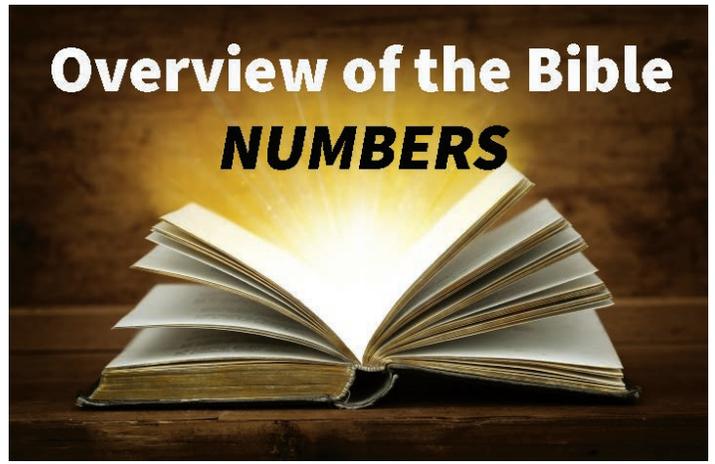


# Overview of the Bible

## **NUMBERS**



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### Preparations for Departure from Sinai

#### *Numbers 1:1-10:10 – Lesson 26*

Wednesday, November 11, 2020

If in some ways *“Leviticus”* seems an odd title the third book of the Pentateuch, the same could be said about the common English title for this fourth book of the Pentateuch.

The title for this book in the Hebrew Bible is *“In the Wilderness,”* taken from the fourth word in the Hebrew text of Num. 1:1 (*“and-spoke taken from the fourth word in the Hebrew text of Num. 1:1.”*) The wilderness, that relatively unpopulated stretch of land between Egypt and Canaan first entered by Israel in Exod. 15:22, is the geographical setting for Numbers. As such, it will be a place where God’s people will either deepen their trust in the power of their God to supply their needs or doubt their God’s abilities and resources. Wilderness will represent for Israel either possibilities or problems as they move through this buffer zone *“between liberation and occupation.”*

It is almost a consensus that the Book of Numbers leaves much to be desired and has much that is puzzling in the presentation of its material. However, in spite of its diversity of subject matter and complex literary development the book of Numbers maintains an unified interpretation of God’s will for his people which is set forth in a sharp contrast between the holy and the profane.

Perhaps it is best to begin by observing the divisions within the book, based on geographical and chronological notations.

#### **1:1-10:10-Preparation for Departure from Sinai**

1:1: *“The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai...on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt.”*

#### **10:11-20:21-Departure from Sinai and Arrival at Kadesh**

10:11: *“In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle of the testimony.”*

#### **20:22-36:13-Journey from Kadesh to Moab**

20:22: *“And they journeyed from Kadesh.”*

There are some powerful contrasts between 1-25 and 26-36, all of which put those of the second part in a better light than those of the first part. In the first military encounter that the Israelites fight in 1-25, they lose (14:45). In the one post-chapter 26 military encounter that the second-generation Israelites fight in 26-36, they win (ch.31). Elsewhere in 1-25 Israel either wants to avoid confrontation (13:31-32) or veers away from confrontation (20:21). Where Israel is victorious in chs.1-26 the accounts of destroying Arab in 21:1-3 and defeating Sihon and Og in 21:21-35. Thee victories probably should be credited to the second generation. That reading is more likely rather than believing that the first generation of Israelites, under the judgment of God and destined to be obliterated shortly, are the triumphant warriors.

A second contrast between the two units is that many Israelites die or suffer in 1-25, but none die or suffer in 26-36:

1. 11:1: *"fire from Lord...consumed some of the outskirts of the camp"*
2. 11:33: *"he [the Lord] struck them with a severe plague"*
3. 12:10: *"there stood Miriam-leprous, like snow"*
4. 14:37: *"these me...were struck down and died of a plague"*
5. 16:32: *"the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them"*
6. 16:35: *"fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men"*
7. 16:49: *"14,700 people died from the plague"*
8. 20:28: *"Aaron died there on top of the mountain"*
9. 25:8 *"he [Phinehas] drove the spear through both of them"*
10. 25:9: *"those who died in the plague numbered 24,000"*

The first unit we can label *"Preparations for Departure from Sinai."* It covers 1:1-10:10. The Israelites have not moved geo-geographically from Mount Sinai.

### **Census and Tribal Arrangement (1-2)**

In terms of pure excitement and dramatic effect on the reader, the material presented in the first two chapters of Numbers does not measure up to the impact created by the clashing thunder and smoke that engulfed Sinai, followed by the revelation of God's will.

In these two chapters Moses is told by God to take a census of the congregation of Israel (1:1-3). He is assigned a representative from each tribe, except that of Levi, to assist in the taking of this census (1:4-16). The census is taken (1:17-46). The Levites are exempted from this particular census (1:47-54). An area is assigned to each of the tribes on the east, south, west, or north side of the tent of meeting, an area of residence that is to be maintained whether the people are encamped or on the march (2:1-34).

There are, nonetheless, a few things here that merit our attention. The census is to include all males aged twenty years and older, *"all in Israel who are able to go forth to war"* (1:3). Israel is being sent forth as a sheep among wolves. Military activity, for either preservation or conquest, will be inevitable. The previous encounter with the Amalekites (Ex.17:8-16) is a harbinger of experienced ahead. What inevitably lies immediately ahead in the journeying of Israel is brought out by the use of the phrase *"able to serve in the army"* fifteen times in ch. 1 (v. 3, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 45). The presence of God over/among/at the head of his people as they march on does not render the need for a prepared army superfluous. God works not outside of his people, but through his people, to see them realize his destination for them.

Numbers 2 in our modern Bibles is arranged so as to emphasize the centrality of God's presence among his people via the either assembled or disassembled tent in the middle of the camp.

- 2:1-2: instructions for the camp
- 2:3-9: Judah between Issachar and Zebulun on the east
- 2:10-16: Reuben between Gad and Simeon on the south
- 2:17: Levites and the tent in the middle
- 2:18-24: Ephraim between Benjamin and Manasseh on the west
- 2:25-31: Dan between Asher and Naphtali on the north
- 2:32-33: Summary and totals
- 2:34: a statement of compliance