

Excerpted from: Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

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.

A WALK THROUGH NUMBERS

□ **1:1–2:34** ***The Census at Sinai***

This introduction to Numbers is in two parts: (1) the census and (2) the arrangement of the tribes around the Tent of Meeting (the place of God’s presence). Note that the census is for those “twenty years old or more who were able to serve in the army” (1:3) and that the arrangement of the tribes concludes in each case, “All the men assigned to the camp of ...” These are preparations for their engagement in the holy war; former slaves are being transformed into an army.

□ **3:1–4:49** ***The Account of the Levites***

Observe how this section begins with the narrative theme formula of Genesis (“This is the account of ...”). As you read, recall two things from before: (1) the central role of the Tent of Meeting with its ark of the covenant, the place of God’s presence, for the journey to Canaan—and beyond—and (2) in making covenant with Israel at Sinai (where they still are), Yahweh adopted them as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6). Hence the reason for this material: This is part of what makes them a “kingdom of priests,” a nation set apart for God.

□ **5:1–6:27** ***Cleansing the Camp***

Note how this section is structured around the rubric of Leviticus: “The LORD said to Moses” (Num 5:1, 5, 11; 6:1, 22), who in turn is to instruct the people. Remember also their calling to be a “holy nation.” Thus the narrative about purifying the camp (5:1–4) is followed by three sets of laws: (1) the restitution of wrongs (5:5–10, they must be in accord with one another); (2) purity/faithfulness in marriage (5:11–31, thus keeping the holy “seed” pure); (3) the Nazirites, laypeople who dedicate themselves to God’s service, as special illustrations of Israel’s holy calling (6:1–21). The section concludes with the Aaronic blessing (6:22–27), a reaffirmation of God’s covenant promise as the Israelites look toward the promised land.

□ **7:1–9:14** ***Final Preparations for Departure***

Notice how 7:1 picks up from Exodus 40:2, so that each part of this section deals with final preparations for their journey. Everything now centers on the tabernacle, the place of sacrifice (worship) and of God’s presence. Thus the narrative proceeds from the twelve-day dedication of the altar (Num 7:1–89), through setting up the lamps (8:1–4) and the purification of the Levites (8:5–26), to the celebration of the Passover as they set out (9:1–14; cf. Exod 12).

□ **9:15–14:45** ***From Sinai to Kadesh***

Israel is now ready to go, so observe how this narrative begins: with the reminder from Exodus 40:34–38 of God’s presence, symbolized especially by the cloud that would lead them (Num 9:15–23), and with the blowing of the trumpets (10:1–10). And so they take off in battle formation (10:11–28). See also how each day ends: with a call for God the Divine Warrior to lead in battle and to return to Israel (10:35–36).

You can hardly miss the emphasis in the rest of the narrative (11:1–14:45): Israel complains to God and rejects Moses’ leadership. Note how much of this recalls Exodus 15:22–18:27 and 32:1–34:35, where Israel complains rather than offers praise and gratitude to God and where God gives them what they need but also judges them; Moses’ intercession for the people (in Num 14:18, recalling the very words of Exod 34:6–7); the seventy elders, who now also anticipate Spirit-empowered prophecy in Israel; God’s reaffirmation of Moses’ leadership. Note also the crucial roles of Joshua and Caleb (from Ephraim [the northern kingdom] and Judah [the southern kingdom]). Their stories will continue (Num 27:12–23; the book of Joshua; Judg 1:1–26), as will the roles of the two tribes they represent (1–2 Kgs).

□ **15:1–41** ***Supplemental Laws***

Since the next generation *will* enter the promised land, this section records God’s giving his people laws in anticipation of that time. Note that it includes provisions even for unintentional sins, no matter how the failure occurs. Note also how the death of a Sabbath violator (15:32–36) carries forward the theme of covenant obedience both from the beginning of the whole story (Gen 2:1–3) and from the beginning of the covenant (Exod 20:8–11).

□ **16:1–19:22** ***The Crisis over Leadership and Priesthood***

The narrative portion of this section (chs. 16–17) has to do with Moses as God’s chosen leader and with Aaron as God’s chosen high priest. This second matter explains the placement here of the law portion as well (chs. 18–19).

