



BAKER COMMENTARY
on the OLD TESTAMENT
PENTATEUCH

Bill T. Arnold, EDITOR

Numbers

Mark A. Awabdy

Numbers



BAKER COMMENTARY *on the* OLD TESTAMENT
PENTATEUCH

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Volumes now available

Genesis, John Goldingay
Numbers, Mark A. Awabdy

Numbers

Mark A. Awabdy



Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

*To Leslie,
love of my life,
one of five daughters
(Num. 27:1)*

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Series Preface

If the ancient books we call the “Old Testament” were studied simply as witnesses to a bygone era, they would still merit continued scrutiny and analysis. Were they merely works of great antiquity, reflecting the thoughts, actions, and worldviews of writers from a faraway world, they would still garner great interest. They would arouse our curiosity about the history, society, and culture of that long-ago period of human civilization. And if these ancient volumes were also of high literary quality—as the books of the Old Testament certainly are—an entirely separate field of investigation would no doubt be needed to understand and appreciate those qualities and rhetorical properties.

Of course, today we have texts from ancient Babylonia, such as the *Enuma Elish*, the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and others, as well as similarly soaring belles lettres from Egypt, Syria-Palestine, Greece, and Rome. Surely Israelite literature is among the greatest ever produced—with its tales of homeless ancestors trekking across ancient lands while following the deity’s call to be a blessing to all the world, a covenant-making deity in love with a people of little political significance, and divinely ordained kings and prophets rising and falling with the fortunes of the nation. If such were all that the books of the Old Testament offered, we would certainly continue to acknowledge their great worth. And for many readers, this is all that the Old Testament books represent.

However, this is not the whole story. The truth is that these books are considered by millions of readers through the centuries as much more—as the Word of God. We mean by this that the books of the Old Testament have a divine origin, they are divinely inspired, and somehow they say what God intended for them to say. Of course, there are as many different ways of explaining what this means and of understanding inspiration as there are believers in the truthfulness of these books. But in general, Christians turn to these writings as trustworthy and authoritative expressions of God’s will.

Fascination with the books of the Old Testament has not diminished for two thousand years. It is safe to say with some degree of confidence that these books will continue to command our attention. As long as there are believers in the Jewish and Christian traditions of faith, there will be a need for fresh readings and attractively presented commentaries to aid in the interpretation of these ancient documents.

The Pentateuch is the fountainhead from which the Bible's "Torah" (its teaching) flows. From this source—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—we are given to understand the very nature of God, creation, humankind, sin, salvation, atonement, sacrifice, holiness, and righteousness. All these themes find rootage and are in fact defined in the pages of the Pentateuch. Today's believers want and need reliable resources for reading these important texts.

The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (BCOT): Pentateuch series represents one attempt to address this need in the church. The volumes in the series are critically informed and respect the integrity of the original discourse as well as the theological dimensions of the text. That is, the commentaries consider not merely what God originally said through the authors of the Torah but also what God is saying today through these ancient books.

The need for a commentary series on the Pentateuch that is both critically engaged and sensitive to the theological contributions of the text is especially pressing given that the relationship between law and gospel has been a perennial problem for the church. Moreover, advances have been made in the past twenty years on the relationship between law and narrative in the Pentateuch, on the way the various legal corpora of the Pentateuch relate to each other diachronically, and on the Pentateuch's contribution to theological studies more generally. These factors have not yet found expression in the type of comprehensive textual treatment possible only in a detailed commentary. Fortunately, a growing number of scholars are engaging in a critical investigation of the text, especially in methodologies that arise naturally and appropriately from the biblical documents themselves and can be combined with sensitivity to the theological contours of the text.

Each commentary in this series not only highlights the distinctive features unique to each biblical book but also reflects the unique approach of the one commenting on it. Each volume provides a fresh translation of the Hebrew text along with section-by-section comments. Each contributor carefully attends to (1) the meaning and significance of the ancient discourse and, where appropriate, (2) its reception in Jewish and Christian tradition, (3) the text's relation and contribution to the canon of Scripture as a whole, and (4) the text's implications for our contemporary setting. In this way, these commentaries not only lay bare the perspectives of the ancient human authors but also bring their voices into dialogue with other words that God has spoken—and is speaking—through Scripture and tradition, doing so in a way that dignifies

the relevance of the Pentateuch as a contemporary word from God rather than merely an ancient, dusty book from antiquity. It is our hope that these BCOT: Pentateuch volumes will enable us all to hear this word from God afresh for the benefit of the church universal.

Bill T. Arnold
Paul S. Amos Professor of Old Testament Interpretation
Asbury Theological Seminary

Author's Preface

Occasionally a faithful Bible reader, even a pastor, will admit to me that they struggle with boredom or confusion when they arrive at the dwelling-place instructions in Exod. 25–40, the books of Leviticus and Numbers, or the legal core of Deuteronomy. This has grieved me for twenty years and counting, not because I have never shared those feelings (!), but because I have been captivated by the mystery and beauty of Yahweh through the literary world of the Torah. Some are repelled especially by Numbers because it seems pedantic and redundant in its censuses (chaps. 1, 26), layout of the wilderness camps (chap. 2), dedication of the altar (chap. 7), and sacrificial calendar (chaps. 28–29), to name a few texts. It is precisely this scrupulous repetition, however, that reveals how contextual Yahweh is—resolved to make himself known to people embedded in culture—by using ANE conventions of literary repetition to stress the authors' theological convictions.¹ Others dismiss the rituals of Numbers as obscure and antiquated, or overturned by Christ. But the book's textualized rituals are latent with formative symbolism for the people of God throughout time, and we must grapple with what it means that Christ came not to destroy these rituals but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17). Other Bible readers are put off by its depressing stories of rebellion and a wrathful God (chaps. 11–25). If only the satirical Balaam Cycle (chaps. 32–34) and the episodes about the courageous daughters of Zelophehad (chaps. 27, 36) opened the book instead of the esoteric Priestly instructions (chaps. 1–10)! Such a wish, however, distorts the brilliant editorial design, which stresses first the centrality of Yahweh's desert shrine and servants amid his people (chaps. 1–10) before exalting Yahweh's holiness (divinity), which necessitates the purging of ingratitude, insubordination, and physical contagions from his covenant people (chaps. 11–25), whom he is relentless in leading toward

