfect with simple *waw* (*wəyāda*ʿ). This Greek rendering appears in 2 Tim. 2:19, where the context invites Timothy to trust his ultimate vindication as a faithful teacher of the truth (as over against improper claimants) and therefore not to lose heart, which serves as an application of the ideas at work.

Numbers 25:9 presents us with “the missing thousand.” Paul warns the Corinthian Christians not to commit whoredom (*porneuō*), “as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day” (1 Cor. 10:8 ESV; cf. Num. 25:1 LXX: *ekporneuō*). Paul apparently sees the same principles at work governing the Christian community as governed the ancient Israelite one, but his mention of twenty-three thousand rather than twenty-four thousand in Num. 25:9 presents a difficulty. (A few NT manuscripts do read twenty-four thousand, but they may be ignored.) Possibly Paul thought that the plague lasted more than a day, with its casualties spread out over time. Josephus reports the number as “no fewer than fourteen thousand” (*Ant.* 4.155: *ouk elattous tetrakischiliōn kai myriōn*). Or, possibly, Paul somehow fetched the number from the census of the Levites (Num. 26:62), whether for unknown symbolic reasons, or from memory. However, Paul’s Greek is *eikosi treis chiliades*, which differs in format from the LXX of both Num. 25:9 (*tessares kai eikosi chiliades*) and 26:62 (*treis kai eikosi chiliades*), so neither Paul nor Josephus has offered a simple quotation from the LXX. It is also possible that these are both round numbers. For survey and analysis of the possibilities, see Anthony Thiselton (739–40). Thiselton helpfully observes, “It is worth noting that the patristic writers seem to be untroubled by this verse.” Rohintan Mody suggests that Paul has connected the three thousand who died in the golden-calf incident (Exod. 32:28) with the number that some Jewish interpreters infer have died by execution here; the result is probably too complicated for Paul to have expected his readers to understand it, but no simple solution has found favor. In any case, the Corinthian Christians (and all others) would do well, first, to refrain from congratulating themselves over their tolerance of what defiles the whole people (1 Cor. 5:6–8), and second, to be zealous for the better gifts, that they might build the body up in loyal service to the Lord (1 Cor. 12:31; 14:1, 12).

Numbers 33:55 warns that the Canaanites whom Israel allows to remain will be “barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides” (ESV). These are far more than mere annoyances; they serve as a picture of something that, if allowed free reign, will destroy any possibility of continued life (because they will induce Israel to violate what is sacred). Even though we cannot be sure just what plants supplied the barbs and thorns (*śikkîm* and *ṣənînim*), the image is clear when we consider the texts that echo this one (Josh. 23:13; Judg. 2:3; Ezek. 28:24), which include the pictures of a snare and a trap. Further, if the LXX can guide, the thorns are serious: the words *skolops* and *bolis* indicate something sharp and spikey, likened to a stake or a javelin. The canonical testimony is that this seduction is just what happens (cf. Ps. 106:34–39), which does eventually lead to drastic judgments on the people (cf. 2 Kings 17:7–19; 23:26–27, for the historian’s verdict on both Israel and Judah). Paul appropriates the image of the barbs and thorns, using the LXX rendering (*skolops*) for some experience of his, a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7). Specialists on Paul have debated just what he means by this expression: Is it a temptation or sin, or some illness or disability, or hardships and persecutions, or demonic attack, or something else? The arguments are involved, and Paul’s words do not enable those outside the original communication to identify his referent. Raymond Collins (239–40) wisely remarks, “In the end, it is impossible to know what Paul meant by this intriguing image. The Corinthians themselves may not have known the real meaning of the metaphor.” But, to the extent that Paul’s image is tied to the LXX usage, it denotes some kind of hindrance, whether to Paul’s health, or faithfulness, or ministry (or some combination).

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C. John Collins[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Numbers**

*Michael J. Glodo*

**Introduction**

The English title of the fourth book of Moses, Numbers (derived from the Septuagint ἀριθμοὶ [*arithmoi*] and echoed by the Vulgate *Numeri*), draws attention to its most prominent literary feature: *the two censuses that occur at the beginning and near the end of the book* (1:1–4:49; 26:1–65). This, perhaps more than any other feature in the Old Testament, suggests something less than excitement. Yet nothing could be further from the truth, for *these censuses mark preparations for war*. Even so, the drama of prospective war is surmounted by the more imminent conflict of *testing the relationship between God and his people*, meaning that Numbers would be among the leading candidates for drama among all the Old Testament books.

The Hebrew title, בְּמִדְבַּר (“in the wilderness,” 1:1), draws the reader’s attention to the setting of the book’s events, and just as setting is crucial to all great drama, the *wilderness setting* of Numbers provides the *context* in which this great drama occurs. In this setting, God’s people will have to rely utterly upon God’s provision and protection—for the wilderness is a place of barrenness and chaos. They will experience want in the form of *hunger* and *thirst*. They will experience *heat*, *cold*, and *weariness*. They will meet *hostility* from the likes of Arad, the Amorites, Bashan, and Moab. They will encounter *sedition* from within the congregation and even from the ranks of leadership in the persons of Korah, Aaron, and Miriam. And on the verge of the Promised Land, a tense inter-fraternal standoff will play out with the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and a portion of Manasseh. Will God be willing and able to keep the promise that he made to Abraham, their father, to bring them to the land? Will they be willing to trust in God alone to provide for them and to protect them in the wilderness and to give them victory over the inhabitants of the land—to be the “shield” and great “reward” promised to Abraham (Gen. 15:1)? Establishing a theme spanning the whole of Scripture, Numbers shows that the wilderness is a place of *testing* and *trials*, even as God tests Israel’s faithfulness and Israel tests his.

This drama began with great promise. After being redeemed from slavery in Egypt four hundred years after Jacob’s clan went down to the land of the Nile (Gen. 15:13), Israel moved from Mount Sinai toward the Land of Promise, a land occupied by the Canaanites with great cities “*fortified up to heaven*” (Deut. 1:28). God had acted powerfully, putting on display the powerlessness of Egypt’s gods before him (Ex. 12:12), yet his people had acted faithlessly by doubting God’s faithfulness and power (Ex. 16:1–17:7) and by worshiping other gods at the foot of Mount Sinai, even while the mountain was enshrouded in God’s glory (Ex. 32:1–10). Would that first generation trust the Lord by continuing to trust his servant Moses? Would God forebear with his people in order to vindicate his own power and promises (Num. 14:15) by bringing them into the land he had promised their father Abraham (Ex. 32:12–14)? This is the drama played out on the wilderness stage of Numbers. And while the first generation proved faithless and rebellious, God proved faithful in preserving his people in the wilderness and bringing the second generation to the “*verge of Jordan*” to land them “*safely on Canaan’s side*.” But it would not happen until after a trial of forty years in which the unbelieving exodus generation would fail to enter into the promise of God’s rest (see Psalm 95).

This drama introduces one of the most discussed and nuanced theological questions of the Christian faith. How can a redeemed people fall short of receiving God’s promises? What is the relationship of initial salvation to ultimate outcomes? These are not questions that can be relegated only to Numbers or to the inefficiency of the old covenant, because the New Testament writers themselves refer to the experiences of the exodus generation when they raise this same conundrum regarding the Christian life (1 Cor. 10:1–13; Heb. 3:7–4:13). Hence, neither in the Old Testament nor in the New does the covenant of grace preclude the challenge to “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*” (Phil. 2:12).

