

## Numbers

“The Lord Bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face shine upon you,  
And be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace.’  
So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.” (Num 6:24–27)

When an individual or a people walks by sight rather than by faith, there is no end to the obstacles that can prevent the doing of God’s will. Fear had dominated the nation of Israel ever since coming out of Egypt. No amount of encouragement to remember God’s miraculous power on their behalf could convince them to believe and follow His leading. This persistent pattern of unbelief finally resulted in that generation being rejected from the privilege of entering the Promised Land. Instead, their children, whose safety had been used as a reason for not pushing forward, survived the wilderness and inherited the land. The book of Numbers chronicles thirty-eight years of God’s faithfulness in the face of Israel’s unbelief as one generation replaced another, becoming established in faith to carry on as the covenant nation.

### **Authorship**

Authorship has traditionally been ascribed to Moses though there is only one reference to his writing activity (33:1–2). However Moses is the recipient of most of the revelation. It is customary writing style in the ancient Near East for the author to refer to himself in the third person. There may be a number of additions to the book including the poem in 21:14 and the building activities mentioned in 32:34–42.<sup>1</sup> Moses may have used source material and was dependent upon either that or direct revelation from God for such things as the Balaam oracles. Certain editorial activity is likely, though this does not

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 84.

negate essential Mosaic authorship. The New Testament speaks of Moses as being the author of the Torah (see Matt 19:8; John 5:46–47; Rom 10:5).

### **Date**

Moses produced Numbers just prior to Israel entering the land, c. 1406 B.C., though later editorial activity may be responsible for its final canonical form. This date assumes the early date of the Exodus, that is, 1446 B.C.<sup>2</sup>

### **Historical Setting**

The action of the book takes place in the Sinai peninsula, between Egypt and modern Saudi Arabia, south of the ancient land of Canaan. Israel has seen Egypt's power broken at the crossing of the sea, though there is no explicit extra-biblical confirmation of this event. Israel had only to deal with smaller nation-states in the immediate area, though spent most of this period in the wilderness, isolated from most of what was occurring politically in this part of the world.

### **Original Readers and Occasion**

The book was originally written as part of the historical and theological record of God's dealings with the nation Israel. As the second generation was poised to enter the Promised Land Moses made sure that they had a complete record of Yahweh's faithfulness in bringing them through the wilderness so that they might be encouraged for the task of conquest that lay before them. As a sort of historical prelude to the covenant document (Deuteronomy) Numbers stands as a tragic reminder of what happens when God's people fail to live by all that He promises.

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<sup>2</sup> For an argument for the early date of the Exodus see Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987, 1996), 66-75.

## Special Issues

The “Numbers” of Numbers. The large numbers resulting from the census lists has created problems of interpretation as well as historical credibility.<sup>3</sup> Several solutions have been offered: (1) the numbers are to be taken literally (2) the numbers are from a census list from the time of the monarchy (3) the word translated “thousands” should read something else (like “tribes” or “chieftains”) and (4) that “the numbers are part of the epic style of narrative, intended to express the majesty and miracle of the deliverance from Egypt.”<sup>4</sup> Allen feels that the numbers were inflated by a factor of ten in order to “bring glory to God, derision to enemies, and point forward to the fulfillment of God’s promise to the fathers that their descendants will be innumerable, as the stars.”<sup>5</sup> Recent studies have confirmed that such a device may have been common in similar ancient Near Eastern writings.<sup>6</sup>

Israel had been out of Egypt for just two years when Yahweh instructs them to leave Mt. Sinai in order to enter the land of Canaan. Numbers details the movement of the people through the wilderness for the thirty-eight years that it took to complete this journey.

Relationship to the Pentateuch. Numbers stands as the fourth book of Moses in the collection known as the Pentateuch (The Five Books of Moses). Chronologically

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<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion see Ronald B. Allen, “Numbers,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 680-92.

<sup>4</sup> William Sanford Lasor, David Allan Hubbar, and Frederic Wm. Bush, editors *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982, 1996), 103-6.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, “Numbers,” 688.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., David M. Fouts, “A Defense of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Large Numbers in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 3 (September 1997): 377-87.

the first part belongs to the two year sojourn at Mount Sinai (1:1—10:36) while the rest covers the nation's thirty-eight year sojourn in the wilderness. Structurally, it has been argued that Numbers does not form a completely separate book but fits into a larger whole that encompasses Exodus and Leviticus or even Genesis through Joshua.<sup>7</sup>

### Message

Despite Israel's initial failure to enter and possess the Promised Land of Canaan, which resulted in the death of the first generation in the wilderness, Yahweh demonstrates His faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant by preserving and preparing the second generation to enter and possess that land.

