Study Commentary on Numbers

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A Study Commentary
on
Numbers

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Contents

Glossary of linguistic terms

apodosis: the main clause of a conditional sentence (see also protasis)

chiasmus (derivative **chiastic**): a literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order, in the same or a modified form

ellipsis: an omission from a sentence of one or more words which would be needed to complete the sense or construction

enclitic: a word which is pronounced as if it were part of the preceding word, and is sometimes attached to it

epibole: repetition of a phrase for emphasis

hendiadys: the expression of a single idea by two words connected with 'and'

***inclusio*:** a repeated theme which both introduces and concludes a passage, and thus encompasses the whole

meiosis: a figure of speech by which something is intentionally presented as smaller or less important than it really is

***merismus*:** a pair of opposites that are all-inclusive

metonymy: the substitution of a word denoting an attribute or adjunct of something for the word denoting the thing itself

polyptoton: the use of a verb and a cognate noun together, which acts as a superlative, giving great force and emphasis to the action

protasis: the clause expressing the condition in a conditional sentence (see also 'apodosis')

***puncta extraordinaria*:** dots placed above the letters by the scribes, which usually indicate that they thought these characters should be omitted

synecdoche: a figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole, or vice versa

Introductory matters

Title

The title 'Numbers' comes from the Septuagint through the Vulgate. In Greek the name for the book is *arithmoi*, which means 'quantity', or 'numbers' (our word 'arithmetic' is a derivation of it). This is the common name for the book in the Septuagint, although in some texts it is amplified by the addition of 'book four', or 'of the Israelites', or even, 'of the Israelites; a composition of the God-inspired Moses; the fourth book'.[1] The Greek title certainly reflects the centrality in the book of the two censuses and the fact that the narrative begins with a census (chs. 1 – 4).[2] The heading of the book in the Vulgate is *Numeri*. Dillard and Longman argue that this title for the book promotes lack of interest in it: 'The descriptive, yet prosaic title Numbers has contributed to a general lack of interest in the book by the Christian community at large. The title conjures up thoughts of censuses and lists.'[3]

In Jewish circles the book goes by two different names. The first is *way^{e}dabēr*, which literally means 'And he said …' It is the opening word of the book, and this heading reflects a common practice of Judaism to name its books this way. For example, in the Hebrew text, the book of Exodus is called 'And these are the names of,' and the book of Leviticus has the title 'And

he called'. In both cases these are the first words of the book. For Numbers, 'And he said …' is also an appropriate title because it relays one of the central ideas and teachings of the book: God speaks to Moses and gives him his word in Numbers from beginning to end. In fact, the book closes with this statement: 'These are the commandments and the judgements that Yahweh commanded the sons of Israel by the hand of Moses in the plains of Moab next to the Jordan near Jericho' (36:13). In addition, just like the books of Exodus and Leviticus, Numbers begins with the *waw* consecutive / conjunction (= 'and'), which indicates a historical continuity with the previous books in the Torah.

The second heading found in Hebrew texts is *b^{e}mid^{e}bar*, which means 'in the wilderness'. This is clearly a fitting and accurate name for the book because it properly reflects its setting. The book narrates the movement of Israel through the desert from Mount Sinai (1:1; 10:12) to the plains of Moab (22:1; 36:13).

The structure of the book

For many decades, the general scholarly consensus regarding the structure of the book of Numbers has promoted the principle of disunity and disorder. Martin Noth's work on Numbers is an example of this disjointed perspective; he says, 'From the point of view of its contents, the book lacks unity, and it is difficult to see any pattern in its construction.'[4] Gray is not being facetious when he suggests that a coherent reading of the book of Numbers would be greatly improved by assigning Numbers 1-10 to the book of Exodus.[5] The problem, in a nutshell, as seen by many scholars, is that Numbers is a 'piece of narrative, but this narrative is interrupted again and again by the communication of more or less comprehensive regulations and lists'.[6] In other words, Numbers lacks coherence as narrative literature because its flow is often disturbed by insertions of law and other non-narrative material.

It is true that Numbers contains a variety of literary genres surpassing that of most other books of the Hebrew Bible. Milgrom notes the following categories: 'narrative (4:1-3), poetry (21:17-18), prophecy (24:3-9), victory song (21:27-30), prayer (12:13), blessing (6:24-26), lampoon (22:22-35), diplomatic letter (20:14-19), civil law (27:1-11), cultic law (15:17-21), oracular decision (15:32-36), census list (26:1-51), temple archive (7:10-88), itinerary (33:1-49).'[7] The reality is that 'what impresses one about Numbers is its generic variability'.[8] Childs concludes that Numbers is simply one of 'canonical tolerance of diversity'.[9]

The question for us, then, is, does this multiplicity of form mean that there is no discernible structure to the book of Numbers?