**Background Issues**

**Numbers and Higher Criticism**

Traditionally the book of Numbers was accepted, along with the Pentateuch as a whole, as the substantial product of Moses. But with the rise of the historical-critical method and source criticism, scholars increasingly regarded Numbers as predominantly the product of the hypothetical P (Priestly) source, given its prominent treatment of such subjects as the duties of the Levites and priests, the Tent of Meeting, the consecration of the tabernacle, Aaron’s authority, and numerous cultic provisions regarding such matters as ritual cleansing and sacrifices. How this source theory plays out in the details depends on the scholar. Critical scholars have debated whether P is exilic or postexilic, while a minority have argued for a preexilic origin that places P before D (Deuteronomist). Several view chapters 11–12 and 21–24 as the preexilic JE, that is, the integrated J (Yahwist) and E (Elohist) sources that, according to Budd, are now read largely as one; in this view, chapters 10; 13–14; 16; 20, and 25–32 are regarded as JE with Priestly-source influence. According to higher critics, the final form of Numbers with its Priestly redaction would place the historical origin of most of its material during or after the Babylonian exile and the final form of the book after the return.4

The details of these proposals and recent trends in biblical studies render this reconstruction less than convincing. For example, while a postexilic setting might be compatible with Numbers’ considerable attention to priestly concerns and virtual silence on the monarchy, the same is no less true of the actual historical situation in the book, which describes Israel as having full possession of the law of Sinai and the tabernacle with the monarchy yet over three centuries away. Israel in the wilderness was even less influenced by a monarchy than postexilic Israel.

In addition, the trend toward canonical interpretation raises new questions about the higher-critical approach. Critical scholars should account for how the literary approach of recent decades affects the foundational assumptions of higher criticism. In other words, critical scholars more and more take a synchronic approach to the text (i.e., looking at the present state of the text as a whole) without questioning their tradition’s diachronic analysis (i.e., attempting to reconstruct the development of the text). For example, Budd, like many scholars, affirms that “there remains a very wide measure of agreement as to the identity and extent of the priestly material (P),” attributing directly to P or the heavy influence of P all but chapters 11–12 and 21–24. But then he proceeds to analyze the book in such a way as to show greater coherence and purpose than that generally recognized by earlier source critics. This reflects a broader trend in recent scholarship that assumes the general results of source criticism but then, counterintuitively, sets about to demonstrate the coherence of the present form of the text.7

As Budd’s analysis shows, the shift in mainstream scholarship from a primarily diachronic to a primarily synchronic approach to the Old Testament has done little to cause critical scholars to question the philosophical and methodological foundations on which the Documentary Hypothesis developed. While the increasingly perceived coherence in the canonical form undermines the very criteria used to establish historical-critical conclusions, at best we find some who assume the higher-critical reconstructions as generally valid (often disagreeing widely on the details of said reconstructions) yet who, in spite of this, attempt to understand the text as it stands on its own terms.

Put simply, the more coherent the canonical form is seen to be under the new literary analysis, the more dubious the foundations of the higher-critical method become. This is what has been termed the problem of the “disappearing redactor.” Well-developed arguments have elsewhere defended the literary coherence of the Pentateuch as a whole, and these further strengthen the present approach of seeing Numbers as a work of literary integrity and skill.10

**Authorship**

Numbers bears witness to the writing activity of Moses (33:2). Further, Moses is described in Numbers as the recipient of the divine revelation that became part of the content of Numbers. On no less than forty-one occasions, Numbers reports the contents of divine speech to Moses with the phrase “*the Lord spoke to Moses*.”

There was an already-developing scribal class, or group of official historians, in the days of Moses. The instructions of Numbers 1:5, 16 describe the appointment of scribe-like record keepers long before the days of Ezra. Harrison notes that since the rise of higher criticism, archaeologists have discovered a considerable amount of written records in the ancient Near East dating from the era of Moses. Thus “*it is now possible to entertain a properly-accredited process of compilation by recognizing the intrinsic historical worth of the various records emerging from the wilderness period*” as opposed to the “*delineation of hypothetical literary sources as practiced by liberal scholars*.” With the rise of that class of persons responsible for the broad range of official writing activities, “*their function, under the supervision of Moses, was to assist in recording and administering judicial decisions*” (Num. 1:16–18; 5:23; 17:3; Deut. 16:18).

The rest of the Old Testament and the New Testament regard the Pentateuch as a whole, of which Numbers is an essential part, as the substantial product of Moses. Numbers is cited as part of “*the Book of Moses*” (Ezra 6:18). No other authorship tradition is known within Scripture or for the nearly three millennia of history leading up to the rise of higher criticism.

These references and conditions provide significant support for the traditional view that Numbers is the substantial product of Moses. Therefore, this treatment will proceed on the basis of Moses as the fundamental author. While there is evidence of a limited number of post-Mosaic additions or elaborations (e.g., Num. 12:3; 21:14–15; 32:34–42), none have any substantial effect on meaning.

Because the book of Numbers concludes with a reminder of its setting on the plains of Moab, it is intended to be read from that standpoint. While it might be said in more nuanced terms that account for continued scholarship since it was first written, Edward J. Young’s formulation remains sufficiently clear and relevant:

When we affirm that Moses wrote, or that he was the author of, the Pentateuch, we do not mean that he himself necessarily wrote every word. To insist upon this would be unreasonable. Hammurabi was the author of his famous code, but he certainly did not engrave it himself upon the stele. Our Lord was the author of the Sermon upon the Mount, but He did not write it Himself. Milton was the author of *Paradise Lost*, but he did not write it all out by hand.

The witness of sacred Scripture leads us to believe that Moses was the fundamental or real author of the Pentateuch. In composing it, he may indeed, as Astruc suggested, have employed parts of previously existing written documents. Also, under divine inspiration, there may have been later minor additions and even revisions. Substantially and essentially, however, it is the product of Moses. The position for which conservatives contend has been well expressed by [Robert Dick] Wilson: “That the Pentateuch as it stands is historical and from the time of Moses; and that Moses was its real author, though it may have been revised and edited by later redactors, the additions being just as much inspired and as true as the rest.”

**Date and Audience**

With the assumption, then, of fundamental Mosaic *authorship*, the *date* and *occasion* of Numbers are fairly concrete. Given the account of the passing of the first generation and the concluding setting on the plains of Moab, at its earliest Numbers would have been written to the second generation on the plains of Moab in anticipation of the conquest. “*Repeated references to Jericho suggest that the book may have been written very near the end of Moses’s life as Israel looked ahead to the conquest of the land*.” Given that Deuteronomy recounts these wilderness journeys in summary form, anticipates life in the land as yet future, and relates the death of Moses, Numbers would have been written prior to Deuteronomy. Therefore, we will treat the *original audience* as the second generation of Israel on the plains of Moab prior to the covenant renewal of Deuteronomy (Num. 22:1; 36:13).