□ **20:1–25:17** ***From Kadesh to the Plains of Moab***

As you read this next portion of the journey narrative, look for several narrative clues: (1) The deaths of Miriam and Aaron (20:1, 22–29) indicate that the forty years are coming to an end and the transition to the next generation is beginning. (2) The refusal of Edom (descendants of Esau, Jacob/Israel’s brother) to let Israel pass through their lands marks the beginning of a long history of enmity (see the book of Obadiah). (3) The defeats of the Canaanite king of Arad (21:1–3) and the Amorite kings (21:21–35) mark the beginning of Israel’s victories in the holy war and anticipate the book of Joshua; it is of some importance that the first victory (Arad, 21:1–3) eliminates a foe that had defeated them a generation earlier (Num 14:45; cf. Josh 12:14). (4) The Balaam cycle (chs. 22–24) and its sequel—the cultic immorality with the Baal of Peor

(Num 25)—both recapitulate the story to this point and anticipate the rest of the Old Testament story. Note especially how the Balaam cycle is told with mockery—and a touch of humor (an ass speaks and Balaam thinks it reasonable to talk back!) and irony, as God uses a pagan prophet (!) to announce God’s certain fulfillment of his covenant, even as many in Israel fall prey to cultic prostitution and thus to idolatry.

□

26:1–36:13

***In Moab: Preparations for
Entry into the Land***

Again, watch for the various narrative clues that give significance to this section and anticipate the actual possession of the land: (1) The second census (ch. 26) reaffirms God’s promise that the new generation will indeed enter the promised land, as does the repetition of the stages of the journey in 33:1–49. (2) Various succession and inheritance issues (chs. 27; 32; 34–36) reaffirm God’s promise of a long stay in the land, as do (3) the repetition (and enhancement) of the annual cycle of worship festivals (chs. 28–29). (4) The vengeance on the Midianites (ch. 31) anticipates the long story of success and failure in Judges (cf. Num 33:50–56). (5) The sanctity of people and of the land must be preserved (ch. 35), because it is “the land ... where I dwell, for I, the LORD [Yahweh], dwell among the Israelites” (v. 34).

The significant part of Israel’s story we find recorded in Numbers had a long history in Israel’s memory (Deut 1–4; Neh 9; Pss 78; 105; 106; 135; Acts 7), stressing God’s faithfulness to his people despite their many failures, and the story continues to be sung in the Christian church (“Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”).

Study notes from ESV Study Bible

Source: *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

Num. 1:1–10:10 Israel Prepares to Enter the Land. Numbers tells how Israel moved from Mount Sinai to the Jordan Valley, the eastern border of the Promised Land. All the material in the first 10 chapters relates Israel’s preparations for a war of conquest.

Num. 1:1–46 The First Census. This census has two purposes: (1) to demonstrate the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore (Gen. 22:17); and (2) to count the number of men over 20 years old who could fight. Both considerations should give the people confidence in their battle for the land.

Num. 1:47–54 The Responsibilities of the Levites. The **Levites**, the priestly tribe, were not included in the census because they had a more important job than fighting. They were responsible for the **tabernacle**, God’s palace, the most vital part of the whole camp. Israel was the people of God, but without his presence with them in the tabernacle, there would have been no point to their existence. The Levites’ task was to ensure God’s continuing presence with Israel. They dismantled, carried, and reassembled the tabernacle (vv. 50–51). They also guarded

it from intruders. Entry to the tabernacle by laypeople could lead to divine wrath breaking out and the death of many Israelites, so the Levites were told to execute any outsider breaking in (vv. 51–53). A similar threat had been made against anyone trying to approach God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:11–13; Heb. 12:18–29).