Diversity of form and genre has not stopped scholars from attempting to determine a structure for the book. The two most common attempts to see structure are the chronological and the geographical approaches. The first defines structure based on indicators of historical sequence (see 1:1; 7:1; 10:11; 33:38).[10] The major problem with this position is that the chronological markers are few and sporadic, and, therefore, it is difficult to see how they might organize the book except in a very cursory fashion. Geographical features do provide a general design to the book. The initial part of the book is set in the wilderness of Sinai (1:1 – 10:10); the second section (10:11 – 21:9) occurs in the north Sinai, west of the Arabah; and the final section takes place in Transjordan, east of the Arabah (21:10 – 36:13).[11] But I would agree with Childs' assessment of this position when he says, '… although geographical features are significant, their importance in establishing a structure should not be exaggerated.'[12]

Olson has defined the structure of the book of Numbers in an even more general way on the basis of its content.[13] He argues that the two census lists of the book are the pillars of its structure. Therefore, the book should be divided into two parts: Numbers 1:1 – 25:18, which deals with the first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt, and Numbers 26:1 – 36:13, which describes the actions of the second generation of Israelites. While this division is certainly true, it does not go very far towards explaining the literary diversity of the book. Again, how does the variety of genres fit into the overall structure of the book?

Literary structure

Mary Douglas, in a groundbreaking study, has argued, from the standpoint of literary form, that the book of Numbers 'has been very carefully constructed and that the many repetitions and jumps of context are not accidental'.[14] I could not agree more. Whereas many scholars have recognized an alternation between narrative and law (and other genres) throughout the book, they have concluded that this signifies disunity; Douglas, on the contrary, believes it reflects symmetry and a well-structured document.

Douglas properly observes that the book of Numbers consists of seven narrative sections that alternate with six ordinance, or law, sections.[15] She is certainly correct that the composition of the book is structured according to these two alternate strands, but what exactly is its arrangement? I would suggest the following inner structure of the book:

1:1 – 4:49. Censuses of Israel (N)
5:1 – 6:27. Laws of separation (L)
7:1 – 9:23. Offerings to the Lord (N)
10:1-10. The trumpets of Israel (L)
10:11 – 14:45. To the land of promise (N)
15:1-41. Laws for the land of promise (L)
16:1 – 17:13. TABERNACLE (N)
18:1 – 19:22. Laws of the priesthood (L)[1]
20:1 – 27:23. To the land of promise (N)[1]
28:1 – 30:16. Laws of offerings and vows (L)[1]
31:1 – 33:49. War and settlement (N)[1]
33:50 – 35:34. Laws of settlement (L)[1]
36:1-13. Daughters of Zelophehad (N)[1]

This arrangement is an inverted structure in which each section has its parallel. Each law section coincides with another law section, and each narrative section matches another narrative section. The crux

or pivot of the design is 16:1 – 17:13. This is a narrative section that focuses on events occurring at the tabernacle. This is no mere coincidence, but the tabernacle, where God dwells with his people, is at the very heart and centre of the book of Numbers and of the people of God.

Douglas conjectures that this arrangement is not haphazard, but in reality it is concordant with the structure of the Jewish lunar calendar. This agreement, in addition, is not a mere act of coincidence, but 'may have had a more profound philosophical purpose. The poet may have been striving for an underlying consonance between logic and existence exemplified by both the organization of the book and the cosmos. It would be fitting that a theological book should itself conform to the structure of creation.'[16] While I would agree that the arrangement of Numbers is based on a paradigm, I am unconvinced that it is modelled on the Jewish lunar calendar. Douglas' suggestion is plausible, but not likely.

It seems to me that the structure of Numbers reflects a more 'down-to-earth' paradigm, rather than a cosmological or philosophical one. It actually appears to mirror the marching order of the tribes as they proceed through the wilderness from Sinai to the plains of Moab. In Numbers 10:11-28, we read about the disposition of the tribes in their travels to the land of promise. Six tribes lead the marching column. These are followed by the Kohathites, who carry the 'holy objects' of the tabernacle. The final six tribes then follow on behind the holy objects. This arrangement reflects the centrality of the holy objects of the tabernacle to the people of Israel. The entire structure of Numbers parallels this order: it begins with six sections of narrative and law, followed by events at the tabernacle (dealing with holiness), and, finally, six further sections of law and narrative conclude the book.

