

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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The Book of Numbers is sublime. It forms an essential link in that forward-directedness from Adam to Jesus. In the most unusual of ways, it heightens our appreciation of and response to the person of Yahweh. For Christians this book is even more rewarding; for we find ourselves confronting in new ways the meaning of our salvation in Jesus Christ. He who is the goal of all history is the goal of the Book of Numbers.

—Ronald B. Allen, “Numbers,” in EBC, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:657

OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Numbers

I. Introduction

- A. For some, the book of Numbers is seen as a book of problems. “Commentators on the Book of Numbers tend to begin with a survey of the problems.”¹
- B. Some of the interpretive problems cited by scholars include:
 - 1. *The literary structure*: One commentator has called the book of Numbers the “trash can” of the Pentateuch because it seems that all the content that doesn’t seem to fit into the other four books was simply collected into Numbers.
 - 2. *The large numbers*: some argue that the numbers given in the book seem to be too large to be possible. If they are taken literally, then there could be as many as 1.5 to 2 million Israelites journeying through the wilderness, making it impossible for the wilderness to support them. For this reason, many have suggested that the numbers were either inflated (hyperbole), or that the meaning of “thousand” in the Hebrew should be taken as “clan,” “chief,” or “military unit.”
- C. Despite this, the book is critical to the Torah’s overall message. It is the literary “bridge” to the book of Deuteronomy.²

¹ Allen, “Numbers,” 2:657.

² Elmer A. Martens, “Theology of Numbers,” in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:985.

D. Key theological features of the book appear in the NT in connection with the person and work of Jesus Christ:

1. John 3:14 identifies the bronze serpent in the wilderness as foreshadowing the lifting up of Christ on the cross (Num 21:9).
2. John 6:31-51 identifies the manna from heaven eaten by Israel in the wilderness as foreshadowing Christ as the ultimate bread of life who came down from heaven (Num 11:8).
3. 1 Corinthians 10:4 identifies the rock from which Israel drank in the wilderness as a picture of Christ (Num 20:11).
4. 1 Corinthians 10:1ff identifies the key events of the book of Numbers as examples from which NT believers are to learn.
5. Jude 5 alludes to Israel's death in the wilderness as punishment for their unbelief.
6. Jude 11 offers Balaam (Num 31:16) and Korah (Num 16:1-3, 31-35) as illustrations of the foolish rebellion of false teachers.
7. Jude 16 calls false teachers "grumblers," a possible allusion to Israel's grumbling in the wilderness.
8. Revelation 22:16 may allude to the Balaam prophecy that "a star shall come forth from Jacob" (Num 24:17).

E. One of the church's most beloved hymns is based on the book of Numbers:

GUIDE ME, O THOU GREAT JEHOVAH

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah	Open now the crystal fountain	When I tread the verge of Jordan
Pilgrim through this barren land	Whence the healing stream doth flow	Bid my anxious fears subside
I am weak, but Thou art mighty	Let the fire and cloudy pillar	Death of deaths, and hell's destruction
Hold me with Thy powerful hand	Lead me all my journey through	Land me safe on Canaan's side
Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven	Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer	Songs of praises, songs of praises
Feed me till I want no more	Be Thou still my Strength and Shield	I will ever give to Thee
Feed me till I want no more	Be Thou still my Strength and Shield	I will ever give to Thee

II. Titles

A. Greek Title

1. The Greek title is *ἀριθμοὶ* (*arithmoi*), meaning "numbers".
2. The English title is simply a translation of the Greek and Latin titles.
3. The LXX title highlights the prominence of census numbers in the book.
4. However, this title doesn't really capture the point of the book.

B. Hebrew Title

1. The Hebrew title is *בְּמִדְבָּר* (*b^emidbār*), meaning "In the Wilderness."

2. The title continues the consistent pattern of titling each section of the Torah after the opening word or phrase of each respective section.
3. In this case, the opening word is actually וַיִּדְבֹר, meaning “And He spoke”
4. There are two possible explanations for why the book’s title was not taken from the opening word. Of these two, option (b) seems to be the stronger argument, though it is possible that both play a part in the book’s ultimate Hebrew designation:
 - a. The title is similar to the title of Leviticus (“And He spoke”) and so the title was taken from the fourth word in order to differentiate the two.
 - b. The title “And He spoke” really doesn’t capture the essence of what Numbers is about, but “In the wilderness” touches upon the geographical importance of the wilderness in the narrative events.