**Structure and Outline**

Childs has observed that “*the book of Numbers has generally been regarded as the least unified composition within the Pentateuch*.” On the other hand, Budd argues that “*the book is by no means as disordered and incoherent as is sometimes claimed*.”19 One of the most prominent features of the book as a whole is the *censuses* that occur at the beginning and at a strategic point toward the end. These *censuses* mark the beginnings of the stories of both the *first* and *second generations*, but they also bracket off a narrative that has “*a certain unified progression which no critical analysis can destroy*.” Despite the book’s variety of genres (*narrative*, *prophecy*, *civil laws*, *cultic laws*, *oracles*), this variety, as Longman and Dillard note, occurs fundamentally “*within the broader contexts of narrative and law*.”21 Thus they categorize the book as “*instructional history writing*,” favoring Olson’s twofold outline of Numbers, which consists of “*the end of the old generation*” (Numbers 1–25) and the “*birth of the new*” (Numbers 26–36).

While scholars have yet to reach a consensus on a comprehensive structure of Numbers, Olson’s outline highlights a recognized two-phase progression marked by the three prominent locations of *Sinai*, *Kadesh*, and *Moab*. These two phases between the three stops exhibit extensive parallels between the first and second generations but with dramatically different responses and outcomes.

The story begins with Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai thirteen months after the exodus from Egypt (1:1). This location provides not only *geographical* and *chronological* context but also *literary* continuity with Leviticus, for in Leviticus the nation was given the means by which they could be a holy people (Lev. 11:45), such that God could fulfill his promise to dwell in their midst (Ex. 25:8).

Numbers goes on to unfold in three major stages (it is helpful to split the first-generation phase in Olson’s outline into two stages): *the census and preparation of the first generation at Sinai* (1:1–10:10); *the first generation’s march to Canaan, the bad report of the land’s inhabitants, and the failed invasion* (10:11–25:18); *and the census and preparation of the second generation to enter the land* (26:1–36:13). When the military significance of the censuses and the numerous requirements for consecration and holiness are perceived, the shadow of holy war is cast over the whole book. In that light, Numbers may be outlined as follows:

I. Consecration of the First-Generation Army (1:1–10:36)

A. Census of all men of fighting age (1:1–46)

B. Exemption of Levites as priest-soldiers (1:47–54)

C. Camp formation of Israel (2:1–34)

D. Census and duties of the priest-soldiers (3:1–4:49)

E. Consecration for holy war (5:1–9:14)

F. Divine acceptance and assurance (9:15–23)

G. Departure in battle array (10:1–36)

II. Failure of the First-Generation Army (11:1–25:18)

A. Rebellion and its consequences (11:1–20:29)

B. Hope for a remnant (21:1–35)

C. Balak and Balaam: Future threat and promise (22:1–25:18)

III. Consecration of the Second-Generation Army (26:1–36:13)

A. Census of all men of fighting age (26:1–56)

B. Census of Levites as priest-soldiers (26:57–65)

C. Preservation of the bereft (27:1–11)

D. Joshua to succeed Moses (27:12–23)

E. Consecration and renewal (28:1–30:16)

F. A taste of victory (31:1–54)

G. The Transjordan tribes compromise (32:1–42)

H. The journey recapitulated (33:1–49)

I. Moses’s final exhortation (33:50–56)

J. Final provisions for allotment of the land (34:1–36:13)

The first generation had witnessed the mighty acts of God in the plagues, the exodus, the glorious lawgiving at Sinai, and the miraculous wilderness provisions, and yet they failed to trust in God’s goodness and power to bring them into the land he had promised their father Abraham. They had been an idolatrous people in Egypt (Josh. 24:14) and even at the foot of Mount Sinai (Exodus 32), desiring the provision and predictability of slavery in Egypt to the challenge of utter dependency upon God in the wilderness (Num. 11:5; 14:1–4). In spite of their resistance, God continued to demonstrate his faithfulness, vindicate his appointed leaders, and even provide means to atone for their rebelliousness and cleanse their guilt. But as the people among whom God dwelt and as his holy army preparing to enter into holy war against the Canaanites, they were to trust God fully, obey his appointed leaders, and purify themselves. For *holy war* is a war of the righteous God against sin. Only warriors who are consecrated and holy can be assured of victory and freedom from the defeat of God’s judgment. For *holy war* is ultimately a war against sin and unbelief, be it against the idolatrous Canaanites or unbelieving Israel.

But so that God could be faithful to his promises, he began again with a *remnant*. The second generation led by Joshua and Caleb would understand the reasons for the first generation’s fate and, most importantly, would strive to avoid its mistakes. By the proofs of God’s faithfulness, recorded in Numbers, they could be confident that if they trusted in God’s power and provision, they would enter into the Land of Promise. But if they did not trust God, they would suffer the same fate as their parents’ generation. The *purpose* of Numbers is well summarized by Walton and Hill: “*to contrast the faithfulness of God with the faithlessness and rebellion of the Israelites.” And yet, to narrow in on the purpose of the censuses and the great challenge that lay across the Jordan, the book of Numbers also aimed “to call the second generation of Israel to arms as the holy army of God*.”

Contrasting and comparing the generations points to *two overarching patterns of parallels*, as Wenham observes. He notes both *literary/historical parallels* comparing the three journeys of Israel—from the Red Sea to Sinai, from Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea, and from Kadesh-Barnea to Moab (see table 11)—and the *parallels* associated with the three major venues themselves (table 12).

Element of Journey Red Sea to Sinai Sinai to Kadesh Kadesh to Moab

Led by cloud Ex. 13:21 Num. 10:11ff. ——

Victory over Egypt Ex. 14:1–31 —— cf. Num. 21:21–35

Victory song Ex. 15:1–18 cf. Num. 10:35–36 Num. 21:14–15

Miriam Ex. 15:20–21 Num. 12 Num. 20:1

People’s complaint Ex. 15:23–24 Num. 11:1 Num. 21:5

Moses’s intercession Ex. 15:25 Num. 11:2 Num. 21:7

Well Ex. 15:27 —— Num. 21:16

Manna and quail Ex. 16:1–36 Num. 11:4–35 ——

Water from rock Ex. 17:1–7 —— Num. 20:2–13

Victory over Amalek Ex. 17:8–16 —— cf. Num. 21:1–3

Jethro Ex. 18:1–12 cf. Num. 10:29–32 ——

*Table 11*

Topic Sinai Kadesh Moab

Divine promises Ex. 19:5–6; 23:23–31 Num. 13:2 Num. 22:1–24:25

Forty days Ex. 24:18 Num. 13:25 ——

Rebellion Ex. 32:1–8 Num. 14:1–12 Num. 25:1–3

Moses’s intercession Ex. 32:11–13 Num. 14:13–19 ——

Judgment Ex. 32:34 Num. 14:20–35 Num. 25:4

Plague Ex. 32:35 Num. 14:37 Num. 25:8–9

Laws of sacrifice Ex. 34:18–26; Num. 15:1–31 Num. 28:1–31

Lev. 1:1–7:38; etc.

Trial Lev. 24:10–23 Num. 15:32–36 Num. 27:1–11

Rebellion against priests Lev. 10:1–3 Num. 16:1–35 ——

Atonement via priests/Levites Ex. 32:26–29 Num. 16:36–50 Num. 25:7–13

Priestly prerogatives Lev. 6:1–7:38; 22:1–33 Num. 17:1–18:32 Num. 31:28–30; 35:1–8

Impurity rules Lev. 11:1–16:34 Num. 19:1–22 Num. 35:9–34

Num. 9:6-14

Census Num. 1:1–4:49 —— Num. 26:1–65

*Table 12*

These *parallels* serve to heighten the comparison of the two generations, all while God remains constant and faithful.