### Outline

- Part I. The first generation of national Israel fails to sustain its initial obedience and experiences God's terminating discipline in the wilderness. 1:1–25:18
- I. Yahweh orders a census in order to confirm the viability of Israel's nationhood and to establish a benchmark of his own faithfulness. 1:1–54
    - A. Israel is numbered by tribe according to men able to go to war. 1:2–46
    - B. The Levites are numbered for appointment to Tabernacle service. 1:47–54
  - II. Israel responds to Yahweh's ordering of the camp and prepares to depart for the Promised Land. 2:1—10:36
    - A. Israel obeys Yahweh in the physical arrangement of the camp. 2:1—4:49
      - 1. The tribes are arranged by threes around the Tabernacle. 2:1–34
        - a. On the East were Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. 2:2–9
        - b. On the South were Reuben, Simeon, and Gad. 2:10–17
        - c. On the West were Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. 2:18–24
        - d. On the North were Dan, Asher, and Naphtali. 2:25–34
      - 2. The Levites are commissioned to serve the Tabernacle. 3:1—4:49
        - a. The high priesthood of Aaron's family is established. 3:1–4
        - b. Yahweh appoints the Levites to serve the Tabernacle. 3:5–13
        - c. The Levites are numbered by family. 3:14–39
        - d. The Levites are dedicated in place of the firstborn. 3:40–51

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of macro structure see David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 47-102; John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992); and Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, D. J. Wiseman ed. (Downers Grove, IL: 1981), 14-18.

- e. Yahweh sets the Tabernacle duties of three Levite families. 4:1–49
  - 1) Kohath is given charge of the most holy things. 4:1–20
  - 2) Gershon is given charge of the curtains. 4:21–28
  - 3) Merari is given charge of the boards. 4:29–33
  - 4) The three families are numbered. 4:34–49
- B. Israel obeys Yahweh in the spiritual ordering of the camp. 5:1–6:27
  - 1. The ceremonially unclean are put out of the camp. 5:1–4
  - 2. Confession and restitution are mandated for the camp. 5:5–10
  - 3. Marital infidelity is regulated in the camp. 5:11–31
  - 4. The Law of the Nazirite is regulated in the camp. 6:1–21
  - 5. The priestly blessing is given for the benefit of the camp. 6:22–27
- C. Moses obeys Yahweh in commissioning the Levites to the service of the Tabernacle. 7:1–8:26
  - 1. Offerings are made for transport of the Tabernacle. 7:1–9
  - 2. Each tribe makes an offering for the dedication of the altar. 7:10–88
  - 3. Moses fellowships with God before the mercy seat. 7:89
  - 4. The lampstands are arranged in the Tabernacle. 8:1–4
  - 5. The Levites are cleansed and dedicated to the service of the Tabernacle. 8:5–26
- D. Israel obeys Yahweh in observing the Passover. 9:1–14
  - 1. The Passover is kept on the fourteenth day of the first month. 9:1–5
  - 2. Provision is made to keep the Passover in the second month. 9:6–14
- E. Israel obeys Yahweh in departing from Mt. Sinai. 9:15–10:36
  - 1. Moses summarizes Israel’s response to the cloud over the Tabernacle in their journey through the wilderness. 9:15–23
  - 2. Yahweh instructs the nation in the use of signal trumpets. 10:1–10
  - 3. Israel departs Sinai at the command of the cloud. 10:11–36
    - a. Israel departs in obedience to Yahweh. 10:11–13
    - b. Israel departs in order. 10:14–28
    - c. Israel departs as a blessing. 10:29–32
    - d. Israel departs with Yahweh’s guidance and presence. 10:33–36
- III. Israel resists Yahweh’s command to enter the Promised Land and spurns His faithfulness with the result that the first generation forfeits the privilege of possessing Canaan. 11:1–25:18
  - A. Israel resists Yahweh’s direction at every turn but still experiences His provision and guidance. 11:1–12:16
    - 1. General complaining results in fire from Yahweh which is quenched by Moses’ intercession. 11:1–3
    - 2. Craving for meat provokes Yahweh’s anger, but also occasions a display of His gracious provision. 11:4–35
      - a. The people despise the manna and crave meat. 11:4–9
      - b. Moses despairs at his inability to satisfy the people. 11:10–15
      - c. Yahweh provides 70 elders to relieve Moses’ burden. 11:16–30
      - d. Yahweh provides meat and metes out discipline. 11:31–35

3. Jealousy of Miriam and Aaron is answered by an affirmation of Moses' privileged relationship with Yahweh. 12:1–16
- B. Israel refuses Yahweh's directive to enter the land which incurs His rejection. 13:1—14:45
  1. Yahweh commands Moses to send spies into the land in order to prove Israel's resolve to believe and obey. 13:1–20
  2. The spies return with a mixed report, tainted by fear. 13:21–33
  3. The people complain and refuse to enter the land. 14:1–10
  4. Moses successfully intercedes for the nation on the basis of Yahweh's character and covenant. 14:11–25
  5. Yahweh pronounces judgment on the first generation but promises to preserve their children to enter the land. 14:26–38
  6. Israel is defeated in a presumptuous battle. 14:39–45
- C. Yahweh reaffirms His intention to deliver the second generation into the Promised Land and provides instruction and protection toward that end. 15:1—25:18
  1. Yahweh instructs the second generation in the ways of covenant nationhood once they are in the land. 15:1–19:22
    - a. Yahweh instructs the people in worship and in dealing with sin to which the people respond positively. 15:1–36
      - 1) Grain, oil and wine are to accompany sacrifices. 15:1–16
      - 2) Instruction for the first dough offering. 15:17–21
      - 3) Offerings for unintentional sin. 15:22–29
      - 4) Law of presumptuous sin and an application. 15:30–36
    - b. Yahweh instructs the people in remembering all His commands. 15:37–41
    - c. Yahweh instructs the people on the importance of the priesthood. 16:1—19:22
      - 1) The position of Moses and Aaron among the Levites is challenged and answered by Yahweh. 16:1—17:13
      - 2) Yahweh instructs the Priests and Levites in their duties and legislates tithes for their support. 18:1–32
      - 3) Yahweh instructs in the rites of purification via the ashes of the red heifer. 19:1–22
  2. Yahweh guides and disciplines Israel as they move through the wilderness 20:1—21:35
    - a. Miriam dies at Kadesh. 20:1
    - b. Due to his presumptuous response to the people's contention, Moses forfeits entrance to the Promised Land. 20:2–13
    - c. Symbolic of the nations' attitude to Israel, Edom refuses to bless Israel by letting them pass through their territory 20:14–21
    - d. Aaron dies according to Yahweh's determination that he would not enter the land because of rebellion. 20:22–29
    - e. Israel defeats the Canaanites under king Arad. 21:1–3