1. E.g., see the repetition in the Sumerian King List and the Ugaritic Baal Cycle.

Canaan to actualize his land promise to the patriarchs (chaps. 26–36). As I write these words, I pray that this present study will ignite or reignite a resolve to know and make known God through the text of Numbers.

I have approached each dimension of this commentary as an evangelical and critical student of Numbers. My translation style vacillates between formal-equivalence (“Yahweh said to Moses”) and dynamic-equivalence (“the ark containing the witness”) to communicate the form and function of the Hebrew text in perspicuous, contemporary English. The translation footnotes provide a guide to textual criticism, lexicology, and syntactical and discourse analysis as a gateway to ascertaining meaning and theology.² To write the commentary proper, I first sought to suspend *a priori* theological and ecclesial convictions in order to explain the text as an ANE artifact, comparing and contrasting its forms, ideations, and theologies with those of Israel and Judah’s neighbors. To explain the text on its own terms, I maneuvered between methodologies: literary structural analysis (not structuralism); form, source, and redaction criticism; narrative criticism; innerbiblical exegesis; ancient Near Eastern comparative research (literature, iconography, material culture); historical geography; other *apropos* sciences (botany, metallurgy, psychology, etc.); and reception in the Hebrew Bible, NT, and some rabbis and early church fathers.

For some readers, this commentary will be their first exposure to the scrupulous reflections of German, French, and English critical scholars. For these readers, I call attention to the initial footnotes of the “Overview” section in each chapter, in which I present the primary proposals for the different sources and redactions that can be identified in the distinct contours (clusters of verses) in the composition of the text. To be clear, perceiving in the text different literary layers with distinct theological perspectives and suspending *a priori* personal convictions does not mean undermining theology or the authority of the text as the Word of God in our lives today. On the contrary, my resolve is to allow each discursive unit to speak on its own terms, in its own cultural context, in order to appreciate how its own distinct theology contributes to the redemptive metanarrative of the whole canon. Rather than flatten the witness of the composition into a monotone, I have tried to make way for the polyphony of voices about Yahweh, his covenant people, and his world to sing their independent parts in a more complex chorus of glory to Yahweh. The “Implications” essays at the end of most chapters became, to my surprise, my favorite aspect of this writing project.

I thank Bill Arnold and Jim Kinney for giving me the rich experience of writing the Numbers volume for this series. I am grateful to those who have

2. References reflect English Bible versification; where the Hebrew numbering differs, it follows in square brackets (e.g., Ps. 51:1 [3]). Letters accompanying verse numbers (e.g., v. 1a, v. 1b) refer to subdivisions of the verse and generally correspond to the MT markings.

supported me so faithfully along the way: Bill Arnold for trusting me with this project and mentoring me graciously and wisely; Christian Frevel and Reinhard Achenbach for conversations with me in Helsinki that left me mesmerized by Numbers; Brad Haggard for digitally scanning endless chapters and articles; Becky Vijay for judiciously copyediting the manuscript; Wells Turner, David Garber, and other members of the Baker team for their stellar editorial work; my wife, Leslie, and our kids, extended family, and friends for cheering me on at every turn; and God for sustaining me with the joy of his presence. The non-Israelite diviner Balaam captures my experience throughout this study:

Yahweh their God is with them, acclaimed as king among them. (Num. 23:21*)

Abbreviations

Bibliographic and General

*	after a numeral, it indicates selected verses within a chapter or selected portions of a verse; before a transliterated Hebrew word, it indicates the root form of the word
/	alternative
//	parallel passage
§	section
≈	When a reading in another language is equivalent in the relevant details, or two numbers are roughly equal
>	greater than
≥	greater than or equal to
<	less than
≤	less than or equal to
a.k.a.	also known as
Akk.	Akkadian
ANE	ancient Near East(ern)
ANET	<i>The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts & Pictures</i> . Edited by James B. Pritchard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. Reprint, 2021
Ant.	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
b.	Babylonian Talmud
BCE	before the Common Era
BHRG	<i>A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar</i> . Edited by Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jacobus A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze. 2nd ed. New York: T&T Clark, 2017
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983
ca.	circa, around/approximately