**Message and Theology**

**Consecration of the First-Generation Army (Num. 1:1–10:36)**

***Census of All Men of Fighting Age (Num. 1:1–46)***

Numbers begins with a census of the first generation but only of *fighting-age males* (1:2–3). This makes it clear that its purpose was military. Knowing troop strength wasn’t necessary from God’s point of view. His army consisted principally of the hosts of heavenly angels. This is why at certain junctures Israel is commanded to stand by and watch God accomplish victory unaided by man (Ex. 14:13; Josh. 6:1–27; 2 Sam. 5:23–24; 2 Kings 6:17; 19:32–37; cf. Ps. 48:4–8). It is necessary, however, for Israel to know their numbers by tribes in order to deploy themselves tactically on the battlefield and at camp in guarding the tabernacle.

There is a similar *census* in 2 Samuel 24 that God condemns. How is this to be reconciled with the fact that twice in Numbers God commands troop counts? The explanation emerges from a wide-ranging motif grounded in Deuteronomy 17:14–20. When Israel chose a king, it was not to choose a king “*like all the nations*” (17:14). Such a king would have the propensity to create political alliances through marrying foreign wives (as well as adulterating the cultus) and to build up a large standing army (17:16–17). Rather, he was to trust in Yahweh as Israel’s sovereign Lord who would protect and give victory to his loyal servant king. That was, after all, what Yahweh’s name connoted in light of the parallelism of Exodus 15:3—“*Yahweh is a warrior, Yahweh is his name*” (my trans.). This is why the psalmist sings, “*Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of [Yahweh] our God*” (Ps. 20:7).

The particular incident of 2 Samuel 24 came near the end of David’s reign when he was aged and weak. In numbering Israel’s army, he was acting in the tradition of a king “*like all the nations*,” not trusting in Yahweh as Israel’s sovereign King to defend it. David had once understood this principle, as he declared in the Valley of Elah before Goliath, “*the battle is the Lord’s*” (1 Sam. 17:47). But as his own strength waned, he failed to retain full confidence in Yahweh’s strength.

In the case of the Numbers censuses, Israel had not yet learned to trust the Lord by following him into battle. The first generation, then, was to prepare itself to be God’s army on the march through the wilderness into the land that God had promised them. And they were to do so by numbering all who could fight.

***Exemption of Levites as Priest-Soldiers (Num. 1:47–54)***

The Levites were not to be numbered among the fighting men (1:47). Yet this did not mean that the Levites were exempt from military service. They were charged with war not against the Canaanites and Israel’s harassers along the way but against those who would encroach upon the tabernacle in an unauthorized way (1:50–51). Faithful priestly duty meant, for them, to be guardians of the sanctuary. Their warfare was guarding God’s presence from the offense of sin (1:51; 3:38).

This is consistent with the *office of priest* in the larger cultural context. “*Every priest was chosen and installed to serve in a sanctuary. The ruling was universally acknowledged particularly by the Arabs in the days before Islam. The priest was for them essentially a sadin, a ‘guardian’ of the temple; he looked after the sanctuary, received visitors and took charge of their gifts*.” In fact, the Levites’ general duties here as well as the particular ones in 3:1–4:49 are set forth by the Hebrew verb שָׁמַר, which can mean “*keep*” but in these instances means “*guard*.”

***Camp Formation of Israel (Num. 2:1–34)***

The order and manner in which Israel was to encamp around the tabernacle reflected this priestly guardianship, with the Levites stationed adjacent to the tabernacle to the north, west, and east. Aaron’s family was stationed immediately to the east at the entrance.

The priestly guardianship of all the tribes is exhibited in their positions of encampment as well. In his paternal blessing, Jacob had anticipated Judah’s lead role in the defeat of Israel’s enemies: “*Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies*” (Gen. 49:8). Joshua, from the tribe of Judah, would lead Israel into Canaan, and Judah would take the initiative in the days of the judges (Judg. 1:2; 20:18). Thus, Judah would camp to the east, the direction in which the tabernacle faced, and toward which it would head when moving out. This organization would also preserve the identity of the tribes and clans, which would prove important when the second generation entered the land and the land was apportioned (and preserved going forward into the future) by those allotments.

***Census and Duties of the Priest-Soldiers (Num. 3:1–4:49)***

To Aaron and his sons, God had given the service of the *tabernacle*, especially the inner *sanctuary* (Ex. 28:1–29:46; 40:9–15). The general service of the *tabernacle*, including its assembly and reassembly, were assigned to the tribe of Levi as a whole (Num. 3:6). Each clan within the tribe held specific responsibilities.

The Levites’ special service stemmed from the *Passover*, during which God required every firstborn male in Israel to be set apart as holy to the Lord, belonging to him (Ex. 13:2, 15). There had been a death in every house in Egypt on that first Passover night, but in the Israelites’ houses there had been the substitutionary death of a spotless lamb. Every firstborn had been redeemed by this substitute, thus every firstborn son in Israel belonged to the Lord. God provided, however, that he would claim the whole tribe of Levi in substitute for each firstborn male (Num. 3:40–51).

Here we find a *numerical difficulty* in the text. Numbers 3:43 indicates that there were 22,273 firstborn among the other eleven tribes, requiring a redemption price for the 273 differential with 22,000 Levites reported in 3:39 (see 3:46). The *problem* is that, according to the Hebrew text, there were actually 22,300 Levites (7,500 Gershonites in 3:22; 8,600 Kohathites in 3:28; and 6,200 Merarites in 3:34). However, an important textual witness in the *Septuagint* (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) indicates that the Kohathites numbered 8,300. Since the difference between 300 and 600 in the Hebrew is the omission of one letter, it is likely that the original was 8,300 and a copying omission resulted in 8,600.35 If this is the case, which seems likely, then the numbers cohere precisely.

***Consecration for Holy War (Num. 5:1–9:14)***

Because Israel was preparing itself for holy war, it had to be holy itself. Otherwise, it would be subject to the same outcome as the idolatrous Canaanites. Thus, the essence of *cleanness* and *uncleanness* under the Levitical laws are fronted in summary form in 5:1–4.

*Holy war* is a consequence of God’s *imminence*. When God becomes present, sin is judged and righteousness vindicated. God’s promise to Israel was that he would dwell among them, but he could only do so through the sacrificial and atoning provisions of the *tabernacle* and its worship (Ex. 25:8). While Israel would enjoy God’s immediate presence in the camp and as they went in to take the land, they had to be consecrated properly to avoid the same fate as the Canaanites. Numbers 5:1–9:14 can be seen as various provisions, in addition to those in Leviticus, for how they were to achieve the holiness required for God to dwell in their midst.

Some of these provisions may seem obscure, arbitrary, or even objectionable to the modern mind. A few even appear to leave people subject to mere chance (e.g., 3:16–31). But bear in mind that they are administered by the God of providence. Though his ways are inscrutable to us, and human hearts inscrutable to men, God is the One to whom every thought is laid bare (Heb. 4:13). While these *ceremonial laws* are no longer binding on us in the same form today, they were an efficient means at the time for God to speak.