The structure of Numbers may also reflect the arrangement of the Israelite tribes when they are encamped. In Numbers 2, Yahweh commands how Israel will be organized when they are in camp and not travelling. In verses 1-16, he tells the first six tribes of Israel where they are to be positioned. Verse 17 then describes where God wants the tabernacle to be positioned. And, finally, Yahweh tells the final six tribes where they are to camp (2:18-31). Again, this design appears to be reflected in the overall structure of the book of Numbers.

This arrangement makes perfectly good sense, because one of the primary purposes of the book is to trace the wilderness journeys of Israel. The book of Numbers records the travels of the people of God from 'the wilderness of Sinai' (1:1) to 'the plains of Moab next to the Jordan at Jericho' (36:13), and so the organization of the book of Numbers is based on the arrangement of Israel's marching order and order of encampment.

The following commentary on the book of Numbers is framed according to the pattern just discussed. In other words, the first chapter of the commentary consists of the narrative section of 1:1 – 4:49 (censuses of Israel), the second chapter comments on the law section of 5:1 – 6:27, and so on through the book.

Macro-structure

Whereas certain scholars see little internal structure to the book of Numbers, some of them acknowledge that it plays an important role in the design of the entire Pentateuch. Noth, for example, says, 'We can scarcely speak of a special significance peculiar to the book of Numbers. It has its significance within the framework and context of the greater Pentateuch whole.'[17] Others attempt to see how the book of Numbers fits into the

grand design of the Hexateuch — that is, the five books of Moses plus the book of Joshua.[18] I would agree that the latter position has some merit.

The following diagram demonstrates a basic literary form of the Hexateuch with the pattern of 'ABCDE X $E^1D^1C^1B^1A^1$'. The place of Numbers in the overall structure ought to be observed. The following points should also be noted.

As with all structures of inversion, the pivot (X) is critical to the entire pattern. The pivot is Sinai. Milgrom comments on Sinai's centrality: 'Not only is it the watershed of the wilderness narratives (Exodus–Numbers); it is the great divide of the Hexateuch. Sinai marks the end of slavery and the beginning of freedom.'[19]

And I might add that Sinai is the dividing line between Israel's escape from the land of Egypt and her settlement in the land of promise. As is evident in the following diagram, the issue of land is a dominant theme of the Hexateuch.

Gen. 1 – 11. Creation of a land
Gen. 12 – 50. Promise of a land
Exod. 1:1 – 12:36. Slavery in the land of Egypt (Passover observed)
Exod. 12:37 – 15:21. Escape from the land of Egypt (dividing of the Red Sea)
Exod. 15:22 – 18:27. Wandering in desert land (Meribah)
Exod. 19:1 – Numbers 10:10. SINAI
Num.10:11 – 36:13. Wandering in desert land (Meribah)
Josh. 1 – 4. Entering the land of promise (dividing the Jordan River)
Josh. 5 –12. Securing the land of promise (Passover observed)
Josh. 13 – 24. Promise of a land fulfilled
Deut. Excursus: how to live in the land of promise

In the parentheses of parallel sections I have placed examples of individual events that help to tie together the parallel sections. The primeval history of Genesis 1 – 11 is introductory to the pattern because one of its core elements is the theme of land. Sailhamer comments: 'When Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a speaks of God's creation and preparation of the land, we are, in fact, introduced to one of the central elements of the Sinai covenant: the promise of God to give the land to Israel.'[20] Deuteronomy is placed as the concluding section of the paradigm, for it is primarily a reiteration or repetition of the law that has already been given at Sinai. It serves to reinforce the point that the law was not merely for the wilderness, but it must be applied to the context of the land of promise.

The place of the book of Numbers in the literary pattern is clear. First of all, it concludes Israel's stay at Sinai, and it prepares the people for the march to the land of promise (1:1 – 10:10). Secondly, the book records the actual journey from Sinai to the plains of Moab, and it ends with Israel prepared to launch a campaign into the land of promise. It is telling that the final word of the book is 'Jericho'; this anticipates the book of Joshua, in which the tribes make an assault on the land by first attacking the site of Jericho.

Authorship and composition

For decades critical scholarship has been clear and certain regarding who did *not* write the book of Numbers. Typical of this stance is Gray, who comments: 'Judged even by itself, Numbers supplies abundant evidence that it is not the work of Moses, or even of a contemporary of the events described.'[21] Then who wrote the document? A view commonly held by critics today is espoused by Olson, who claims, 'The diverse materials in Numbers were shaped and developed throughout many different periods and social situations, ranging from the earliest to the latest times in Israel's history.'[22] Accordingly, many critical scholars conclude that the present form of Numbers is an end result of a process that was not completed until the post-exilic period (after 539 B.C.).