CAD	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . Edited by A. Leo Oppenheim et al. 21 vols. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2006
CAL	The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon. https://cal.huc.edu
CE	Common Era
CEB	Common English Bible
cent.	century/centuries
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
chap(s).	chapter(s)
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2016
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
DCH	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . Edited by David J. A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2014
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert (series)
DNWSI	<i>Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions</i> . Jacob Hoftijzer and Karen Jongeling. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1995
ea.	each
EA	El-Amarna tablets. According to the edition of Jørgen A. Knudtzon. <i>Die el-Amarna-Tafeln</i> . Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908–15. Repr., Aalen: Zeller, 1964. Continued in Anson F. Rainey, <i>El-Amarna Tablets</i> , 359–79. 2nd rev. ed. Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1978
EBA	Early Bronze Age
ed(s).	editor(s), edition, edited by
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
Eng.	English (versions and their versification)
esp.	especially
EST	Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty
ESV	English Standard Version
et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and so forth, and the rest
EÜ	<i>Einheitsübersetzung</i> [Unified Translation] of the Bible into German
F	Fahrenheit (temperature)
fig.	figure
formally	i.e., literal translation of the Hebrew forms
GBHS	<i>A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> . Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018
GELS	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint</i> . Takamitsu Muraoka. Rev. ed. Leuven: Peeters, 2009
Gk.	Greek
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Edited by Emil Kautzsch. Translated by Arther E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910

Abbreviations

HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–99
hapax	hapax legomenon: a word occurring only once in the Bible
Hb.	Hebrew language
HB	Hebrew Bible
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica (Ecclesiastical History)</i>
IBHS	<i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> . Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
Iron	Iron Age (I–III)
JLAT	Jewish Literary Aramaic, Targumic
Joüon and Muraoka	Joüon, Paul. <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> . Translated by Takamitsu Muraoka. 2nd ed. Paperback single volume. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006
kg	kilogram
KTU	<i>Die keilalphabetische Texte aus Ugarit</i> . Edited by Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2013
LBA	Late Bronze Age (I–II)
lbs.	pounds
LEH	Lust, Johan, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, eds. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint</i> . Rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003
m.	Mishnah
mg	milligram
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NET	New English Translation
NETS	<i>A New English Translation of the Septuagint</i> . Edited by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; corrected to 2014. https://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition
NIV	New International Version (2011)
NJPS	<i>The Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i> (1985)
NLT	New Living Translation (2007)
no(s).	number(s)
n.p.	no page/no place/no publisher
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NRSVUE	New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PB	Priestly Blessing (Num. 6:24–26)
pl(s).	plate(s)
prb.	probably
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> , under the word

ThB	<i>Theokratischen Bearbeitung</i> , a theocratic/hierocratic community ruled by the high priest
trans.	translator, translated by, translation
vs.	versus
VTE	Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon

Grammatical and Syntactical

act.	active	obj.	object
adv.	adverb	pass.	passive
const.	construct	pers.	person
fem.	feminine	pl(s).	plural
fut.	future	prep.	preposition
gen.	genitive/genitival	pron.	pronoun
impf.	imperfect	ptc(s).	participle(s)
impv.	imperative	sg.	singular
inf.	infinitive	subst.	substantive/substantial
masc.	masculine	suf.	suffix
nom.	nominative		

Text-Critical Sigla

⌈ . . . ⌋	from LXX ^{ed} and/or Qumran; absent from MP, SP
[. . .]	encloses what is conjectured for a damaged scroll
col.	column
D	Deuteronomistic source
Dtr	Deuteronomistic (History; writer); Deuteronomist
DtrL	land-conquest narrative in Deut. 1 to Josh. 22, with a preexilic redaction of Deuteronomy
E	Pentateuch source using the name Elohim (<i>ʾēlōhīm</i>)
H	Holiness Code, esp. Lev. 17–26, yet also elsewhere
Hb.	Hebrew; Hebrew text agreement/versification: Qumran MSS, MT, SP
HB	Hebrew Bible
J	Pentateuchal source using the name Yahweh (<i>yhwh</i>)
KD	Deuteronomistic composition
KP	Priestly composition that incorporates non-P material
LXX	Septuagint (the Greek OT)
LXX ^A	Codex Alexandrinus of the LXX
LXX ^B	Codex Vaticanus of the LXX
LXX ^C	The C (catena) group of LXX manuscripts
LXX ^{ed}	Göttingen critical edition of the LXX of Numbers: <i>Numeri</i> . Edited by John William Wevers. Septuaginta 3/1. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982. 2nd ed., 2020
LXX ^L	The Lucianic text (recension) of the LXX

LXX ^O	The O recension of Septuagint manuscripts
majority	most versions
M ^L	Masoretic text in Codex Leningradensis B 19 ^A
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
MT	Masoretic Text
MT ^{ketiv}	<i>ketiv</i> = “what is written” in the main text of the MT
MT ^L	Leningrad Codex of the Masoretic Text (1008 or 1009 CE)
MT ^{ms}	manuscripts of the Masoretic Text
MT ^{qere}	<i>qere</i> = “what is (should be) read,” as suggested in the margin of the MT
P	Priestly writing(s)
P ^g	groundwork of Priestly source of the Pentateuch
P ^{ge}	supplement to the Priestly source, including some of Exod. 16
P ^s	secondary additions to the Priestly source of the Pentateuch
SP	Samaritan Pentateuch
Syr	Syriac (Peshitta)
Tg	Targum, a reading shared by the major Aramaic versions of Numbers (see next)
Tg ^{Neo}	Targum Neofiti
Tg ^O	Targum Onqelos
Tg ^{PJ}	Targum Pseudo-Jonathan
Vulg	Latin Vulgate
Vulg ^{ed}	Latin Vulgate, a critical edition of Jerome’s Vulgate in <i>Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem</i> . 5th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007