- f. The people speak against Yahweh, who afflicts them with fiery serpents but also provides a way of deliverance. 21:4–9
        - g. Yahweh provides for Israel as they move through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. 21:10–20
        - h. Israel defeats two opposing nations and possesses their lands. 21:21–35
      - 3. Yahweh protects the nation from the devices of paganism. 22:1–25:18
        - a. Israel is protected from being cursed by a pagan diviner. 22:1–24:25
          - 1) Balak calls Balaam to curse Israel but Yahweh resolves to use him for blessing instead. 22:1–20
          - 2) The Angel of Yahweh intercepts Balaam and guarantees that the prophet will speak Yahweh’s word. 22:21–40
          - 3) Balaam blesses Israel for its might in numbers 22:41–23:12
          - 4) Balaam blesses Israel as the objects of Yahweh’s irreversible promises. 23:13–26
          - 5) Balaam blesses Israel by assuring them of their exaltation among the nations. 23:27–24:14
          - 6) Balaam blesses Israel as the recipient of the promise of a special king. 24:15–25
        - b. Israel is delivered from being joined to religious paganism. 25:1–18
- Part II: Yahweh prepares the second generation to enter the Promised Land. 26:1–36:13
- I. A second census and specific instruction confirms that Yahweh was now committed to the second generation as his covenant people. 26:1–27:23
    - A. The replacement of the first generation by the second is confirmed. 26:1–65
      - 1. The tribes are numbered and found to equal the preceding generation. 26:1–51
      - 2. Yahweh instructs Israel regarding apportionment of the land. 26:52–56
      - 3. The Levites are numbered and found to exceed the preceding generation. 26:57–62
      - 4. The replacement of the first generation by the second is confirmed. 26:63–65
    - B. Focus on the Promised Land is renewed. 27:1–11
    - C. The replacement for Moses is inaugurated. 27:12–23
  - II. Final instructions and provisions demonstrate that Yahweh will bring the second generation into the Promised Land. 28:1–36:13
    - A. Yahweh specifies the offerings of worship and service in the land. 28:1–29:40
      - 1. The daily offerings are specified. 28:1–8

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| 2. | The Sabbath offerings are specified.  | 28:9–10     |
| 3. | The monthly offerings are specified.  | 28:11–15    |
| 4. | The festival offerings are specified.   | 28:16—29:40 |
|    | a. The offerings for Unleavened Bread are specified.  | 28:16–25    |
|    | b. The offerings for the Feast of Weeks are specified.  | 28:26–31    |
|    | c. The offerings for the Feast of Trumpets are specified.   | 29:1–6      |
|    | d. The offerings for the Day of Atonement are specified.  | 29:7–11     |
|    | e. The offerings for the Feast of Booths are specified.   | 29:12–40    |
| B. | Yahweh delineates the statutes regulating vows of devotion.   | 30:1–16     |
| C. | Yahweh instructs Moses to take vengeance on the Midianites for their treachery against the covenant nation.                                       | 31:1–54     |
|    | 1. The war is undertaken successfully.  | 31:1–11     |
|    | 2. The spoil is purified for use by Israel.   | 31:12–24    |
|    | 3. The plunder is apportioned according to participation.   | 31:25–47    |
|    | 4. A freewill offering is made to Yahweh for preserving all the soldiers from death.  | 31:48–54    |
| D. | Moses preempts division of Israel by securing the commitment of the tribes of Reuben and Gad to participate in the conquest of the Promised Land. | 32:1–42     |
| E. | Israel's wilderness sojourn is chronicled in order to underscore Israel's failure and Yahweh's faithfulness.                                      | 33:1–49     |
| F. | Yahweh gives final instructions for the conquest and occupation of the Promised Land.   | 33:50—35:34 |
|    | 1. Yahweh gives instructions for the conquest of Canaan.  | 33:50–56    |
|    | 2. Yahweh specifies the boundaries of Israel's possession.  | 34:1–15     |
|    | 3. Yahweh appoints leaders to divide the land.  | 34:16–29    |
|    | 4. Yahweh prescribes cities for the Levites.  | 35:1–8      |
|    | 5. Yahweh instructs Israel about the cities of refuge.  | 35:9–34     |
| G. | As a summary postscript, Moses further delineates the laws of inheritance as it applies to tribal possession of the land.                         | 36:1–13     |

## Argument

Part I - The first generation of national Israel fails to sustain its initial obedience and experiences God's terminating discipline in the wilderness (1:1—25:18).