Much of critical scholarship argues that the final composition of Numbers is the result of an aetiological purpose. In a literary sense, aetiology is the assignment of a cause or a reason for something. For example, in biblical studies, some critical scholars believe that Genesis 3 was written in order to explain why humans have an aversion to snakes. With regard to the composition of Numbers, some surmise that it was written so that the Jewish community would understand why God had sent them into exile in 586 B. C.[23]

The issue of authorship is complex, but I do want to consider some of the arguments made by critical scholarship used to deny and undermine the Mosaic authorship of Numbers.

First of all, an almost ubiquitous contention is that Moses 'is always referred to in the third person' and, so, he could hardly be the author of that material.[24] Even some conservative commentators set great weight on this point. Hill and Walton, for instance, say, 'The references to Moses in the third person in the narrative (e.g., Num. 12:3; 15:22-23) … suggest that the book took its final form sometime after the death of Moses.'[25] In reality, the literary technique of writing about oneself in the third person is common in ancient Near-Eastern literature. For example, the author of the Code of Hammurabi is without doubt Hammurabi himself; he states in the text, 'I wrote my precious words on my stela.'[26] But in the text he also refers to himself in the third person: '… the laws of justice, which Hammurabi, the efficient king, set up.'[27] Many of the covenant treaties of the ancient Near East have the same literary feature.[28] Literary licence that allows the author to speak of himself in the third person is obvious elsewhere in the Pentateuch. In Deuteronomy 33, Moses pronounces a great blessing on Israel (v. 1), and then in the words of the blessing Moses refers to himself in the third person (v. 4).

Other modern critics rarely fail to mention Numbers 12:3, and claim that Moses 'could hardly have been the author of the commendation "the man was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth"'.[29] Thus this verse is often interpreted as an editorial gloss by a later copyist to show the humble nature of Moses in the light of Aaron and Miriam's complaint. Keil and Delitzsch have provided an appropriate response to this issue, and I would like to quote them extensively at this point:

> The self-praise on the part of Moses, which many have discovered in this description of his character, and on account of which some even of the earlier expositors regarded this verse as a

> later gloss, whilst more recent critics have used it as an argument against the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, is not an expression of vain self-display, or a glorification of his own gifts and excellence, which he prided himself upon possessing above all others. It is simply a statement, which was indispensable to a full and correct interpretation of all the circumstances, and which was made quite objectively, with reference to the character which Moses had not given to himself but had acquired through the grace of God, and which he never falsified from the very time of his calling until the day of his death.[30]

Still others point to the reference to the 'book of the Wars of Yahweh' as being a later addition. Dillard and Longman state, 'Numbers also contains some material that is most naturally understood as post-Mosaic additions. These include the short poem that is taken from the "book of the Wars of the LORD" (21:14).'[31] This latter argument is actually specious; who knows the provenance of that book? The most natural reading of the poem is that it dates from before the time of Moses, and the fact that Moses employs previous writings is clear and not problematic. He obviously used lists of kings and genealogies in his writing of Genesis. The census lists in Numbers perhaps existed independently, and then were incorporated into the text of Numbers by Moses.

It is true that there is only one reference to the writing activities of Moses in Numbers (33:1-2). Yet he is the recipient of the divine commands throughout the book from beginning to end. The statement, 'And Yahweh spoke to Moses', is found in every chapter of the book except for the episode recorded in Numbers 22 – 24 involving Balaam (in which Moses is not even present). In fact, the book of Numbers claims forty-two times that 'Yahweh spoke to Moses'.

Harrison has made an intriguing suggestion that there possibly existed a class of scribes who recorded the census lists and even wrote down accounts of certain historical events.[32] Perhaps these annalists worked under the direction of Moses, and possibly he dictated accounts to these scribes (see 1:16-18). This view is certainly plausible, although the evidence for it is minimal.

1. Censuses of Israel

Numbers 1:1 – 4:49

Conscription of the tribes (Numbers 1:1-46)

The census in the ancient Near East had various purposes. It could be used to enrol the population of a people for the purpose of taxation (see Luke 2:1-5; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18. i. 1). The census might be employed to fund the central sanctuary (see Exod. 30:13-16), or to allocate the number of workers who are to serve there (see 3:14-39). Yet, the most prominent and frequent use of the census was to determine the number of men available for war.

In the Old Testament, we read of three military censuses for the purpose of conscription in case of war. The first occurs in Numbers 1:1-46, in which the eligible men of Israel are counted at Mount Sinai at the beginning of the second month during the second year after leaving Egypt. This is just prior to their leaving Sinai in order to enter the wilderness. A second census takes place at the end of the wilderness wanderings at Shittim in Moab at a time just before the conquest of the land of Canaan (Num. 26). And the final military census takes place under David's orders at the end of his reign (2 Sam. 24:1-17). This last census is prompted by sin and folly on David's part: he is demonstrating pride in numbers.