Old Testament / Hebrew Bible

Gen.	Genesis	Neh.	Nehemiah	Hosea	Hosea
Exod.	Exodus	Esther	Esther	Joel	Joel
Lev.	Leviticus	Job	Job	Amos	Amos
Num.	Numbers	Ps(s).	Psalm(s)	Obad.	Obadiah
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Prov.	Proverbs	Jon.	Jonah
Josh.	Joshua	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mic.	Micah
Judg.	Judges	Song	Song of Songs	Nah.	Nahum
Ruth	Ruth	Isa.	Isaiah	Hab.	Habakkuk
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Jer.	Jeremiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Lam.	Lamentations	Hag.	Haggai
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Zech.	Zechariah
Ezra	Ezra	Dan.	Daniel	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Acts	Acts
Mark	Mark	Rom.	Romans
Luke	Luke	1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians
John	John	Gal.	Galatians

Eph.	Ephesians	Heb.	Hebrews
Phil.	Philippians	James	James
Col.	Colossians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians	1–3 John	1–3 John
1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy	Jude	Jude
Titus	Titus	Rev.	Revelation
Philem.	Philemon		

Old Testament Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books

Add. Dan.	Additions to Daniel (= Pr. Azar., Sg. Three, Sus., and Bel)
Add. Esth.	Additions to Esther
Bar.	Baruch
Bel	Bel and the Dragon
1–2 Esd.	1–2 Esdras
Jdt.	Judith
Let. Jer.	Letter of Jeremiah (= Baruch chap. 6)
1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees
Pr. Azar.	Prayer of Azariah (often cited as part of the Song of the Three Jews)
Pr. Man.	Prayer of Manasseh
Ps. 151	Psalms 151
Sg. Three	Song of the Three Jews
Sir. (Ecclus.)	Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)
Sus.	Susanna
Tob.	Tobit
Wis.	Wisdom (of Solomon)

Qumran/Dead Sea Scrolls

Qumran documents cited in the text are identified by cave number + Q + document number. Scrolls cited by letter/abbreviation are listed below.

CD	Damascus Document from Cairo Genizah
Hev	Naḥal Hever
Hev/Se	Naḥal Hever documents formerly attributed to Wadi Seiyal
1QM	War Scroll (<i>Millḥamah</i>)
Mur	Murabaʿat
Q	Qumran

Introduction

Title and Hebrew Manuscripts

The title “Numbers” is arguably the worst misnomer in the entire Bible, and at least in recent decades, it has grievously deterred English readers from engaging this essential book.¹ This title comes from the Greek *Arithmoi* (ΑΡΙΘΜΟΙ, source of the English word “arithmetic”), which is not attested until the Septuagint (LXX) codices of the fourth centuries CE and later.² This name was adopted into English translations at least by John Wycliffe (1382–95) and famously by the King James Version (1611). The beauty of the Greek and English Bibles notwithstanding, the title “Numbers” is not divinely inspired and gives the wrong impression by suggesting that this book is the Hebrew stepchild of Babylonian and Egyptian mathematics or that it contains lots of genealogies, like what we find in Gen. 5–11 but from the time of Moses. This is not the case. In fact, out of thirty-six chapters, only four contain numerical records (chaps. 1–3 and 26), and even these are not mathematics or genealogies or esoteric to the original audience but instead resemble the ancient literary genre of a military census. More important, these rare numerical sections of the book are acutely *theological*. For instance, the signal military census (chap. 1) was vital for conscripting eligible Israelite young men for war service in Canaan in order to take hold of Yahweh’s land promise to the patriarchs and matriarchs. That exodus generation died tragically in the wilderness for their rebellion (chaps. 11–25), rendering the first census obsolete and necessitating

1. See Strawn, *Old Testament Is Dying*, 33–34.

2. Namely, Codex Vaticanus (B, 4th cent. CE); Alexandrinus (A, 5th cent. CE); Ambrosianus (F, 5th cent. CE); Coislinianus (M, 7th cent. CE); Venetus (V, 8th cent. CE); see Wevers, *Numeri*, 47. In Codex Vaticanus (B), for example, ornamentation, diacritics, and textual notations were added in the Middle Ages: Šagi, “Codex B,” 3–29; Birdsall, “Codex Vaticanus,” 34; Payne and Canart, “Text-Critical Symbols,” 106.PP. 89f.

a fresh count of the military troops from the second generation (chap. 26) to inherit the land of promise. The tribal arrangement (chap. 2) centralized Yahweh's dwelling among them (2:17), and the cultic census (chap. 3), still using military terminology, validated the authority of the priests, the sons of Levi, and defined their service in Yahweh's meeting tent to make life with this holy and dangerous God possible.

By contrast, the Jewish title, "In the wilderness" (במדבר, *bəmidbar*), which dates back to the late Second Temple period or earlier, is quite fitting.³ This title raises the right kinds of expectations for readers precisely because it is the incipit, the opening words, of Numbers from an original editor, "Then Yahweh spoke to Moses *in the Sinai wilderness* [*bəmidbar sīnay*] inside the meeting tent" (Num. 1:1). This setting distinguishes Numbers from Leviticus, which is self-contained by its own superscription and subscriptions (Lev. 1:1; 26:46; 27:34), which prepares readers for the central wilderness motif in Num. 10:11–21:35.⁴ The phrase "in the Sinai wilderness" (*bəmidbar sīnay*) first occurs in Lev. 7:38, where it localizes Yahweh's sacrifices and offerings. The phrase appears eight more times in the OT, all in the book of Numbers, suggesting that Num. 1:1 signals the most important segment of this motif in the Pentateuch.⁵ In Numbers, the noun *midbar* refers to one or another "desert," but the translation "wilderness" may offer a slight conceptual advantage since the English word often points to "an area of land that has not been used to grow crops or had towns and roads built on it, especially because it is difficult to live in as a result of its extremely cold or hot weather or bad earth."⁶ This is a good start for the geography of Numbers, if we are careful not to think of the wonder of forests or grasslands but of the stigma of desolation and death.⁷ In the context of the ANE, the deserts of Sinai, Paran, Zin, and Transjordan were like the primordial chaos, "formless and empty" (*tōhū wābōhū*, Gen. 1:2). By residing, leading, providing, punishing, and showing immeasurable grace to his covenant people, Yahweh would shape and fill these places, making them suitable for life.⁸ *In the Wilderness* is, therefore, a fitting title for the book.