The Book of Numbers is largely a contrast between disobedient Israel and faithful Yahweh, and between the first and second generations of the fledgling nation.

The book contains a major movement motif as the nation departs from Mt. Sinai, wanders in the wilderness and finally arrives in Moab some 38 years later. However, the literary



structure revolves around the two censuses taken (chs. 1 and 26) and the contrast between the first and second generations.

I. Yahweh orders a census in order to confirm the viability of Israel's nationhood and to establish a benchmark of his own faithfulness (1:1–54).

As a means of demonstrating the viability of the descendants of Israel to receive nation status, Yahweh orders their numbering, and the people comply. This early census, taken at the beginning of the second year out of Egypt (1:1) will also serve as a measure of God's protection of his people over the next thirty-eight years when they will again be counted. The tribes are numbered by men able to go to war, indicating the manner by which they would take the land (1:2–46). A separate census is taken of the Levites who will be dedicated to special Tabernacle service, denoting the purpose the nation will have once they enter the land, namely to be a kingdom of priests (1:47–54; cf. Exod 19:4–6).

II. Israel responds to Yahweh's ordering of the camp and prepares to depart for the Promised Land (2:1—10:36).

The Book of Exodus had established the centrality of the Tabernacle as the locus of God's presence among his people. Numbers carries that theme forward as witnessed by the Tabernacle's presence in so much of what is detailed in the book.

A. Israel obeys Yahweh in the physical arrangement of the camp (2:1—4:49).

Having just numbered the men of war, the camping and marching arrangements are set forth next, with the Tabernacle and its furnishings occupying the central place. The military arrangement is unmistakable (note the repetition of "army" in ch. 2). The ultimate commander is Yahweh himself, hence the extensive arrangements for the

care of his “dwelling” place through the commissioning of the Levites for service of the Tabernacle in general and especially for its transportation by three chosen families (3:1—4:49).

B. Israel obeys Yahweh in the spiritual ordering of the camp (5:1—6:27).

Israel was more than just a nation bent on military conquest. It was a holy nation, dedicated to representing the Holy God to surrounding nations. As a result, Israel’s “marching” orders involved a spiritual discipline as well as a military one. As a reminder of this exalted purpose and exacting responsibility, a number of spiritual measures were undertaken in preparation for invading pagan Canaan. The ceremonially unclean were removed from the camp, signifying Israel’s separation to Yahweh’s service (5:1–4). Relationships must be maintained (divine/human and human/human) through confession and restitution (5:5–10), and marital purity needed to be guarded (5:11–31). These three requirements were but reminders of the entire body of covenantal stipulations which had already been set forth in Exodus and Leviticus. Regulation of the Nazirite vow reminded Israel that a voluntary consecration of the entire self was the greatest service that could be rendered to the Lord (6:1–21). The priestly blessing (6:22–27) reminded Israel that their destiny was bound up with Yahweh’s purpose to bring blessing to them, and through them to all the families of the earth (cf. Gen. 12:1–3).

C. Moses obeys Yahweh in commissioning the Levites to the service of the Tabernacle (7:1—8:26).

The culmination of the ordering of the camp is, fittingly, Moses’ commissioning of the Levites to the service of the Tabernacle. Leviticus 8:10 mentions the anointing of the Tabernacle. Whether Numbers 7:1 looks back to the prior dedication of the Taber-

nacle or whether Leviticus is based on the historical sequencing of Numbers, it is clear that once the dwelling place of God had been constructed and properly sanctified, it required special attendants for its proper functioning. The emphasis on the Levites' service in Numbers is on the movement of the Tabernacle from place to place. The nation recognizes the importance of such transport as witnessed in the leaders' supply of carts and oxen (7:2–9) as well as their dedicatory offerings for the altar (7:10–88).

At the center of this section on the Levites' commissioning to Tabernacle service, marking its supreme importance, is an account of Moses being spoken to by Yahweh from above the mercy seat (7:89). This brief notice is enough to remind Israel of the significance of the Tabernacle as their meeting place with God, which had already been fully developed in the Book of Exodus. This conversation also underscored the centrality of Moses as the mediator of the covenant and as Yahweh's unique representative. The only other items of furniture mentioned are the lamps (8:1–4) which may have been designed to remind Israel of their election to be lights to the pagan world into which she was moving.

Finally, the Levites are cleansed and dedicated to the service of the Tabernacle as the last necessary preparation for Israel's departure from the Mountain of God to enter the land of promise. If Israel was to be faithful as Yahweh's vassal nation, the Tabernacle would have to remain as the center of the nation's life. Taking what amounted to one thirteenth of the whole nation to simply care for the physical structure of the Tent of Meeting was a reminder of the structure's relative importance.