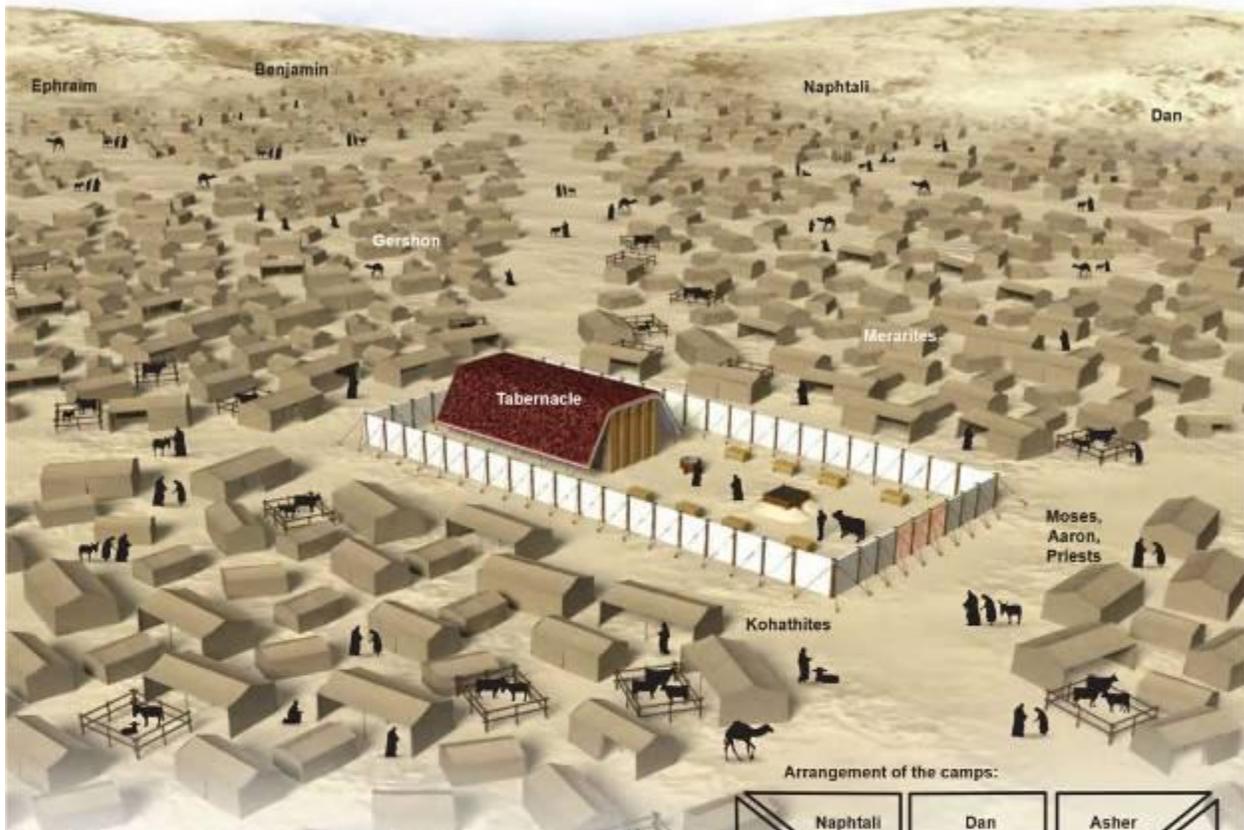
Num. 3:11–13 Reason for the Levitical Census. In the last plague, every **firstborn** male Egyptian and every firstborn of their cattle died, but the Israelite boys and cattle were spared. So after this, all Israelite firstborn boys and cattle were dedicated to God. That meant the cattle were sacrificed and the boys should have served God in the sanctuary (Ex. 11:4–13:15). But after the golden calf incident, the Levites took the place of the firstborn boys (Ex. 32:25–29).

Num. 3:40–51 Redemption of the Firstborn. The census showed there were **273** fewer **Levites** than **firstborn males** in the other tribes. To redeem these 273 Israelites who had no Levite to take their place, **five shekels** (v. 47) per person had to be paid. This is the tariff prescribed in Lev. 27:6 for boys under five. Five shekels would have been about a year's pay for a herdsman.

Num. 4:34–49 The Results of the Second Census. Levites between 30 and 50 years old totaled **8,580**, just over a third of their total number of 22,000 (3:39). This chapter again shows preparations being made for the march into Canaan. It underlines once again the dangerous holiness of God: he cannot be approached casually. It also emphasizes the importance of the ministry of the Levites, who make possible the transport of the tabernacle to the land and who guard it from intrusion.

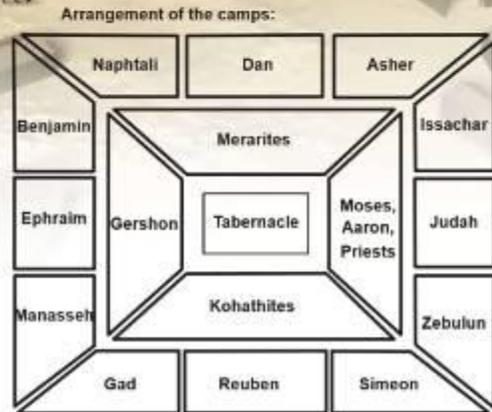
Israelite Encampment Diagram (Numbers 2:1-34)

Source: Logos 5 Bible software



The Israelite Encampment

The Book of Numbers describes the layout of the encampment during Israel's 40 years of wilderness wanderings (2:1-34). The tribes encamped around the tabernacle, both in order to stay close to the tent of meeting and to defend it during attack. The four sides were surrounded by four groups, led by Judah, Reuben, Ephraim, and Dan. The Levites—specially chosen to be close to God—camped around all sides of the tabernacle.



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