3. The heading of the Qumran Numbers scrolls is broken off, but the Jewish title of Genesis, "In the Beginning" (*bršyt*) is attested in 4QGen^{h-title} (50–25 BCE) and 4QGen^b (*br'syt*, 30–100 CE) and 4QGen^s (*br'syt*, late Hasmonean); see Webster, "Chronological Index," 351–446; and Ulrich, ed., *Qumran Scrolls*, 1.

4. See Nihan, *Priestly Torah*, 70–74. Otto ("Ende der Toraoffenbarung," 191–201, esp. 197) argues that Num. 1:1 reflects a post-Pentateuchal redaction, assuming Exod. 33:7–11 and introducing, after the Lev. 27:34 colophon, a Sinai wilderness collection that extends the Mosaic revelation up to the Israelites' departure from the mountain in Num. 10:12.

5. Num. 1:1, 19; 3:4, 14; 9:1, 5; 26:64; 33:15.

6. Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/wilderness>.

7. See Leal, *Wilderness*, 67–72.

8. See Brueggemann, *Land*, xiv, 27–33.

The primary Hebrew manuscripts of the book of Numbers are the Leningrad Codex of the Masoretic Text (MT^L, 1008 CE);⁹ the Samaritan Pentateuch codices (SP, 12th–14th cent. CE);¹⁰ and the scrolls and fragments from the Judean Desert, known popularly as the Dead Sea Scrolls, that contain part of every chapter of Numbers except chaps. 6 (Nazirite vow and Priestly Blessing) and 14 (Israel fears the people of Canaan).¹¹ The scrolls were discovered in caves 1, 2, and 4 of Khirbet Qumran, a settlement on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea; a cave in Naḥal Ḥever, a wadi (seasonal stream) near the western shore of the Dead Sea; and a cave in Wadi Murabbaʿat (Naḥal Darga), a wadi that runs just southwest of Jerusalem past the Herodium down to the Dead Sea. The two most extensive Numbers scrolls from the Judean Desert come from Qumran and are numbered 4Q23 and 4Q27. The first, 4Q23, is labeled 4QLev-Num^a (ca. middle to late 2nd cent. BCE)¹² and contains parts of Leviticus together with part of every chapter in Num. 1–5*, 8–13*, 22*, 26*, 30*, 32–33*, 35*.¹³ The second, 4Q27, is labeled 4QNum^b (ca. latter half of the 1st cent. BCE) and contains Num. 11–13*, 15–36*.¹⁴ A theory that many scholars have either adopted or adjusted is that the texts found in the Judean Desert can be classified into four groups based on their alignment or nonalignment with the major text forms of the MT, SP, and LXX.¹⁵ Of 46 Torah texts long enough to serve as a testable sample, 48

9. The Aleppo Codex (ca. 930 CE), the earliest Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible, is broken and so today does not contain Gen. 1:1–Deut. 28:17.

10. For a clear overview of the SP and its manuscripts (Codex Add. 1846 [1100 CE]; Codex B [1345/46 CE]; Manuscript E [1219 CE]; Abishaʿ [12th–13th cent. CE]), see VanderKam and Flint, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 93–95.

11. See Ulrich, “Index,” 113–29, esp. 121–23.

12. R. Kugler and Baek, *Leviticus at Qumran*, 3.

13. The asterisk denotes select verses within a chapter.

14. There are other extant Qumran manuscripts containing smaller portions of the book of Numbers. 1Q3 (lQpaleoLev, ca. 125–75 BCE) appears to contain parts of Leviticus and Num. 1* and 36* written in paleo-Hebrew script; 4Q121 (4QLXXNum, ca. late 1st cent. BCE–early 1st cent. CE) contains Num. 3* and 4* in Koine Greek, arguably reworking the original LXX (Old Greek) to align with a text form close to MT; 2Q6/7/8/9 (2QNum^{a, b, c, d}, ca. late Herodian, 1st cent. CE or post-Herodian) contain Num. 3*, 4*, 7*, 18*(?), and 33*; 5/6HevNum. 1a (5/6HevNum^a, ca. 50–68 CE) contains Num. 20*; XHev/Se 1, 2 (XHev/SeNum^{a, b}, ca. 50–68 CE) contains Num. 19*, 27*, and 28*; Mur 1 (MurNum, ca. 115 CE) contains Num. 34*, 35*, and 36*; and 4Q365 (4QRP^c = 4QReworked Pentateuch^c, ca. 40–10 BCE) contains idiosyncrasies: jumping unbroken from 4:49 to 7:1, juxtaposing the stories of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 27 and 36), and attaching Deut. 16:13–14 to Num. 29. Another scroll, 4Q65, reflects a Qumran scribal practice and, while close to SP, does not display the “editorial manipulations of SP” (Tov, *Textual Criticism: Collected Essays*, 54). See Ulrich, “Index,” 121–23; Bernstein, “4QReworked Pentateuch,” 36–37, 42.