1:1-3. Then Yahweh spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first [day] of the second month in the second year of their departure from the land of Egypt, saying, 'Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel according to their clans, according to their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, according to a head count, from the age of twenty years and upwards, all who go out in the army of Israel. You and Aaron shall muster them according to their armies.'

The book of Numbers begins with the word **'Then'**. In Hebrew this is a *waw*-consecutive with the imperfect of the verb 'to be'. In older translations it is often rendered as 'And it came to pass…' This device helps to define the literature as historical narrative, and it demonstrates temporal sequence; in other words, it connects the material with the previous book. Indeed, the tent of meeting had been completed one month earlier (Exod. 40:17), and during that ensuing month the material of Leviticus had been revealed to the people. And now, at the end of the month, Israel is commanded to take a census of the people.

Israel is **'in the wilderness of Sinai'**. The nation has been here at the foot of Mount Sinai since Exodus 19:1. They will remain here until Numbers 10:11-12, when they begin to move towards the promised land.

Yahweh commands Moses on the first day of the second month to take a census. The first day of the month is often the day of announcements in the Old Testament (see 9:1; 29:1; Deut. 1:3). According to Numbers 10:11, the Hebrews leave Sinai on the twentieth day of that same month. Thus, the census must have been completed within that twenty-day period.

The purpose of this census is for military conscription. The men to be numbered are those who are able to bear arms and go out with the army. The age of conscription is twenty years old and upwards — there is no upper age limit given, although Josephus says

that military service in ancient Israel only went up to the age of fifty.[1] It appears to have been common practice in Israel, and in the rest of the ancient Near East, for the age of conscription to be twenty (see 2 Chr. 25:5).

The census is to be carried out according to **'clans'**, **'fathers' houses'** and individual **'names'**. This reflects the proper make-up of Israelite social structure. The *beth 'ab* was the most basic and stable social grouping in ancient Israel. The term literally means 'house of the father' and it pertains to the extended family. An extended family consists of a series of close relatives living together as a unit. The **'clan'** is a group of extended families who claim descent from a common ancestor and who live together in a particular community or region. The most complex social group is the tribe, which is a group of clans descended from a common ancestor. Composed of the members of these clans, along with their slaves and strangers adopted into the tribe, it forms a broad community. The tribe is not entirely ethnic in nature, as are the extended family and the clan.[2]

1:4-16. 'And with you shall be a man from each tribe; each man shall be the head of the house of his fathers. And these are the names of the men who shall stand with you:

'From Reuben:	Elizur the son of Shedeur.
'From Simeon:	Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai.
'From Judah:	Nahshon the son of Amminadab.
'From Issachar:	Nethanel the son of Zuar.
'From Zebulun:	Eliab the son of Helon.
'From the sons of Joseph:	
from Ephraim:	Elishama the son of Ammihud.
from Manasseh:	Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur.
'From Benjamin:	Abidan the son of Gideoni.
'From Dan:	Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai.

'From Asher:	Pagiel the son of Ochran.
'From Gad:	Eliasaph the son of Deuel.
'From Naphtali:	Ahira the son of Enan.

'These are the called ones of the congregation, the leaders of the tribes of their fathers; they are the heads of the clans of Israel.'

Obviously Moses and Aaron will need help in performing a census of all the people of Israel. Here God appoints and names the various supervisors of the census from each tribe. Each of these men already holds an important authoritative position within the tribal system: the term **'head'** is often used in the Old Testament of elder men who are in positions of authority in a clan or family, and who are competent in military and judicial matters.[3] Such an understanding fits aptly with the view that this census here in Numbers is a military one.

The order in which the tribes are listed is according to the birth mother: the first five are from the sons of Leah; the next three descend from the two sons of Rachel; and the last four come from the sons of the wives' handmaids. This kind of arrangement is not unusual in the Old Testament (see Gen. 35:22-26). The only tribe not included is Levi, who is exempt from military conscription.

The individual names of the supervisors are often thought to have been 'an old traditional list of names' that was inserted later into the text.[4] There really is no reason to accept such a view. These names are clearly ancient, and many of them carry the divine epithet, e.g., Zuri-Shaddia, Gamali-el, etc. The same individuals are listed together again in Numbers 2:3-31; 7:12-83 and 10:14-27. The only names from the list which are found elsewhere in the Bible are those of Nahshon and Amminadab, from the tribe of Judah, and they appear in the line of David (Ruth 4:20).