III. Chronology

- A. Time is a key element in the narrative of Numbers.
- B. The entire book spans a total of 39 years, but these are very *uneven* years
- C. Thus, the majority of the book (31 chapters) cover just 1 ½ years of Israel’s history while only 5 chapters span an entire 38 ½ years.
- D. This would seem to indicate that Moses is much more concerned about the events that occurred during the 2nd and 40th years of Israel’s wilderness experience than what occurred during the 38 years in between.

CHRONOLOGY OF NUMBERS

14 chapters (1:1-14:45)	5 chapters (15:1-19:22)	17 chapters (20:1-36:13)
Departure from Sinai to Futile Invasion Attempt	Death in the Wilderness	Miriam’s Death to Final Preparations for Canaan
6 months	38 ½ years	1 year

IV. Major Themes

A. The Wilderness

1. The term “wilderness” (מִדְבָּר, *midar*) occurs 48x throughout the book of Numbers
2. The wilderness has several important thematic elements:
 - a. It is a transitory place—a place that cannot be permanently occupied. Thus, Israel is only “passing through” the wilderness. However, they end up spending much more time there than they needed to. In essence, the 38 ½ years that Israel spent as punishment in the wilderness could be seen as Israel’s *wasted* years.

- b. It is a barren place—a place that cannot sustain a nation. Israel’s continued existence in the wilderness was based on God’s supernatural provision and sustaining power (cf. Deut 8:4).
 - c. It is a testing place—a place in which Israel’s faith and trust in Yahweh could be proven or disproven (cf. Deut 8:2).
3. For the first 21 chapters, the wilderness is a present reality in the narrative. By the time it is mentioned again in chapter 26, it is viewed as past—the place where the previous generation died.

B. Israel’s Rebellion and God’s Judgment

1. Israel’s rebellion is predominantly what the book of Numbers is known for
2. But the first ten chapters of the book portray Israel as a people that showed initial compliance with God:
 - a. Each tribe’s leader provided generous dedicatory offerings (7:1-88)
 - b. Israel is said to have “kept Yahweh’s charge, according to the command of Yahweh through Moses” (Num 9:23; cf. 1:54; 2:34; 5:4; 9:5; 10:13).
3. Israel’s rebellion begins in chapter 11 and occurs repeatedly through chapter 25. It is not until chapter 26—when the new generation is counted—that the narrative changes.
4. Each case of rebellion is met by God’s wrathful response, culminating in the death of the entire first generation of Israel in the wilderness, including Moses and Aaron.
5. Thematically, the spiritual character of Israel clearly surfaces throughout the book of Numbers:
 - a. Israel is the recipient of extended divine revelation and grace seen in God’s provision of the law and atonement for impurity.³
 - b. As a nation, their continued rebellion points to a heart of unbelief—Israel refuses to trust God
 - c. Moses employs several terms to capture Israel’s unbelieving spirit: “grumbling” (14:2, 29, 36; 16:11, 41), “complaining” (11:1; 14:27), “weeping” (11:4, 10, 13, 18; 14:1); “speak against” (12:1; 21:5, 7), “impatience” (21:4). But the most significant term used is “rebellion” (Num 14:9; cf. 17:10; 20:10, 24; 27:14).
 - d. Their unbelief culminates in their refusal to trust that God will lead them victoriously into the land. This is an especially important event, for this is the first time that their actions are termed “rebellion”—outright rejection of Yahweh and His commands.
 - e. When Israel says, “Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt” (Num 14:4), they were in essence committing high treason against their master. Israel, who had

³ Martens, “Theology of Numbers,” 4:986.

been redeemed from slavery to Egypt and had become Yahweh's servant, was now seeking to "run away" and return to their old master.