15. Tov (*Textual Criticism* [3rd ed.], 107–10) concludes that we have enough unbroken evidence to classify 121 of the 210–12 biblical scrolls. Tov originally spoke of a fifth group, Qumran scribal practice, but now concedes that those texts reveal “diverse textual backgrounds, and not one common typology” (109). Critiquing Tov is Segal, “Hebrew Bible,” 5–20.

percent align with the MT or the MT/SP (22 of 46 texts); 11 percent with the pre-SP, that is, the SP text form prior to the insertions of its ideological readings (5 of 46); 2 percent with the presumed source of the LXX (1 of 46); and 39 percent are nonaligned, that is, they do not match the MT, SP, or LXX (18 of 46).¹⁶

The debate will continue over how to classify each Qumran scroll and fragment of the book of Numbers—that is, whether it resembles the text form of the MT or MT/SP, the SP, the LXX, a mixture of these, or none of these. In my study of the Qumran texts of Numbers, six scrolls do not provide any exegetically significant variants (1Q3; 2Q8; 2Q9; 4Q121; 5/6HevNum. 1a; Mur 1), and 4Q365 is idiosyncratic. The other important Numbers scroll, 4Q27, appears to have harmonized (assimilated) to the context or to idiomatic usage in at least fifteen readings,¹⁷ while 4Q23, 11Q19, and 2Q7 appear to have harmonized in at least one place each.¹⁸ Errors due to homophony (words with same sounds) and haplography (omission of a word or letter) as well as clarifying additions and omissions appear in the Numbers Qumran scrolls but not with high frequency.¹⁹ Scribal efforts to clarify the meaning of the text appear in at least nine places in 4Q27.²⁰ It can be difficult to determine whether one is looking at a secondary reading that is a harmonization to the context (style, phraseology, or content) or an original reading that fits well within its context.²¹

The Qumran scribes formatted four of the extant Numbers scrolls with section or paragraph divisions (4Q23, 2Q6, 2Q7, 4Q27). These divisions reveal some of the most ancient interpretations of the book. By indenting the opening words on a line (about fifteen to twenty letters/spaces to the left of an otherwise justified column) and by writing a line in red ink instead of black, the Qumran scribes reveal their thinking that the text has begun a new discursive unit, however large or small. By leaving a space within a line and by not starting a new sentence but leaving the remainder of a line blank (in an otherwise justified column), the Qumran scribes reveal their conception of a break in the flow of the discourse. Unfortunately, our comprehension of these early scribal hermeneutics is limited because of the fragmentary nature of the extant texts and because we are sometimes left to speculate on why scribes marked paragraphs where they did or did not mark paragraphs where we expect them.

16. Tov, *Textual Criticism* (3rd ed.), 108.

17. Num. 11:32; 16:8; 18:30; 27:22; 29:11, 28; 30:8; 31:48; 32:1, 25, 29; 35:21, 23; 36:1, 4.

18. See 4Q23 in 5:3; 11Q19 in 29:11, 17 (omission); and 2Q7 in 33:52 (omission).

19. In 4Q27 there is possible homophony in 24:6 and clarifying omission in 18:26; in 4Q23 and 4Q365 there is possible homophony in 13:22; and 4Q23 exhibits possible haplography in 1:38; 4:49 (with MT¹).

20. See 12:6 (2×); 18:26, 28, 31; 22:12, 17, 33; 32:30; 35:27(?).

21. Tov, "Textual Theories," 1:34.

Table Intro.1. Early Section Divisions by Qumran Scribes
(following Ulrich, *Qumran*, 138–74)

	4Q23 (4QLev-Num ^a)	2Q6 (2QNum ^a)	2Q7 (2QNum ^b)	4Q27 (4QNum ^b)
First line indented	Num. 5:1; 9:9		Num. 33:50	Num. 22:21; 25:7; 26:4b; 26:12 (? broken text), 15, 63; 29:17 (? broken text); 29:26 (? broken text); 32:16 (? broken text); 33:50 (? broken text)
Blank line				<i>Between</i> Num. 35:21 and 35:22
After a sentence, the rest of the line is left blank (the next sentence begins on the line below, either justified right or indented)	<i>After</i> Num. 3:4; 3:51 (before 4:1); 4:49 (before 5:1)	<i>After</i> Num. 3:39; 3:51 (before 4:1)	<i>After</i> Num. 33:49	<i>After</i> Num. 11:35 (before 12:1); 15:41 (before 16:1); 16:7 (entire line below is blank before 16:8 begins); 16:15 (? probably, but broken text, may be insignificant because not much space on the line to begin 16:16); 16:50 (before 17:1 = Hb. 17:15 before 17:16); 18:32 (before 19:1); 20:21; 21:12b; 21:20; 22:5a; 22:6; 24:2; 25:6; 26:11; 27:5, 7, 21dβ; 28:15, 31 (? broken text); 29:11 (? broken text); 29:28, 39; 30:16 [30:17]; 31:24, 30, 36, 47, 54 (? broken text); 32:4, 5 (? broken text), 24, 42; 33:20; 35:34 (before 36:1)
After a sentence, a space on the line separates the next sentence (but the next sentence begins on the same line)	<i>Between</i> Num. 3:10 and 3:11; 5:4 and 5:5; maybe unintentionally, 11:19 and 11:20 (? broken text)			<i>Within</i> 20:13 ^{gloss} (= SP ≠ MT LXX); <i>Between</i> 21:11 and 21:12a; 24:10a–b and 24:10c; 26:18 and 26:19; 26:22 and 26:23; 26:25 and 26:26 (? broken text); 26:27 and 26:28; 26:65 and 27:1; 27:17 and 27:18; 27:21 and 27:22; <i>within</i> 27:22 (<i>between w</i> and the rest of the wayyiqtol form y'š); <i>Between</i> 27:23 and 27:23 ^{gloss} (= SP ≠ MT LXX)
Written in red ink (no indentation or spaces; the column remains justified)				20:22–23 (1.5 lines of text); 21:21 ^{gloss} (1 line = SP ≠ MT LXX); 22:21a–c (indeterminate how much is in red ink because lines below are missing); 23:13a–b (1 line); 23:27 (? probably all of v. 27 is written in red ink, but the line above is missing, so only v. 27d is extant); 31:25 (? maybe through most of v. 26a, but mainly broken); 31:37–38a (? broken text); 31:48 (one line, not entire verse); 32:25; 33:1–2aα