While Numbers 5:1–31 provides remedies for the presence of sin in the camp, 6:1–9:14 relates acts of consecration—of the individual Nazirite in 6:1–27 and of the tabernacle and Levites in 7:1–9:14. Numbers 7 recapitulates what was related previously in Exodus 40 and Leviticus 8. This account provides a clear example of the biblical narrator’s willingness to break with a strict chronology when it suits his purpose and to do so without in any way misleading the reader. Many modern critical readers fault the biblical record for not conforming to modernist expectations of precision—a subtle form of hermeneutical colonialism. Additionally, many evangelical readers have unnecessarily contrived explanations of strict chronology when none was required.

After the priests consecrated the *tabernacle* through ritual offerings (Num. 7:1–88), God would make himself present in the *Tent of Meeting* and make known his will to his servant Moses as he spoke to him from between the cherubim over the ark (7:89; cf. Ex. 25:22). Relatedly, the *lampstand rituals* were to be followed, its light being the anticipated consequence of the *divine presence*. The Levites as a whole were to be consecrated (Num. 8:5–22), and a relevant digression explored the limits of Levitical service (8:23–26), given that its work was strenuous as well as dangerous (8:26).

These successive acts of consecration climaxed in the first celebration of the Passover following the exodus from Egypt. As such, it too reminded Israel that they belonged to the Lord by virtue of their redemption from slavery.

***Divine Acceptance and Assurance (Num. 9:15–23)***

Once the people had completed the consecration, the *glory cloud* descended upon the *tabernacle* (Num. 9:15; cf. Ex. 40:34–38). This divine act not only fulfilled God’s stated intent to dwell among his people in the *tabernacle* (Ex. 25:8) but also affirmed God’s response to Moses’s intercession following the *golden calf* incident. God initially agreed to see Israel to the *Promised Land* but refused to be present with them (Ex. 33:3). Moses pleaded that it was God’s *presence* that made them a “*distinct*” people, prevailing upon God to guarantee his presence (Ex. 33:16–17). The account in Numbers adds greater detail about the characteristic, day-to-day manifestation of God’s *glory*. It emphasizes that Israel’s movements, to camp or to march, were completely contingent on whether the *glory cloud* was stationary or on the move, and that their responsiveness was in full obedience to Moses (Num. 9:22–23).

***Departure in Battle Array (Num. 10:1–36)***

The use of the two silver trumpets explicitly connected this movement to obedience to Moses. When played in various combinations, the two trumpets signaled either the assembling of the congregation, the breaking of camp, the assembling of the tribal leaders, or an alarm at some threat (10:1–10). These trumpets continued to have use in worship after Israel settled in the land. In battle in the wilderness and beyond, the trumpets would also summon God’s help, a reminder that Israel depended upon him for victory and had to call upon him in times of trouble (10:9).

Israel’s departure in formation from Sinai served not just an *organizational purpose* but also a *military purpose*, providing defensive as well as tactical advantages. This is consistent with the censuses having a military purpose and is confirmed by Moses’s formulaic invocation to carry the ark forward whenever the glory cloud moved: “*Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered*” (10:35). This *formula* called for God to fight on behalf of his people, but it was particularly associated with the ark, because the ark, as a multivalent symbol, represented God’s battle chariot as well as the footstool of his throne (1 Chron. 28:2). As the ark would be carried forward, God was seen as leading his heavenly army in battle.

Craig Broyles captures this concept well:

In the wilderness the ark served to *lead* the people (Num. 10:33). At the beginning of each stage of the journey Moses invoked what is commonly called “*the song of the ark*”: “*Arise* [*qûmâ*], *O Lord, let your enemies be scattered and your foes flee before you*” (v. 35). Similarly, whenever the ark “*came to rest*” (*nwḥ*), Yahweh is implored to “*return*” (*šûbâ*). The scattering of enemies and flight of foes associates the ark with *battle*. This is confirmed later in Num. 14:44, which presupposes that the ark must precede the people in the conquest of the land. Also related to the ark is the “*cloud of the Lord*,” which led them on their journey.

This is why the prayers for rescue in the Psalms are in some instances couched in this imagery; “*Arise, O Lord, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might*” (Ps. 132:8). This *allusion* is immediately preceded by a call to worship God “*at his footstool*” (132:7). Broyles goes on to argue that the Psalter’s use of key terms associated elsewhere with the ark indicates a role for the ark in the cult long after David brought it to its resting place in Jerusalem. For our purposes, it is enough to see that the psalmist’s frequent prayer “*Arise, O Lord*” draws upon the background of Numbers. The use and misuse of the ark in the battles of the so-called “*ark narrative*” of 1 Samuel 4:1–7:1 also rely on this context.

**Failure of the First-Generation Army (Num. 11:1–25:18)**

***Rebellion and Its Consequences (Num. 11:1–20:29)***

Immediately after the census, consecration, glorious indwelling, and setting out of the camp, the first generation displayed their unbelief and rebellion. These episodes both foreshadow and reveal the root of why the attempted conquest would fail and the first generation would perish in the wilderness. In this respect, it would serve as a warning to the second generation. As they themselves prepared to enter the Promised Land, why should they trust the Lord, trust in the ordinances he gave through Moses, trust Joshua, Moses’s successor, and trust in the priesthood of Aaron’s descendants? The answer comes in three parts. *First*, because of their repeated and deep rebellion, the people merited their fate. *Second*, Moses and Aaron often prevailed upon God to relent. *Finally*, God vindicated Moses and Aaron, and thus Moses’s decrees and the priestly ministry can be seen as clearly God’s will.

*Table 13* provides a summary of the episodes of rebellion in this section. Although we can detect no precise pattern, we can identify general elements that occur variously in the different episodes. They always begin with a *complaint*, usually attributed to some specific condition. The *initial response* may come directly from God or Moses, and this initial response can generate additional *actions* and *reactions* before the *final result.* Presented in the format of a table, one can quickly observe the cumulative weight of the various rebellions.

As *table 13* shows, Moses often proved, as he did at Sinai, to be an effective *intercessor* for a sinful people. Yet he exhibited a growing intemperance that brought hefty consequences. It is first detected in the *initial complaint* in 11:11–15 when Moses suggested that God had left him with too much to bear and was not sufficiently attentive to those he had redeemed. Thus, he gave God an *ultimatum* to kill him or to help him (11:15). This intemperance grew into rebellion itself in 20:2–13, the *second incident* of God providing water from the rock. Unlike the *first episode* in Exodus 17:1–7, in which God instructed Moses to strike the rock, in Numbers God only told Moses to *speak* to the rock. Moses, in apparent anger, *struck it twice* (or a second time). As he did so, he said to the people, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” Whether the “*we*” is Moses and Aaron, Moses and God, or the “*royal we*” of Moses alone, Moses attributed the outcome at least partially to himself. His words and his action brought upon him the same divine sentence declared previously on the first generation as a whole: “*Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them*” (20:12).

This episode informs how one reads not only Numbers but also Exodus. With both being written to the *second generation*, they address the question of Moses’s *authority*. The *second generation* might well wonder why it should observe the laws given through Moses when Moses himself failed to enter the land. God’s frequent endorsements of Moses’s leadership (and Aaron’s) in both books provide the answer to any doubts. Moses was chosen by God to lead Israel. He was an effective *intercessor* at several critical moments. He bore much in leading and ruling over the people on the Lord’s behalf. Yet his actions constituted a failure to trust God sufficiently and to treat him as holy (Num. 20:12). He was *faithful in God’s house*, as God himself said (12:7), but he was *of* the *first generation*, perhaps providing a lesson in covenantal solidarity.