D. Israel obeys Yahweh in observing the Passover (9:1–14).

Chapter nine is the high-point of the generation of the first census. Both symbolically and with respect to the attitude and response of the people, this section summarizes the high-water mark of the nation's covenant commitment. Once again the Passover observance is commanded by Yahweh as a memorial to his redemption from Egypt. Now two years out of bondage, this third Passover takes on the added significance of a fuller understanding of the nation's calling and destiny as well as the nature of their covenant Sovereign. The fact that the people are taking Yahweh's commanded observances seriously is indicated by the fact that there were some who desired to participate but who had become unclean and expressed their disappointment over being excluded (9:6–8). Yahweh graciously makes provision for a "make-up" Passover one month later but warns that this is not to be abused (9:9–13). The permission for foreigners to participate in Passover underscores the universal availability of Yahweh's redemption and serves to remind Israel that she possessed a missionary mandate (9:13).

E. Israel obeys Yahweh in departing from Mt. Sinai (9:15—10:36).

This section likewise highlights the obedience of the nation as they set out from Sinai for the Promised Land. The passage begins with a summary of the next thirty-eight years of movement (9:15–23). The emphasis is on Israel's obedience to the cloud's "command" to move and encamp as the summary verse indicates (9:23). In addition to the cloud, the priests also had a part in directing the movement of the Israelites, again emphasizing the importance of their mediatorial role (10:1–10). Finally, Israel sets out for Canaan on the twentieth day of the second month, according to Yahweh's command and in perfect arrangement, just as they had been instructed (10:11–28). Moses' invitation to

Hobab the Midianite to go with them reminds Israel that a basic feature of the Abrahamic covenant was the blessing of the nations (10:29–32; cf. Gen. 12:3). Israel is reminded that as they first set out from Mt. Sinai, Yahweh went with them just as he had promised he would (10:33–36; cf. Ex. 33:14).

III. Israel resists Yahweh’s command to enter the Promised Land and spurns His faithfulness with the result that the first generation forfeits the privilege of possessing Canaan (11:1—25:18).

The opening phrase of this section (“now when the people complained”) marks a dramatic shift in the tone of the narrative. Whereas the whole preceding material is very positive in its depiction of Israel in their response to Yahweh’s final ordering of the camp for departure from Mt. Sinai, the next section emphasizes just as strongly their rebellion and disobedience. However, this merely serves to highlight Yahweh’s faithfulness in dealing with the chosen people as he continues to guide and instruct them.

A. Israel resists Yahweh’s direction at every turn but still experiences His provision and guidance (11:1—12:16).

A brief introductory paragraph sets the tone for the second half of the account of the first generation (11:1–3). The people complain, Yahweh responds in anger and sends judgment, but Moses intercedes and the Lord stays the destroying plague. At this point the destroying fire is a warning not to fall into unbelief. Later the first generation’s destruction will become Yahweh’s settled course of action, removing them from his program.

Specific examples of complaint and unbelief follow as an illustration of the true character of this generation. The first such example is the people’s craving for meat

which is satisfied, only to become an occasion of judgment due to their improper eating of it (11:4–35). However, something good does come from the incident as Moses recognizes his inadequacy in caring for the whole nation by himself and is given seventy Spirit-filled elders to share the burden (11:16–30).

Even Miriam and Aaron incur Yahweh's displeasure over their jealousy of Moses' exalted role as the Lord's special mediator (12:1–15). The positive result of this incident is the uplifting of the character and position of Yahweh's special servant, the most humble of men (12:3, 7–8).

B. Israel refuses Yahweh's directive to enter the land which incurs His rejection (13:1—14:45).

Yahweh directs Moses to select a representative from every tribe to spy out the land which he declares he is giving to them (13:1–25). The nation needed to be unified in its determination to fulfill its covenant mandate but in fact the spies return with a mixed recommendation with respect to going into the land (13:26–33). Only two, Joshua and Caleb, view taking possession of the land through the eyes of faith (cf. 14:8). The other ten see only their own relative weakness against the land's current inhabitants. This fearful response is a direct result of their previous habit of complaint with respect to Yahweh's intent for them and/or his ability to provide for them in the face of difficult circumstances.

As a result of the spies' negative report, the nation as a whole murmurs against Moses and Aaron and refuse to enter the land, while expressing concern over the threat to their wives and children (14:1–4). In fact, it will be only their children who eventually do enter the land. This refusal to obey Yahweh occurs in spite of the interces-

sion of Moses and Aaron and the exhortation of Joshua and Caleb to believe Yahweh's promise and not fear the inhabitants of the land (14:5–10).

In order to prove the mediator's resolve to see the covenant fulfilled Yahweh moves Moses to intercede for the nation's continuance as the covenant people by threatening to disinherit them (14:11–12). Moses does successfully intercede on the basis of preserving Yahweh's reputation as a covenant keeping God as well as his merciful character (14:13–19). Yahweh responds positively and reaffirms his commitment to covenant, but pronouncing judgment on the rebellious first generation who will die in the wilderness over the next thirty-eight years (14:20–38). Only Joshua and Caleb will join their "little ones" in entering the Promised Land (14:30–31). A futile, and disobedient, invasion attempt confirms Yahweh's resolve to see this rebellious generation perish in the wilderness (14:39–45).