The Samaritan Pentateuch (SP) manuscripts that we have today all date to the medieval period,²² but the translations of the SP into other languages and other Samaritan literature indicate that the SP goes back much earlier. The Samaritan ideological additions may have arisen from a scribal adherent to the Mount Gerizim sacrificial cult in the second century BCE.²³ These additions are few²⁴ and can be easily isolated and set aside.²⁵ What remains is a form of the Pentateuch, often called pre-SP, that predates the Samaritan revision and matches around 11 percent of the testable Qumran Torah manuscripts.²⁶ In the book of Numbers, the SP includes eight interpolations, which are derived from the historical prologue of Deuteronomy. These primarily transform Moses's first-person speech (Deuteronomy) into third-person narration (SP Numbers):

Deut. 1:6–8	→	SP Num. 10:10
Deut. 1:20–23a	→	SP Num. 12:16
Deut. 1:27–33	→	SP Num. 13:33
Deut. 3:24–28 and 2:2–6	→	SP and 4Q27 Num. 20:13
Deut. 2:9	→	SP and 4Q27 Num. 21:11
Deut. 2:17–19	→	SP and 4Q27 Num. 21:12
Deut. 2:24–25	→	SP and 4Q27 Num. 21:20
Deut. 2:31	→	SP Num. 21:23

Surprisingly, these adaptations from Deut. 1–3 into Numbers were not the work of Samaritan scribes but belonged to the pre-SP form of the text. The best evidence for this is that 4Q27 contains four of the same interpolations in Num. 20–21* (with some spelling differences), and because 4Q27 is broken today with only Num. 11–13*, 15–36*, we can reasonably infer that it originally contained the interpolations in Num. 10, 12, 13.²⁷

The pre-SP text form of Numbers must be taken seriously as a witness, which I attempt to do in my text-critical analyses. An important caution, however, is that before the popular SP text came about, the pre-SP text form

22. Codex Add. 1846 (1100 CE); Codex B (1345/46 CE); Manuscript E (1219 CE); Abisha's Scroll (12th–13th cent. CE); see VanderKam and Flint, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 93–94.

23. Gallagher, "Samaritan Pentateuch," 105.

24. Tov, "Samaritan Pentateuch," vii–viii.

25. SP inserts "(Mount) Gerizim" as the centralized place of worship (after Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:18; in Deut. 27:4) and changes "the place Yahweh will choose to put his name" to "the place Yahweh has chosen to put his name" (Deut. 12:5, 14).

26. Tov, *Textual Criticism* (3rd ed.), 108.

27. Also, Tov affirmed to me in an email conversation (07/16/20) that he is not aware of any sectarian SP interpolations in Numbers; see the earlier note on SP inserting "Gerizim" in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

already displayed a harmonizing tendency.²⁸ This includes (1) linguistic corrections, removing unusual forms and spellings and adapting the text grammatically, and (2) minor alterations in content, interchanging individual letters or entire words.²⁹ The pre-SP readings vacillate between (1) agreeing with the LXX against the MT, giving us the actual Hb. *Vorlage* of the LXX (this is common); (2) agreeing with the MT against the LXX, strengthening the likelihood of the primacy of an MT reading (common); (3) providing a unique reading, especially the addition or omission of waws and shifts in number (sg./pl.) (common); and (4) agreeing with a Qumran reading against the MT, either with or against the LXX, probably giving us reason to question the MT reading (uncommon).

Although I normally find that the MT reading explains the other variants as secondary, there are instances where I prefer the reading attested in some or most of the other witnesses (esp. 4Q27 SP LXX^{ed} Vulg^{ed}) against the MT.³⁰

Early and Modern Translations

The early translations of Numbers can help us to reconstruct an early Hebrew edition of Numbers and, perhaps more importantly, give us some of the earliest interpretations of the book. The most significant is the Septuagint, the Koine Greek translation, called the Old Greek when referring to the putative (nonextant) first Greek translation of the Pentateuch, probably by Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, in the third century BCE.³¹ The Greek translation of Numbers has rightly been characterized as showing “a taste for consistency and harmonisation and a tendency toward clarification and elaboration, involving sometimes major differences from the MT in the arrangement or structure of specific passages.”³² These tendencies, however, are not all the result of interpretive changes by the Greek translator: it has been argued persuasively that harmonizations were already present in the translator’s Hebrew source (*Vorlage*) and then were perpetuated by the translator.³³ The textual notes of the translation in this commentary extensively illustrate the harmonizing and clarifying character of the Greek text of Numbers and likely of its Hebrew source.³⁴ Yet, with the obvious exception of the harmonizations and dynamic renderings, the default translation