*Table 13*

The *catalog of* *complaints* concludes with the transfer of high priestly *authority* to Eleazar, Aaron’s son, and the death of Aaron, for he too was complicit in Moses’s failure at Meribah (Num. 20:24), as well as in Miriam’s rebellion (12:11).

***Hope for a Remnant (Num. 21:1–35)***

*Like* the other ten spies, Caleb and Joshua had given a good report about the abundance in the Promised Land. *Unlike* the others, only they had believed that God would give them victory over its intimidating inhabitants. Therefore, they alone of the first generation would enter the land (14:30, 38). Thus, the turning of generations marked by the deaths of Miriam and Aaron produce a dramatic change of fortunes for Israel, which 21:1–3 highlights. While 21:1 marks an apparently minor defeat, 21:3 reports a total victory. From this point on in Numbers, Israel would encounter only victory. In between these two episodes stands the second generation’s vow of full obedience (21:2). As such, 21:1–3 can be viewed as the *turning point* of the entire book.

When the Canaanite king of Arad came out against Israel in a preemptive strike, God gave Israel victory (21:1–3). They also defeated Sihon, king of the Amorites, when he refused Israel un-harassed transit through his territory (21:21–30). Likewise, Israel enjoyed victory against Og, king of Bashan (21:31–35). Within the book of Numbers, these represent tastes of victory for the *second generation*, since the *first generation* had already sealed its fate. These victories proved that God could do what the ten spies and the first generation did not believe he could or would.

The final *complaint episode* comes in the curious incident of the *bronze serpent*. The *complaint* itself is nondescript. The particular cause is not mentioned, but Israel’s sentiment echoes a *past grievance*—they preferred the bread of slavery in Egypt over the bread of heaven in the wilderness. God’s chastisement comes in the form of “*fiery serpents*” (21:6). While it has been debated whether “*fiery*” refers to their appearance, the pain of their bites, or both, the bites were proving fatal to some and of sufficient agony to produce a plea for forgiveness (21:7).

What is curious is the *form* of the cure. God instructed Moses to cast a serpent out of bronze and to fasten it to a pole long enough for all to see it (21:8–9). Why would God use a symbol associated with entities such as Satan and Pharaoh as an object to elicit faith? Some have speculated that God intended not these negative associations but different associations with healing, such as the staff of Aesculapius from Greek mythology, still used today as a symbol for the healing arts. This argument is implausible given the distance of that association and the nearness of these other associations so central to the narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is, in fact, the negative association with Pharaoh (and secondarily Satan) on which its meaning depends, but the *key* in this situation is the *form of its display*.

Moses was to display the *bronze serpent*, which represented all the fiery serpents in the act of biting the Israelites, not merely on a *pole* but on a *pike*. It was hoisted up not as a sign of living hope but as a symbol of the dead Pharaoh and the powerlessness of his serpentine god(s). It was God’s reminder of the status of the powers of Egypt, those powers to which the complainants wished to return. The gods of Egypt were dead, and those who worshiped them would become like them (Ps. 115:8). The bites of the serpents were likely reminders of the sting of slavery, perhaps even the sting of the Egyptian whips. In contrast, the God of Israel was the living God who demonstrated his superiority over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt (Ex. 12:12) and had sustained them in the wilderness for forty years.

***Balak and Balaam: Future Threat and Promise (Num. 22:1–25:18)***

The *Balaam story* presents many curiosities as well. The Moabite king Balak had heard of Israel’s victories and the great number of its people, and he feared that Israel would decimate Moab. Instead of employing the previous kings’ failed strategy of direct engagement, he retained the services of a famed Mesopotamian diviner named Balaam. Balaam claimed to be a worshiper of Israel’s God and was initially unwilling to help Balak (22:13, 18). After a second embassy from Moab, Balaam went but with apparent evil intent (22:22). In the highly ironic, even satirical, scene that followed, the all-seeing prophet was unable to see the threatening Angel of the Lord, but his dumb animal, a donkey, not only saw the threat but also spoke to his master (22:30). The “*crooked*” (22:32, my trans.) way of Balaam was *straightened* out, and he was given divine permission to proceed as long as he was willing to obey the Lord.

In the *threefold cycle of sacrifices* (23:1, 14, 29–30), *encounters with God* (22:12, 20, 22–35), and *oracles* (23:7–10; 18–24; 24:3–9) that follow, Balaam is unable to perform the curses commissioned by Balak. In the spirit of the story’s irony, he is unable to gain a physical vantage point from where he can see the whole of Israel in order to administer the curses (23:13, 27). This dramatic element confirms the vast number of Israel. In fact, it touches on the essence of why Balaam in the end can only do what God wills him to do. He cannot number Israel because its population is so great (23:10). God has blessed Israel and is present among them (23:20–21). Israel will prosper and be numerous (24:5–7). “*Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you*” (24:9). These are all elements of God’s covenant promises to Abraham. Balaam cannot speak a contrary word because God’s promise to bless Abraham has been fulfilled.

Was Balaam a saint or a sinner? *On the one hand*, he is characterized as a believer (“the Lord my God,” 22:18). He resolutely refused to curse Israel, and in the end, he blessed Israel and foretold Moab’s doom at their hands (24:14–25). Yet Deuteronomy 23:3–6 indicates that he was culpable. He was treated as an enemy in the conquest (Josh. 13:22). Later passages confirm his mercenary intent, which prompted God’s opposition and the donkey episode (Num. 22:22; cf. Josh. 24:9–10). The New Testament’s condemnation is even more unequivocal (2 Pet. 2:15–16; Jude 11). George Coats concludes that the question must be answered not on the basis of Balaam’s character or intent but on his repeated insistence that he would only speak what God allowed him to speak. Yet that evidence must be considered alongside his mercenary status. Most importantly, Balaam’s counsel to Balak—not divulged until the ensuing narrative—revealed his true colors.

In the account that follows, the intermingling between Israel and Moab, both in *idol worship* and in *male-female relations*, prove to be more of a threat to Israel than Balaam’s oracles (Num. 25:1–9). Only subsequently is it indicated that this was Balaam’s counsel to Balak: “*Behold, these [women of Midian], on Balaam’s advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord*” (31:16). The proximity of Balaam’s conclusion and the sin of Baal-Peor might have suggested it, but this passage confirms that Balaam did not leave Balak without a strategy against Israel. While Balaam may have stuck to the “letter of the law” concerning his oracles—to pronounce only what God permitted—he provided Balak counsel that did lead to Israel being cursed, at least cursed to the extent that twenty-four thousand people died, until the zeal of faithful Phinehas turned away God’s anger (25:10–13).

This narrative highlights the great unlearned lesson of much of Israel’s history. *The enemy without could never prevail. But the enemy within would never fail.* Israel, with God as their Protector, was unassailable by any nation. The greatest threat to Israel was its covenant Lord when it harbored sin within the camp. Just like the serial victories of 21:1–3, the zeal of Phinehas prompted a new hope. The second generation had learned from the failure of the first. Idolatry and immorality would still occur, but Israel’s new leaders and the second generation would be decisive in confronting it.