ISRAEL'S REBELLION AND YAHWEH'S JUDGMENT

Chapter	Israel's Rebellion	Yahweh's Judgment
11:1-2	Israel complains against Yahweh.	Yahweh burned the outskirts of the camp with fire, which was abated only by Moses' intercession.
11:4-34	Israel complains about the manna. They want to return to Egypt where they had "better" food.	Yahweh gives Israel nothing but quail to eat and strikes the people with a severe plague because of their greed.
12:1-15	Aaron and Miriam question Moses' leadership as covenant mediator.	Miriam becomes leprous.
14:1-38	Israel refuses to enter the land because of the false testimony of the spies who had returned from reconnaissance. They resolve to usurp Moses' leadership and return to Egypt.	The entire first generation of Israel is consigned to die in the wilderness without stepping foot in the land of Canaan.
14:39-45	Israel makes a futile attempt to take the land without Yahweh's help.	Israel is repulsed by the Amalekites and the Canaanites.
15:32-36	An Israelite man is caught gathering wood on the Sabbath.	Yahweh orders him to be stoned outside the camp by the entire congregation.
16:1-35	Korah and some of the Levites rebel against Moses and Aaron by arrogantly questioning their leadership and the special role of the Aaronic priests.	The earth opens up below Korah and his rebels and swallows them up.
16:41-50	Israel complains against Moses and Aaron, blaming them for the deaths of Korah and the others.	God incites a plague that kills 14,700 before Aaron makes atonement for the people and stops the plague.
20:2-13	Israel complains because of a lack of water. Yahweh instructs Moses to speak to the rock, but instead Moses strikes the rock, ironically rebelling against God in an angry response against Israel's rebellion.	Moses and Aaron are prohibited from entering the land and are consigned to die in the wilderness with the rest of the rebellious generation.
21:4-9	Israel complains impatiently because of their journey and their food.	Yahweh sends fiery serpents among the people, biting and killing many people. After Moses' intercession, he erects a fiery serpent. Anyone bitten who looked at the serpent lived.
25:1-9	Israel engages in idolatry while at Shittim by worshipping Baal-peor and engaging in cultic sexual sin with the daughters of Moab.	Yahweh sends a plague that kills 24,000. The plague is abated when Phinehas, one of Aaron's sons, executed an Israelite man and his Moabite prostitute.

C. The Blessing of God through Balaam

1. The Balaam Prophecies (22:1-24:25) comprise 3 full chapters, making it the single largest block of independent narrative in the book.
2. This section comprises a series of blessings over Israel made by Balaam of Peor
3. Two factors make the Balaam oracles both fascinating and problematic:
 - a. *The Placement*: The oracles fall in between two major judgments of God on Israel for rebellion: the episode of the fiery serpents (21:1-9) and final episode of idolatry at Peor (25:1-9). This raises the obvious question of why a series of blessings would fall upon a nation that is very clearly undeserving of them:

PLACEMENT OF BALAAM PROPHECIES

Rebellion At Mount Hor	The Balaam Prophecies	Rebellion At Peor
21:1-9	22:1-24:25	25:1-9

- b. *The Prophet*: The oracles come from the most unlikely of sources—a pagan diviner for hire, known in the region for his ability to speak for the gods. Was Balaam a true prophet of Yahweh or was he a false prophet?
 - 1) Some have argued that Balaam was a true prophet of Yahweh, in that “the Spirit of God came upon him” (24:2).
 - Counterpoint: The ministry of the Holy Spirit in the OT differs from His ministry in the NT. In the OT, it was primarily administrative and not always related to high moral character (e.g., Saul, Samson, etc.). The anointing by the Spirit enabled the person to carry out a specific function (e.g., theocratic rule, craftsmanship, judge, fight, or prophesy).⁴
 - 2) It is better to see Balaam as a false prophet for hire
 - The NT always portrays him negatively (2 Pet 2:15, 16; Jude 11; Rev 2:14)
 - Balaam ultimately led Israel into idolatrous sin with Baal-peor, leading to the deaths of 24,000 Israelites (Num 31:16)
4. The Context of the Prophecies:
 - a. Balak, the king of Moab, sent for Balaam to curse Israel out of fear of their large numbers and military successes. He did not possess a large enough army to confront Israel militarily.
 - b. Balaam was a diviner for hire, who genuinely thought that he could speak for Yahweh (“Spend the night here, and I will bring word back to you as *Yahweh* may speak to me” [22:8]).

⁴ For more on theocratic anointing of the Holy Spirit in the OT, see Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), 93.

- c. However, Moses' precise wording makes it clear that Balaam does not know Yahweh, nor is he able to speak for Him ("Then *God* [Elohim] came to Balaam and said..." [22:9, 12, 20]). Balaam speaks as though he has a relationship with Yahweh ("Yahweh my God" [22:18]), but the reader is aware that this is untrue. After all, he claims that "Yahweh has refused to let me go with you" (22:13), yet he returns a second and a third time to inquire of Yahweh. It is obvious that Balaam's core motivation was to profit from Balak's request, so he returns to see if something different would be said.
 - d. The pinnacle of his self-deception comes when the angel of Yahweh stands—sword drawn—before Balaam as he rode to fulfill Balak's wish. Ironically, Balaam's donkey sees the angel of Yahweh while Balaam himself remains blind to Him until his "eyes are opened" (22:31; cf. 24:3, 4, 15, 16). In this case, Balaam's donkey foreshadows in chapter 22 what Balaam will eventually become in chapters 23-24: a spokesman for God against his will, like a stubborn donkey!
5. The Content of the Prophecies

