

Introduction to Numbers

Where is it in the Bible?

Numbers is the fourth book in the Old Testament and, therefore, the fourth book in the Bible. Although it may be somewhat unfamiliar to Christians, its stories are referenced about fifty times in other books of the Bible.¹

Who wrote it?

Like the other books in the Pentateuch, Moses is traditionally identified as its author. This claim is supported by 33:2, where the text says that “Moses wrote down their starting points, stage by stage, at the command of the LORD.” However, the book contains many different styles and forms of literature that it is clear that it had a long period of development stretching from very early in Israel’s history to the years after the exile.

When was it written?

The book was put together over a long period of time from a variety of sources. Although some of this material probably comes from earlier times, most scholars think that the final form of the book may be as late as the fifth century B.C.E., roughly 800 years after the Exodus.

What is it about?

Our name for this book comes from the Septuagint (LXX) and is probably related to the account of the census in the first chapter; however, in Hebrew it is called “In the Wilderness”. Numbers tells the story of the people of Israel travelling from Mt. Sinai to the plains of Moab just outside the Promised Land. It includes the forty years spent wandering in the wilderness because of the rebellion which occurred after the unfavorable report of the spies (Numbers 13-14). This book is composed of a wide variety of literary types, including historical narrative, statistical reports, poetry, and ritual and legal regulations.

How is it structured?

- I. Israel Prepares to Enter the Promised Land (1:1-10:10)
 - a. First Census and the Ordering of the Camp (1:1-2:34)
 - b. Duties of the Levites (3:1-4:49)
 - c. Measures to Prevent Defilement (5:1-6:27)
 - d. Consecration of the Tabernacle and the Levites (7:1-8:26)
 - e. Passover Celebration and Final Preparations (9:1-10:10)
- II. Traveling from Sinai to Kadesh (10:11-12:16)
 - a. The Journey Begins (10:11-36)
 - b. Complaints about Hardships (11:1-3)
 - c. Complaints about Food (11:4-34)
 - d. Miriam and Aaron Oppose Moses (12:1-16)

¹ *Lutheran Study Bible*, p. 238

- III. Forty Years Near Kadesh (13:1-19:22)
 - a. The Spies and the Rebellion (13:1-14:45)
 - b. Law-Giving at Kadesh (15:1-41)
 - c. The Rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (16:1-50)
 - d. The Budding of Aaron's Staff (17:1-13)
 - e. Duties and Privileges of Priests and Levites (18:1-32)
 - f. Laws Concerning Corpses (19:1-22)
- IV. Traveling from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab (20:1-21:35)
 - a. Rebellion at Meribah (20:1-13)
 - b. Resistance of Edom (20:14-21)
 - c. Death of Aaron (20:22-29)
 - d. Defeat of Arad (21:1-3)
 - e. The Bronze Snake (21:4-9)
 - f. Traveling Through Transjordan (21:10-20)
 - g. Victories Over Sihon and Og (21:21-35)
 - h. Balaam and Balak (22:1-24:55)
 - i. Baal Worship at Peor (25:1-18)
 - j. The Second Census (26:1-65)
 - k. Laws for the New Land (27:1-30:16)
 - l. War with Midian (31:1-54)
 - m. Settlement in the Transjordan (32:1-42)
 - n. Summary of the Journey (33:1-49)
 - o. Distribution and Inheritance of the Land (33:50-36:13)

What are some of its themes?

- **Covenant:** Numbers shows several of the promises that God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 being fulfilled. The Israelites have reached the Jordan River, the eastern boundary of Canaan. The descendants of Abraham have grown from the 70 who went to Egypt to the hundreds of thousands preparing to conquer Canaan. Finally, God has maintained the covenant relationship with Israel, in spite of the people's repeated failures to obey.
- **God's Continuing Presence:** In spite of the people's unfaithfulness, God remains faithful throughout the story. The Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle and the repeated appearances of God's glory (for example 14:10b, 16:19, and 16:42) are constant signs of God's continued presence among God's people.
- **Journey:** Numbers can be seen as a metaphor for a journey of a community or an individual. In spite of everything which can happen along the way – conflict, natural disaster, violence, and war – this book gives assurance that God's people are not alone. God is with them and will lead them.
- **Murmuring and Rebellion:** Numbers continues stories about the grumbling and rebellious people that we first encountered in Exodus. Perhaps the most significant example of this is the rebellion in which occurs when the spies return from Canaan and which leads to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (13:1-14:45). Rebellion also leads to the plague of snakes in chapter 21.