C. Yahweh reaffirms His intention to deliver the second generation into the Promised Land and provides instruction and protection toward that end (15:1—25:18).

In order to reassure the nation of his resolve to deliver the second generation into the Promised Land Yahweh continues to instruct in the ways of covenant nationhood all the while guiding and protecting the people even as the first generation dies off.

1. Yahweh instructs the second generation in the ways of covenant nationhood once they are in the land (15:1–19:22). The reason for again discussing laws concerning sacrifices, which have already been spelled out in Leviticus, is to underscore the certainty of the land promise.<sup>8</sup> The agricultural offerings which are to accompany the other sacrifices would only be possible once the nation was settled in the land (15:1–16).

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the significance of these various offerings see *ibid.*, 126-29.

Their inclusion at this point is to encourage faith in God's promise to take the second generation into the land. Once again a reminder of Israel's missionary mandate is given through the mention of the "stranger" (15:14–16).

Perhaps in order to clarify Yahweh's severe response to the nation's refusal to enter the land Moses instructs concerning unintentional and presumptuous sin (15:22–30). There is forgiveness for unintended violations of Yahweh's will, even for a national infraction (cf. 15:25–26). But the penalty for presumptuous violation is to be cut off, even if it is a whole generation. An example of just such a case follows immediately as the congregation stones a man for violation of the Sabbath (15:31–36). This would also serve to underscore the seriousness of Yahweh's stated intent to see the first generation perish in the wilderness. The command to wear tassels on the corners of their garments is to serve as a reminder that all Israel was responsible for all the commandments all of the time (15:37–41).

A challenge to Moses and Aaron's leadership from within the Levites serves as an introduction to an extended section on the "centrality and indispensability of the priesthood" (16:1—19:22).<sup>9</sup> Yahweh deals severely with the rebellion and memorializes the fact that the priesthood belonged exclusively to the house of Aaron (16:15–40). When the people react negatively to the rebels' fate a consuming plague from Yahweh breaks out but is stopped by Aaron's atoning sacrifice (16:14–50). As a permanent reminder that the priesthood was of the house of Aaron by divine selection Aaron's rod, the single one to bud of all the tribes, is placed before the ark of Testimony (17:1–11).

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 133.



In response to the people's fear of coming near the tabernacle (17:12–13) Yahweh instructs Aaron in duties of the priests and Levites (18:1–7) and in their respective support by the tithes and offerings of the nation (18:8–32). The instructions, in this setting, would have had the effect of promoting harmony between the two divisions of the tribe of Levi (Aaron and all the rest) as well as between the Levites and the rest of the congregation. Once again unity of purpose and resolve is seen as crucial in the covenant nation's fulfilling of its mandate.

The people's fear regarding the sanctity of the tabernacle is warranted since even the touching of a dead body could defile the sanctuary (19:13). Therefore Yahweh instructs Moses and Aaron in the preparation of the ashes of the Red Heifer for the purification of the people in such instances (19:1–19). Otherwise the unclean had to be cut off (19:20–22).

2. Yahweh guides and disciplines Israel as they move through the wilderness (20:1—21:35). While many take this to be the beginning of the last major section of the book (being a journey notice) it is better to view it as the climactic movement of the sorry symphony of the failure of the first generation. However as such it is also a transition to the formal introduction of the second generation (26:1).

The report of Miriam's death (20:1) introduces the failure of Moses and Aaron to honor Yahweh before the people when they are again confronted over the lack of water (20:2–13). Even the high priest and the unique mediator are subject to unbelief (20:12) which will be the basis for their falling in the wilderness (cf. 20:12, 24). Likewise Edom has an opportunity to bless Israel but refuses and so sets itself on a course which will ultimately lead to their judgment (cf. Obadiah). When the nation comes to Mount Hor

Aaron dies and his son Eleazar takes his place showing that this section is also one of transition. Out of the failure of unbelief Yahweh is always making provision for ultimate success. Future success in warfare is indicated by Israel's defeat of the Canaanites (21:1–3). Unfortunately the first generation will not experience the conquering of the land due to its spirit of contention (21:4–9). This time Yahweh's judgment consists of poisonous serpents. But even in judgment Yahweh exercises grace in lifting up the bronze serpent for deliverance (21:7–9). A brief journey sequence continues the development of an expectation of entering the land (21:10–20) which is further heightened by the defeat of Sihon and Og and the possession of their lands (21:21–35).

3. Yahweh protects the nation from the devices of paganism (22:1—25:18).

The plains of Moab was the final stop of Israel's wilderness odyssey (22:1). Here the final transition from the first to the second generation will take place. It is also where the final great obstacle to Israel entering the land will take place in the person of the pagan prophet Balaam. The placement, subject matter and length of this section confirms the two-fold division of the book.

a. Israel is protected from being cursed by a pagan diviner (22:1—24:25).