**Consecration of the Second-Generation Army (Num. 26:1–36:13)**

***Census of All Men of Fighting Age (Num. 26:1–56)***

The *second census* of men of fighting age is worded nearly identically to the *first* (cf. 1:2–3; 26:2). It does not conclude the book but marks a *new beginning* in which God’s people will trust him fully. They had seen the *first generation* fall short because of unbelief, and they stood on the plains of Moab overlooking the Promised Land, knowing that God had been faithful in spite of their parents’ failure. The narrative draws attention to the fact that not one of those numbered at Sinai were numbered on the plains of Moab save Caleb and Joshua (26:63–65).

***Census of Levites as Priest-Soldiers (Num. 26:57–65)***

Similarly, the Levites were numbered for the same purpose as in 3:1–51. They were not exempt from soldierly duty but instead were to conduct their holy war in the precincts of the tabernacle and the camp of Israel. Phinehas had already turned aside the anger of God against syncretism, and those numbered here were to continue in that role for the nation.

***Preservation of the Bereft (Num. 27:1–11)***

From 27:1 through the end of Numbers, various situations arise that may not lend themselves to an explicit literary structure but which do have a natural logic. In the case of the daughters of Zelophehad, we encounter the first of several situations that anticipate occupation of the land. These women, fatherless and without brothers, would be bereft in the Promised Land because land inheritance followed the custom of male inheritance rights.

The *Promised Land* was a gift of inheritance from God to his people. Title was not to be regarded as a commodity that could pass from any person to another. Such a commoditized system would lead to impoverishment for those who experienced calamity or tragedy or whose ancestors made sinful or foolish decisions.

The *allotment of the land* by tribe and clan was a social system that, working in conjunction with the *Sabbath Year* and the *Year of Jubilee*, would preserve families in perpetuity. It would not spare them all hardship, but it would prevent them from becoming chronically bereft for generations. This system was grounded in the fact that God never relinquished title to the land, and thus it was God’s grant of stewardship to his vassal lords (Lev. 25:23). As Christopher Wright has pointed out, “*If the exodus was God’s idea of redemption, the jubilee was God’s idea of restoration*.”

The ruling that God gave Moses in the case of the *daughters of Zelophehad* provided for one such circumstance in which the vulnerable could have been cut off not only from land but from tribe and clan. As such, it anticipated life in the land, which was premised upon the success that God would give the *second generation* as they were willing to believe the Lord.

***Joshua to Succeed Moses (Num. 27:12–23)***

Moses had one final opportunity to intercede for God’s people. As he neared the end of his life, gazing from the heights across the Jordan into the *Land of Promise* (27:12), his true character as Israel’s shepherd shone through once again. The resentment and bitterness of his previous complaints, issued albeit amid the unrelenting unbelief of the *first generation*, gave way to the heart of one to whom God would speak as to a friend. He pleaded for a shepherd to succeed him so that “*the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd*” (27:17). While God had been Israel’s shepherd since the days of the patriarchs (Gen. 48:15), during the days of the exodus he had administered his shepherd care through human under-shepherds of his own choosing. The *second generation* would have witnessed the divinely authorized transfer of authority from Moses to Joshua, as verified by the ministry of their new high priest, Eleazar, so that they would have trusted in Joshua as God’s provision for leadership.

***Consecration and Renewal (Num. 28:1–30:16)***

Learning from the example of the *first generation*, the *second generation* would have known the critical importance of consecrating God’s holy army. The *sacrifices* in this section serve this strategic purpose in the flow of the Numbers narrative, recapitulating and elaborating on the *offerings* of Leviticus. Likewise, the *provisions on vows* for men and women would have reinforced the importance of integrity.

***A Taste of Victory (Num. 31:1–54)***

God narrowly defined the venue and objects of holy war in the Old Testament as within the confines of the *Promised Land* because it was fundamentally a matter of *worship*, necessitated by the imminent *presence of God* within those confines. Where God’s special *presence* dwells, *holiness* and *righteousness* must prevail as a consequence. For this same reason, God’s people—whether the camp of Israel in the *wilderness* or the *Land of Promise* after settlement—must also maintain *holiness* and *righteousness*.

The only exceptions to this principle of *holy war* were those people who harassed Israel along their route to the *Promised Land*. This was not simply because of national or security concerns but because their harassment threatened to cut off God’s people from God’s inheritance. This was particularly the case with Moab and Midian, which together engaged in a strategy to disaffect Israel from the Lord by adulterating Israel’s *worship* (25:1–9). Therefore, the Moabites and Midianites merited the status of the Canaanites and became the object of this new generation’s first full-scale engagement (31:1–2).

In this way this first major engagement portended success in the land, a success that ten of the twelve spies believed was impossible but which the two faithful ones—Caleb and Joshua—believed God would give them.

***The Transjordan Tribes Compromise (Num. 32:1–42)***

Before full-scale entry into the land, the tribes of Reuben and Gad, as well as a portion of Manasseh, saw that the land east of the Jordan was desirable. They sought permission from Moses to choose that territory as their allotment. Moses granted permission but only after challenging their motive: “*Shall your brothers go to the war while you sit here*?” (32:6). Moses either discerned or questioned that their motive mirrored that of the ten unfaithful spies (32:7). Their request would be granted only after they first showed their full trust in the Lord by supporting the other ten tribes in the conquest.

Moses’s condition had a *twofold purpose*. One was to prove their faith. No unbeliever would have an inheritance with the Lord. They could not come short of full faith and still receive God’s gracious provision. The second purpose was to preserve the covenantal solidarity of the nation. God’s people are not a confederation of spiritual opportunists but are one people. There is no “*each tribe for himself*,” much less “*each man for himself*.” The covenantal community that trusts and obeys him is the prime venue through which God displays his power and attributes (Deut. 4:32–40). Fraternal fractures are symptoms of unbelief. After what may have been a tense standoff of undetermined duration, the so-called “*Transjordan tribes*” consented to participate in the conquest in support of their fellow Israelites (Num. 32:17).

***The Journey Recapitulated (Num. 33:1–49)***

As the dramatic time for conquest approached, Numbers recounted for the *second generation* all that the nation had experienced. Hardship and God’s faithfulness had marked the journey from place to place. This retrospective reaches back to the foundations of Israel’s provision—redemption from slavery in Egypt. Throughout the Old Testament, as here, Israel will look back upon the exodus as a principal means of engendering and strengthening faith (cf. Ps. 77:11–20).

***Moses’s Final Exhortation (Num. 33:50–56)***

Moses issued a final exhortation to the *second generation*, outlining principles for allotting the land in anticipation of success. Besides implicitly anticipating success, he explicitly warned of the consequences of coming short of full obedience. Just as the Moabites’ infiltration of Israel’s worship and tents proved a threat to Israel’s existence, even more so would the inhabitants of the land (33:55). If Israel accommodated the idolatrous Canaanites, they would become as Canaanites themselves. This warning is ominous, both here and as it is echoed in the books of Joshua and Judges (Josh. 23:6, 12–13; Judg. 2:3, 14–15, 20–23).

***Final Provisions for Allotment of the Land (Num. 34:1–36:13)***

Numbers concludes with additional anticipations of success. God delineated the boundaries of the land for the nine and a half tribes that would dwell there (34:1–15). And Moses empowered tribal chiefs to allocate the land (34:16–29).