THE BALAAM ORACLES

ORACLE 1 23:7-10	God has turned the cursing of Israel's enemy into a blessing for Israel in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant promises (Gen 12:2-3). God has set Israel apart from the rest of the nations and has multiplied her in according with the Abrahamic Covenant promise (Gen 13:16).
ORACLE 2 23:18-24	God is determined to bless Israel, in spite of their unfaithfulness. God has acted mightily on behalf of Israel in the past, and He will certainly lead Israel into victory in the future.
ORACLE 3 24:3-9	Israel is a nation blessed by God. He fights on behalf of Israel and will bless them abundantly. They will certainly prevail over their enemies in accordance with Yahweh's promises to Abraham.
ORACLE 4 24:15-19	Yahweh will raise up a king over Israel who will defeat the kingdoms of Moab, Edom, and Sheth.
ORACLE 5 24:20	Despite the prosperity and power of Amalek, that nation will be destroyed.
ORACLE 6 24:21-22	The imposing defenses of the Kenites will not stop their ultimate destruction.
ORACLE 7 24:23-24	God—the sovereign over the nations—will bring both Asshur and Eber to destruction.

6. The Message of the Prophecies

- a. "The oracles demonstrate God's sovereign protection of his people against a planned spiritual attack, of which they themselves are unaware and which they can do nothing to avert."⁵

⁵ Al Wolters, "Oracles of Balaam," in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem. A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:436.

- b. “The oracles signal the dramatic return of God’s favor after the punishment of the unfaithful generation in the forty years of wandering.”⁶ In other words, Yahweh remained faithful to the Abrahamic Covenant promises even in spite of Israel’s continued unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant.
- c. The oracles reassure that “a people’s sinfulness will not thwart God’s plan.”⁷ No matter how sinful Israel becomes, Yahweh is both faithful and sovereign.
- d. The oracles reveal God’s ultimate plan to provide a king to rule not only over Israel, but all the nations.

D. The Numbers: The Glory and Grace of Yahweh

- 1. The numbers from the census of the first generation totaled 603,550 fighting men.
- 2. The numbers from the census of the second generation totaled 601,730 fighting men.
- 3. Thus, Israel’s population decreased by a grand total of 1,820 fighting men. In other words, despite the judgment upon Israel to die in the wilderness, the nation was completely replaced in numbers. This clearly demonstrates the grace and the glory of God to reestablish a people who had rebelled against Him, and even to reestablish them to their original numbers.
- 4. Scientifically speaking, there is no evidence for Israel’s experience in the wilderness. In fact, all that archaeology can prove is that it would be miraculous for even a few thousand people to survive in the wilderness for any length of time.
- 5. There is, then, no human explanation for what happened in the wilderness. To the glory and grace of God, the Israelites were sustained and provided for in a place where they should have certainly perished.

E. The Old and the New: The Patience of Yahweh

- 1. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness, during which time the entire generation who came out of Egypt perished.
- 2. From the time of the first census of Israel to the time of the second census, 39 years had elapsed. This reveals the incredible patience of God. God put up with Israel’s rebellion for 40 years.

F. The Land

- 1. The land becomes very important in the book of Numbers. The term “land” appears 123x.
- 2. Israel’s time at Sinai was for the purpose of gaining the revelation needed to function as Yahweh’s priestly nation. The book of Numbers, however, is about Israel’s trek from Sinai to the plains of Moab in preparation for the conquest of the land.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Martens, “Theology of Numbers,” 4:987.

3. It is no surprise, then, that the judgment of death in the wilderness comes after Israel rejects the land. Their failure to trust Yahweh to give them the land ultimately cost that generation the land. Not one of them stepped foot in it. Thus, the main concentration of the term “land” appears in chapters 13 and 14.
4. The second census was not only for the purpose of counting Israel’s fighting men, but also to split up the inheritance of the land. Thus, the second greatest concentration of the term “land” appears in the latter half of the book, where the allotments are given concerning each tribe’s inheritance.

