

Numbers

ORIENTING DATA FOR NUMBERS

- **Content:** the Israelites' long stay in the desert as they journey from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab, with supplemental covenant laws
- **Historical coverage:** forty years, a period within which the generation that left Egypt died off
- **Emphases:** preparation for military conquest of the promised land; God's covenant loyalty toward Israel with regard to the land; Israel's repeated failure to keep covenant with God; God's leadership of his people and affirmation of Moses' leadership; preparations for entering and worshiping in the promised land; conquest and settlement of the land east of the Jordan River

OVERVIEW OF NUMBERS

If Leviticus tends to be an unappealing book to contemporary readers, then Numbers must be one of the most difficult in terms of “what in the world is going on?” The problem for us is that it is such a mixture of things—narrative, additional laws, census lists, oracles from a pagan prophet, the well-known Aaronic blessing—and it is not easy to see how it all fits together.

Numbers primarily records the pilgrimage of Israel through the desert from the foot of Mount Sinai to its encampment in the plains of Moab (on the east bank of the Jordan River), poised for conquest. But it is the second generation that ends up on the east bank—because the exodus generation refused to enter by way of the more direct southern route (at Kadesh) and so were judged by God as unworthy to enter at all. The basic travel narratives are found in 9:15–14:45 (from Sinai to Kadesh, including the refusal to enter and the declaration of God's judgment) and 20:1–22:1 (from Kadesh to the plains of Moab along the Jordan). There are four other major sections of narrative that have slightly different functions: (1) 7:1–9:14 records the preparations for the journey; (2) chapters 16–17 speak to the issue of Moses' and Aaron's God-given (and recognized) leadership; (3) the Balaam cycle (22:2–24:25) and the seduction at Shittim with the Baal of Peor (ch. 25) anticipate both the fulfillment of God's giving them the land and their own capacity nonetheless to be seduced by Canaanite idolatry; (4) chapters 31–36 narrate events on the east bank as they prepare for conquest.

Interspersed among these narratives, but at the same time adding meaning to them, are two census lists (chs. 1–2; 26–27), plus a genealogy/account of Aaron's family and of the Levites (chs. 3–4), as well as several collections of laws (chs. 5–6; 15; 18–19; 28–30), most of them picking up items from the Levitical Code (Lev 1–16; 21–22).

This, then, is what Numbers is all about: the journey to the edge of the promised land and further laws pertaining to proper worship. The question is, Can one make sense of its arrangement as narrative?

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING NUMBERS

In order to appreciate how the narrative of Numbers works (both the journey and the various surrounding matters), you need to recall several items from Genesis and Exodus.

First, the primary driving force behind everything is God's promise/covenant with Abraham that his seed would inherit the land of Canaan. This is what keeps the narrative going in all of its parts. And God will bring about the fulfillment of that covenant promise, even in the face of Israel's reluctance and disobedience.

Second, the conquest of the land involves the second stage of the holy war. The first stage—against Pharaoh in Exodus—even though led by Moses, was carried out by God the Divine Warrior through miraculous intervention. In this second stage, God intends his own people to be involved. He rescued them from slavery in order to make them his own people and place them in the land, but they must take ownership of the actual conquest of the land. This accounts for the two census lists, which count the men who can fight and put the tribes in battle formation around the tabernacle. The list at the beginning (from which Numbers derives its name) prepares the first generation for conquest by way of Kadesh; the second prepares the second generation for conquest by way of the Transjordan. This motif also accounts for the various narratives at the end, including the succession of Joshua (27:12–23) and the various matters in chapters 31–36 that anticipate the conquest.

Third, recall that in Genesis 12:7, immediately following the promise of the land, Abraham built an altar to the Lord. As you now read the various law portions interspersed within this narrative, you will find that they focus primarily on the Israelites' relationship with their God. Thus both the central role of the tabernacle and the priestly matters in Numbers continue to focus on two previous concerns in the Pentateuch to this point: the *presence* of God in the midst of his people—both his being with them and his guiding their journey—and the proper *worship* of God once they are settled in the land.

Finally, God's people themselves do not come off well in Numbers. You can hardly miss the relentless nature of their complaints and disobedience. In fact, apart from the future blessing that God speaks through a pagan prophet, there is hardly a good word about them in the entire narrative. The same complaints against God and his chosen leader Moses that began in Exodus 15:22–17:7—and then some—are repeated here (Num 11–12; 14; 16–17; 20:1–13; 21:4–9). This is simply not fun reading. In the New Testament, the Israelites' disobedience serves as warning for us (1 Cor 10:1–13; cf. Heb 3:7–13); in the Old Testament, even though their sins are expressly remembered, so also is God's "great compassion" on them (Neh 9:16–21; cf. Pss 78:14–39; 106:24–33, 44–46; see also the invitation and warning in Ps 95).

Thus, even though the narrative has some abrupt shifts of focus, Numbers carries on the burden of the Pentateuch in grand style. You are not allowed to forget that, despite Israel's waffling, this is *God's story* above all, and God will keep his part of the covenant with Abraham regarding his seed inheriting the land. At issue is whether Israel will keep covenant with God—and Numbers reminds you over and over again that the divine provision for them to do so is always ready at hand.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 49–51.