Israel's success in battle rightfully terrorizes the nearby peoples, prompting Balak, king of the Moabites, to engage the services of a pagan diviner by the name of Balaam (22:2–7). Balak desires the renowned diviner to curse Israel as a last resort in stopping their advance.<sup>10</sup> However, God assumes the initiative and takes over the whole encounter (22:8–21). Yahweh will use the false prophet as his mouth-piece of blessing even though the plain indication is that Balaam remains thoroughly pagan in his approach. The inci-

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<sup>10</sup> See Allen, "Numbers," 884-914.

dent of the talking donkey highlights the blindness of Israel's pagan adversaries, Yahweh's sovereign control of all events and factors surrounding his chosen people, and the inability of Balaam to say anything other than what Yahweh would grant (22:22–40).

At the continual insistence of Balak, Balaam delivers four oracles which were originally intended to be pronouncements of cursing upon Israel but which turn out instead to be pronouncements of blessing and prophecies of success. In the first oracle (22:41—23:12) Balaam rehearses the nature of Israel's irrevocable blessing by Yahweh which has already resulted in their becoming a numerous people. The second oracle (23:13–26) focuses on the God of Israel as the source of their unique blessing and the Power behind their deliverance from Egypt. The third oracle (23:27—24:14) contains strengthened praise of the beauties of Israel along with a prediction of their future victory and ascendancy over the nations. The pronouncement at the end of verse 9 (“Blessed is he who blesses you, and cursed is he who curses you”) echoes Yahweh's original promise to Abraham as the controlling motif running throughout this section (cf. Gen. 12:3). The fourth, and most remarkable, oracle (24:15–25) foresees a coming ruler who will destroy Moab and all the surrounding nations. Many, like Allen, feel that this is “a specific prophecy of the coming messianic Ruler, the Lord Jesus Christ. Israel's future Deliverer will be like a star and a scepter in his royalty and will bring victory over the enemies of his people . . .”.<sup>11</sup> The three final oracles (24:20–24) serve to underscore the universal dominion of Israel, ultimately guaranteed under their coming Ruler.

The final act of rebellion in Numbers is the sexual and spiritual adultery committed between Israel and Moab (25:1–18). What pagan divination failed to accom-

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<sup>11</sup> Allen, “Numbers,” 909.

plish could perhaps be achieved through the more base instincts of the people themselves. Yahweh's anger and resulting judgment are abated when the sin is severely dealt with by Moses and Phinehas. In addition, the Midianites are to be attacked for their instigation of such perversion (25:16–18).

Part II - Yahweh prepares the second generation to enter the Promised Land (26:1—36:13).

The second major division of the book begins with a second census, this time of the second generation and continues with a marked change in mood and subject matter. The emphasis is on the second generation and their positive preparation for entrance into the Promised Land.

I. A second census and specific instruction confirms that Yahweh was now committed to the second generation as his covenant people. (26:1—27:23).

A. The replacement of the first generation by the second is confirmed (26:1–65).

At Kadesh Barnea the first generation had complained that their wives and children had been brought into the wilderness to die (14:3). The second census confirms that Yahweh is now working with those children all of whom are now over the age of twenty (26:2) (all of the men and their wives have indeed died—26:64–65). The census confirms that the parents fears were unfounded. The nation had not really diminished in numbers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The twelve tribes had decreased insignificantly (603,550 to 601,730); the Levites had actually increased from 22,000 to 23,000. This is a net decrease of only 820 (or 82 if the “factor of ten” view of Numbers’ numbers is accepted)!

B. Focus on the Promised Land is renewed (27:1–11).

Significantly the first instruction has to do with inheritance laws pertaining to when a man dies without direct heirs (27:1–11). The fact that this was an issue can only be explained by an imminent expectation of possessing of the land.

C. The replacement for Moses is inaugurated (27:12–23).

The land continues to be the focus as Moses is told to view Israel's territorial inheritance since he will not enter it because of his lapse at Meribah (27:12–14). Instead Joshua will replace Moses and lead the congregation as the divinely chosen leader (27:15–23).

II. Final instructions and provisions demonstrate that Yahweh will bring the second generation into the Promised Land (28:1—36:13).

A. Yahweh specifies the offerings of worship and service in the land (28:1—29:40).

Instructions for all of these offerings and feasts have already been given in Exodus and Leviticus. The repetition here serves the purpose of emphasizing to the second generation that the worship of Yahweh is of utmost importance. Once in the land their life must still revolve around him and his sanctuary. One new feature of the prescribed offerings is the inclusion of flour, oil and wine (cf. 28:4–8). As the time is at hand for actual possession of the land these elements take on new significance and add further confirmation to Yahweh's intention to see them enter into their inheritance.

B. Yahweh delineates the statutes regulating vows of devotion (30:1–16).

The introduction of instruction concerning vows serves to show that the mandated offerings and feasts were not to be an onerous obligation but rather something that

betokened Yahweh's gracious intentions; this should have led to a voluntary act of devotion beyond what was demanded of Israel as a vassal. The fact that vows are subject to certain regulations underscores the fact that it is Yahweh's established order which is to govern all religious and relationship issues.