As God’s inheritance, the Levites did not receive a specific area of allotted land. Further, they were to perform functions for all the tribes throughout the land. Therefore, certain cities were designated as *Levitical cities* along with adjacent pasture lands to sustain their cultic and life needs (35:1–34). These cities would also serve a unique cultic function. As *cities of refuge*, they would provide sanctuary for anyone guilty of manslaughter who fled an avenging relative of the deceased. This provision reminds us that there was no absolute distinction between the cultic and the civil elements of the nation. The whole land had a cultic character because God had made it a sanctuary by his very presence. Therefore, every civil crime was cultic as well (35:33).

The closing chapter of Numbers revisits the matter of the *daughters of Zelophehad*. In a model of jurisprudence, this case corrected the inequity or unintended consequences of the previous ruling (27:1–11). The previous ruling was not overturned but qualified so that the land that the *daughters of Zelophehad* might have received would not unintentionally pass out of the tribe of Manasseh if any of them married men of other tribes. This is the nature of *casuistry*—or *case law*—as an ongoing process of interpreting and applying the norms of prescriptive law. Life is complicated, and both moral reasoning and moral norms are necessary to faithful living.

Numbers concludes on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho (36:13). The future is before the *second generation*, with every hopeful prospect if they will trust the Lord and act faithfully. Graciously, the past is also before them—the past of the *first generation* with its failings. Never were the words of William Faulkner more apt: for the *second generation*, “*the past is never dead. It’s not even past*.” It looms behind them as a reminder even as success lies on the horizon before them.

**Approaching the New Testament**

The book of Numbers fulfills an essential role in the foundations of the Old Testament. Along with Exodus and Deuteronomy, it recounts the history of God’s faithful acts toward his covenant people, whom he redeemed from slavery in Egypt according to the promises made to the patriarchs. It gave Israel its shape both as a congregation ordered around the divine presence and as a holy army on the march with its divine Warrior-King in the lead. Both in the camp and on the march they were to be a holy people, consecrated to Yahweh. His gracious provision and protection even included the means of serving his sanctuary presence and of atoning for their sins.

Numbers also provides a grand object lesson on unbelief and its consequences. The *first exodus generation* did not trust in God’s provision and protection in spite of unmerited favor. This account teaches us that unconditional grace is not without the condition of receiving and resting upon that favor. At its core, the disobedience of the *first generation* was a failure to believe the word of God. As Deuteronomy 1:30–32 recapitulates (cf. Deut. 9:23),

The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place. Yet in spite of this word you did not believe the Lord your God, who went before you in the way to seek you out a place to pitch your tents, in fire by night and in the cloud by day, to show you by what way you should go.

It was not the promises of God that failed but the *first generation* who failed to believe those promises (Josh. 21:45).

Yet the promises of God were not in vain. God preserved a faithful *remnant* in Caleb, Joshua, and the *second generation*. After the passing of the *first generation*, God provided tokens of victory as they moved toward the land and anticipatory provisions for life in the land. The only enemy they truly had to fear was *unbelief*, especially that arising out of adulterated life and worship as recorded in the events of Baal-Peor. While the fate of the *first generation* was tragic, it became a *means of grace* to the *second generation*, displaying the life-and-death consequences of trusting their faithful Lord.

Even before the time of the New Testament, the lessons of Numbers played a prominent role in Israel’s *worship*. Psalm 78 labors to review the history in Numbers:

that the next generation might know them,

the children yet unborn,

and arise and tell them to their children,

so that they should set their hope in God

and not forget the works of God,

but keep his commandments;

and that they should not be like their fathers,

a stubborn and rebellious generation,

a generation whose heart was not steadfast,

whose spirit was not faithful to God. (Ps. 78:6–8)

Likewise, Psalm 95:7b–9 says,

Today, if you hear his voice,

do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,

as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

when your fathers put me to the test

and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

This lesson is not abrogated by the new covenant, contriving opposition between faith and faithful obedience. Rather it emphasizes the role that the wilderness period of redemptive history is to play in the lives of believers today: “*Now these things took place as examples [τύποι] for us, that we might not desire evil as they did*” (1 Cor. 10:6). Even as both the *first* and *second generations* in Numbers experienced God’s grace, so also does everyone in the *church*. Yet just as with the *first generation*, when his *grace* is not met with genuine *faith*, it is of no benefit. Paul continues:

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Cor. 10:11–12)

Quoting Psalm 95, the writer of Hebrews makes the same application and concludes, “*Take care, brothers [and sisters], lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God*” (Heb. 3:12).

Herein lies the critical distinction in doctrine between so-called “*eternal security*” and “*perseverance of the saints*.” The *former* is associated with the view that there is nothing the believer can do to lose his salvation and to fall away from God’s favor. “*Once saved, always saved*.” While this may be true in itself, it is precarious by itself. For the Scriptures also teach that there is something that every believer will do in order not to fall away from God’s favor—he will persevere in faith. While the ultimate cause of the believer’s security is found in God and his decree, the instrumental means of his perseverance is a faith that obeys. So, when we encounter the New Testament’s elaboration on this doctrine, we must not blunt the warnings with false assurance. Rather, we should make full use of the warnings as a *means of grace* so that the Spirit-awakened conscience will “*examine [himself], to see whether [he is] in the faith*” (2 Cor. 13:5).

The other principal way in which Numbers is meaningful to the Christian is in how it situates the church in precisely the same kind of circumstance as Israel in the wilderness. While those who are Gentiles are no longer alienated from God (Eph. 2:12, 19), Christians do live as “*sojourners*” and “*exiles*” on the earth (1 Pet. 1:17; 2:11). We are in a better position in terms of the clarity and efficacy of God’s promises than those Old Testament saints who “*died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar*” (Heb. 11:13). Through the victory of Jesus Christ, we have “*come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*” (Heb. 12:22). Nevertheless, this should not lead us into presumption, as the earlier discussion would warn us, so that we “*do not refuse him who is speaking*” (12:25). Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we await the appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:20; Titus 2:13). Thus, as Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin, “*the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands*” (Acts 7:48). So we, like the wilderness generations, await our full inheritance in the new heavens and new earth, when “*the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ*” (Rev. 11:15). Yet, like the wilderness generations, the most important and blessed aspects of life in the Promised Land have come to us in the wilderness. For the glory descended upon the new Israel at Pentecost, and we have the living water of the Spirit and the true bread that has come down out of heaven and given life to the world (Acts 2; John 4:1–45; 6:22–59). We are not sheep without a shepherd, because the Good Shepherd has laid down his life for us and taken it up again, and he has appointed under-shepherds over us so that we will know the provision and protection of God until we enter into our final rest (John 10:1–18; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). All this is because, just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, Jesus Christ was lifted up on the cross to become the cursed one and to overthrow the ruler of this world (John 3:14–15; 12:31–32).

Embracing the wilderness setting of the church in exile has empowered the church throughout the ages, as embodied in one of its greatest hymns:

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,

Pilgrim through this barren land.

I am weak, but Thou art mighty;

Hold me with Thy powerful hand.

Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,

Feed me now and evermore;

Feed me now and evermore.

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1. C. John Collins, [“Numbers, Book of,”](https://ref.ly/logosres/dctnwtsldtstmnt?ref=Page.p+568&off=36117) ed. G. K. Beale et al., *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2023), 568–574. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael J. Glodo, [“Numbers,”](https://ref.ly/logosres/bblclthlgcltstm?ref=Page.p+107&off=2&ctx=4%0a~Numbers%0aMichael+J.+Glodo) in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 107–131. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)