G. The Priestly Covenant

1. The Circumstance of the Covenant
 - a. The Priestly Covenant arises out of Phinehas’ zealous act to execute one of the idolatrous Israelites who brashly took his Moabite woman into his tent to consummate the marriage, all in plain sight of Moses and the congregation of the Israelites (Num 25:6).
 - b. Phinehas, one of Aaron’s grandsons, “made atonement for the sons of Israel” (25:13) by sacrificing the two human offenders and thus “allowing the Lord to pardon His people and halt the spread of the plague.”⁸
2. The Promise of the Covenant
 - a. God promised Phinehas and his descendants a perpetual (“everlasting”) priesthood, meaning that Phinehas’ sons would always serve in the tabernacle/temple as God’s high priests.
 - b. Even though the priesthood ended with the abrogation of the Mosaic Covenant, Ezekiel 44:15 and 48:11 assert that the priests in the line of Zadok will continue their priestly ministry in the millennial temple. The Zadokian priests are in the genealogical line of Phinehas (1 Chron 6:50-53), and were the only priests who remained faithful to Yahweh and did not become idolatrous during Israel’s history (Ezek 44:10).
 - c. To this, Jeremiah 33:20-21 confirms that God’s covenant with David and His covenant with the Levites (the Priestly Covenant) is as sure as His covenant with Noah—“If you can break My covenant for the day, and My covenant for the night, so that day and night will not be at their appointed time [Noahic Covenant; cf. Gen 8:22], then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne [Davidic Covenant; cf. 2 Sam 7:8-17], and with the Levitical priests, My ministers [Priestly Covenant; cf. Num 25:11-13]” (Jer 33:20-21).

⁸ Irvin A. Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants; The Noahic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant,” *MSJ* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 188.

V. Purpose

- A. The purpose of Numbers must be understood in connection with the purpose of the Torah as a whole:

Book	Purpose Statement
Torah	God chose Israel as the seed of Abraham to be the priestly nation that would restore mankind to its proper role as rulers for God over His created earth.
Genesis	The God of Creation chose to bless sinful mankind through Abraham and his Seed who will inherit the Land.
Exodus	Yahweh (the God of Creation, the God of the Patriarchs) redeemed/delivered the Sons of Israel from bondage in Egypt and entered into a Covenant with the Nation of Israel at Sinai.
Leviticus	Yahweh gave instructions that enabled Him to live among His chosen people and enabled His people to have fellowship with Him.
Numbers	<i>The failure of Israel to obey Yahweh in faith brought Yahweh's discipline by death, but it did not frustrate Yahweh's ultimate purpose to bless Israel.</i>
Deuteronomy	

VI. The Literary Structure

- A. Geography seems to play a part in the book of Numbers (Sinai, Kadesh, Plains of Moab), but they don't seem to be the main focus of the book's organization.
- B. Instead, the more obvious focus is on the generations. The obvious break in the book appears with the census of the new generation, indicating that the book's largest concern is with the experiences of these two generations in the wilderness.

NUMBERS

I. The Experience of the First Generation of Israel in the Wilderness (1:1-25:18)	
A. The Obedience of Israel toward Yahweh at Sinai (1:1-10:36)	
1. The Organization of Israel around the Tabernacle of Yahweh (1:1-6:27)	
2. The Orientation of Israel toward the Tabernacle of Yahweh (7:1-10:36)	
B. The Disobedience of Israel toward Yahweh in the Wilderness (11:1-22:1)	
1. The Complaining of Israel on the Journey from Sinai to Kadesh (11:1-12:16)	
2. The Rebellion of Israel and Its Leaders at Kadesh (13:1-20:29)	
a. The Rebellion of Israel and the Consequences (13:1-19:22)	
b. The Rebellion of Moses and Aaron and the Consequences (20:1-29)	
3. The Renewed Complaining of Israel on the Journey from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab (21:1-22:1)	
C. The Final Rebellion of Israel with Baal of Peor on the Plains of Moab (22:2-25:18)	
1. The Blessing of Israel by Balaam: Yahweh will Fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant through a Future King from Jacob (22:2-24:25)	
2. The Covenant of an Everlasting Priesthood: The Seed of Phinehas (25:1-18)	
II. The Experience of the Second Generation of Israel on the Plains of Moab (26:1-36:13)	
The Renewed Obedience of Israel toward Yahweh	
A. The Preparations for the Conquest of the Land (26:1-33:49)	
B. The Anticipation of the Conquest of the Land (33:50-36:13)	

VII. Recommended Resources

R. Dennis Cole. *Numbers*. New American Commentary. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000.

Gordon J. Wenham. *Numbers*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981.

Timothy R. Ashley. *The Book of Numbers*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.