C. Yahweh instructs Moses to take vengeance on the Midianites for their treachery against the covenant nation (31:1–54).

As a reminder of various threats to the purity and purpose of the nation which are posed by the rest of the nations, Yahweh commands Israel to take vengeance on the Midianites for their treachery at Baal Peor (cf. 25:3). This judgment included Balaam (31:8). An apparent act of incomplete obedience is rectified by Moses and the congregation is purified (31:12–24). The provision of the ashes of the Red Heifer (19:2) is applied by the second generation as they take seriously Yahweh's standards of holiness. The plunder is apportioned (31:25–47) and a freewill offering is made by the military leaders in thanksgiving for the fact that they had not lost one man in the attack on Midian (31:48–54). The second generation is already showing more signs of an obedient and appreciative vassal than had their fathers.

D. Moses preempts division in Israel by securing the commitment of the tribes of Reuben and Gad to participate in the conquest of the Promised Land (32:1–42).

However, this positive response does not mean that there would be no problems. In the request of the tribes of Reuben and Gad to dwell in the conquered lands of the transjordan region Moses detects a threat to the unity of the nation. Looking back to the discouragement caused by the spies at Kadesh Barnea (32:6–15) Moses elicits a commitment from the two tribes to fully participate in the campaign to take the land after

which they could return to the east side of the Jordan river (32:16–42). One half of the tribe of Manasseh also buys into the arrangement (32:33). The nation will be unified in its reception of Yahweh’s promised benefit.

E. Israel’s wilderness sojourn is chronicled in order to underscore Israel’s failure and Yahweh’s faithfulness (33:1–49).

As a sobering, yet potentially encouraging, reminder of the process of Israel’s arrival at the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses chronicles their physical movements, interspersed with reminders of Yahweh’s goodness and faithfulness (33:3–4, 9) despite the nation’s failure, symbolized by the death of Aaron outside the land (33:38–39).

F. Yahweh gives final instructions for the conquest and occupation of the Promised Land (33:50—35:34).

Following a glance backward via a wilderness movement chronicle, Israel’s gaze is directed forward to the conquest of the land. They are to drive out all its inhabitants, destroy anything having to do with false religion and divide up the land (33:50–56). As further encouragement Yahweh instructs Moses to specify the boundaries of the area that Israel was to possess by divine intent (34:1–15) and then actually selects the leaders who would be responsible for dividing the land according to tribe (34:26–29). Furthermore, Israel is ordered to give cities to the Levites and to establish cities of refuge for the manslayer (35:1–34). Beyond the functional need for such cities, namely, the livelihood of the Levites and the protection of the innocent, instruction about them at this point is to add further confirmation of Yahweh’s intent to see this generation into the land as well as

to heighten anticipation (and set the stage for the renewal of the covenant which will follow directly via the Book of Deuteronomy).

G. As a summary postscript, Moses further delineates the laws of inheritance as it applies to tribal possession of the land (36:1–13).

Reintroduction of the issue of the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad might seem to be a rather anti-climactic, even trite, way to end such an important document. Indeed, this chapter along with the previous two, seem to be appendages to the climactic pericope regarding the conquest of Canaan (33:50–56).<sup>13</sup> And yet in a sublime manner it captures the message of the entire book. The second generation has indeed been prepared to enter the land and they are here evidencing a confidence in its conquest and an expectation of holding it as a lasting possession as the reference to the year of Jubilee shows (36:4). Yahweh is dealing with Israel as a nation coming of age. There is development in the application of case law all within the context of the sovereign-vassal relationship established at Mt. Sinai. Israel is taking its role and Yahweh's promises seriously. It is looking beyond the fierceness of any resistant inhabitants in the land, contrary to their unbelieving fathers, and thinking about the laws of tribal inheritance that had been set up by Yahweh himself. Hence, the last chapter is not anticlimactic but rather a graphic illustration, in a very normal and everyday way, of the fact that despite all that they had going against them, the second generation of national Israel had indeed been prepared in the wilderness to succeed where their parents had failed.

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<sup>13</sup> So says Allen, "Numbers," 1005-6.



## Summary

After a year at Mt. Sinai, being instructed in the stipulations of the covenant of nationhood, receiving instructions for and building the Tabernacle, and being taught in the way of holiness, Israel was ordered to set out for the land. This would complete the journey toward nationhood. The nation responded and then immediately failed. Instead of entering the land in dependence upon a faithful God, Israel refused to enter the land through unbelief. This resulted in the first generation wandering and dying in the wilderness. However, God demonstrated His faithfulness in preserving the second generation and delivering them into the land of promise. Numbers demonstrates that though a given person or generation may fail through unbelief, God will ultimately fulfill his purposes through responsive agents. Neither the unbelief of Israel, nor the opposition and sedition of Israel's enemies, were able to thwart God's sovereign intention. God punishes rather than rewards disobedience, but his plan will not be untracked by it. The key to success for Israel was the presence of God dwelling in their midst. The Tabernacle is a focal point in Numbers and represents God's powerful presence among His people. The fear of unbelief, evidenced in the first generation's concern over the destructive threat of the inhabitants of the land, is shown to be unreasonable by the fact that God preserves the "little ones" for thirty-eight years and delivers them into the land instead of their parents. And their numbers have not decreased. God is faithful to keep His promises and deliver His people to their appointed end. However, unbelief brings loss of temporal blessing and short-term forfeiture of covenant privilege.

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