

Numbers

1. Name – The Hebrew name means “In the wilderness,” from the fifth Hebrew word in the book. This name describes the setting of the entire book, which records the movement of the people of Israel from Sinai through the wilderness of Paran to the plains of Moab. The name “Numbers” comes from the Septuagint title. While the book certainly contains lots of numbers – in censuses and various lists – it has much more to say than reporting numbers.
2. Author and date–Moses wrote the bulk of Numbers, and he died around 1400 BC. See handout on Pentateuch for details. However, some sections are most naturally understood to be post-Mosaic additions made by a later editor under divine inspiration. These include the poem taken from the “Book of the Wars of the Lord” in 21:14. Also, building activity by the tribes that settled across the Jordan after the conquest of Canaan is described in 32:34-42. This is widely understood even by conservative scholars to be a post-Mosaic elaboration. We also find the statement in 12:3 that Moses was the most humble man who ever lived, which would be an odd statement from the pen of the most humble man who ever lived!
3. Character – Numbers is often thought to be a dry, boring book, partly because of its name. However, it contains a huge number of literary genres within its pages – “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 (21:14-19), civil law (27:1-11), cultic law (15:7-21), oracular decision (15:32-36), census list (26:1-51), temple archive (7:10-88), itinerary (33:1-49).” (Quoted from Milgrom by Dillard and Longman) The broader context, however, is the same instructional history that characterizes the rest of the Pentateuch. This book is not considered the most literary of OT books. However, it does contain some parts—the story of Balaam, for instance—that are as skillfully composed as other OT narratives.
4. Major themes and importance:
 - a. God perseveres in his relationship with his people in spite of their hard-heartedness and rebellion. He remembers his covenant, preserves his people, and moves forward his work of redemption even in the face of their unfaithfulness.
 - b. The wilderness experience is a theme that is woven throughout the Bible. Christ is tempted in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11). Our journey in this present age is a journey in the wilderness prior to entering the land of promise (Heb. 13:14).
 - c. God is holy. The Levites are appointed guardians of the holy things of God. God is concerned with the purity of his people. And he will not tolerate evil in his people.
5. Structure (Olson, D. T. – *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New* as cited in Dillard and Longman):
 - a. The End of the Old: The First Generation of God's People Out of Egypt on the March in the Wilderness (1:1-25:18)
 - i. The Preparation and Inauguration of the March of the Holy People of Israel (1:1-10:36)
 - (1) Preparation and ritual organization of the march (1:1-10:10)
 - (2) The inauguration of the march (10:11-10:36)
 - ii. The Cycle of Rebellion, Death, and Deliverance of the Holy People of Israel With Elements of Hope but Ultimate Failure and Death (11:1-25:18)
 - (1) Repeated incidents of rebellion and atonement, each involving the death and/or the threat of death of a portion of the first generation (11:1-20:29)
 - (2) The end of the first generation: signs of hope coupled with ultimate failure (21:1-25:18)
 - b. The Birth of the New: The Second Generation of God's People Out of Egypt As They Prepare to Enter the Promised Land (Num. 26:1-36:13)
 - i. The Preparation and Organization of the New Holy People of God As They Prepare to Enter the Promised Land (26:1-36:13)
 - ii. Will This Second Generation Be Faithful and Enter the Promised Land (Promise) or Rebel and Fail as the First Generation (Warning)?
6. Reference: *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.