28. Tov, “Samaritan Pentateuch,” ix.

29. Tov, “Samaritan Pentateuch,” ix.

30. See 11:4; 12:8; 13:24; 14:21; 18:31; 19:3; 21:30; 22:11; 23:3, 10; 24:3; 26:23; 30:7; 35:5.

31. See B. Wright, “Letter of Aristeas,” 322–25.

32. Evans, “Numbers,” 64.

33. Tov, “Septuagint of Numbers,” 181–201.

34. See translation notes.

technique of LXX Numbers comes closest to a formal-equivalence rendering of its source.³⁵

The text of Num. 4 illustrates the harmonization apparent in LXX Numbers. Throughout the chapter we find that all the Hebrew witnesses—Qumran (4Q23^{vid}), the MT, and SP—read that the Levites eligible for Yahweh’s tent service must be “from thirty to fifty years old” (vv. 3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47). However, the LXX throughout chap. 4 consistently states that the Levites should be “from *twenty-five* [*eikosi kai pente*] years and above to fifty years” (LXX^{ed}). The Greek translator could have expanded the age span to from twenty-five to fifty to match 8:24–25, which begins the Levites’ service at age twenty-five.³⁶ More likely, however, this harmonization was already present in the Hebrew *Vorlage* that the Greek translator was using.³⁷ To illustrate the dynamic-equivalent renderings in LXX Numbers, consider the report of the ten explorers about the locals in Canaan: “All the people we saw there are huge. We saw the Nephilim there” (13:33c–34a LXX). The term “Nephilim” is transliterated in English translations since it reflects the name of a legendary people group (Gen. 6:4), but the Greek translator, presumably thinking that such a transliteration would not be understood by his readers, describes them as “giants” (*tous gigantes*, v. 34a), a synonym of the preceding genitive “very tall” (*hyperēmēkeis* for Hb. *middôt* “great stature,” v. 32c). In this example, the dynamic rendering “giants” can also be seen as a harmonization to LXX Gen. 6:4, which set a precedent of replacing Nephilim with “giants” (*hoi gigantes*).³⁸ Finally, let me illustrate what I see as the default “translation technique” of LXX Numbers, formal equivalence. Consider Moses’s ruling by the word of Yahweh for Zelophehad’s daughters: “What the tribe of the Josephites is saying is right” (36:5b). The Greek translator mistook the adjective *kēn* I (correct, right, accurate)³⁹ for its homonym, the adverb *kēn* II (thus, in the same manner, so).⁴⁰ Instead of attempting a dynamic rendering based on the context, the Greek translator opts for awkward formality: “*Thus* [*houtōs*] Joseph’s sons’ tribe are saying.”

After the Septuagint, the Aramaic versions of Numbers are next in importance. To the surprise of some, the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, called targums (Hb. *targumim*), characteristically represent the original Hebrew form, word for word, but not always the meaning,⁴¹ and Numbers is no exception to this. All the various targums—Onqelos (Tg^O), Pseudo-Jonathan (Tg^{PJ}), Neofiti (Tg^{Neo})⁴²—have literal renderings as their

35. See Aejmelaeus, “Translation Technique,” 531–52.

36. Wevers, *Notes*, 55.

37. Tov, “Textual Harmonization,” 1–16; Tov, “Septuagint of Numbers,” 181–201.

38. With Wevers, *Notes*, 209.

39. See “*kēn* I,” *HALOT* 2:482.

40. See “*kēn* II,” *HALOT* 2:482.

41. Flesher and Chilton, *Targums*, 27.

42. In some passages, like Num. 20*, there are Neofiti marginalia, Galilean Targum, et al.

default. For example, Tg^{PJ} of Num. 22:1–3 represents a one-to-one verbal correspondence with the Hebrew word order but also swaps out a few individual words with meanings that differ from the Hebrew words.⁴³ The text of Num. 11:34 is illustrative. After the Israelites complain and suffer Yahweh’s judgment, the narrator concludes, “So the name of that place was called Kibroth Hattaavah (Graves of Craving), because there they buried the people who had a craving.” The Greek and Latin (≈ Syriac) versions do not transliterate Kibroth Hattaavah but instead represent the Hebrew meaning closely as “Tombs of Craving” and “Graves of Lust,” respectively (see the second translation note on 11:34). Targums Onqelos and Pseudo-Jonathan translate the genitive more dynamically: “Graves of *the Demanders* [*dimša’ālê*] (Tg^O, my trans.) and “Graves of *the Desirers of the Flesh* [*dmšyly byšr’*] (Tg^O, my trans.). There are, of course, occasional targumic insertions that explicate difficult texts, such as the one at Num. 16:1. Korah either “took” men as an implied object (many versions) or “took” Dathan and Abiram, but both options have an unclear meaning (undisputed is the verb “took” *wylqh* 4Q27 MT SP). Targum Onqelos swaps out the verb so that Korah, with Dathan and Abiram, “made a division” (*w’tplyg*), which makes perfect sense contextually (16:2–3). Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, however, inserts an object so that Korah “took his robe, which was all of hyacinth” (*wnsyb gwlytyh dkw’ tykl’*), before rising up against Moses (16:2).

Other important early versions include Jerome’s Latin Vulgate (late 4th cent. CE) and the Syriac version (a.k.a. Peshitta, ca. 2nd cent. CE). The earliest Arabic translations of the Pentateuch (9th cent. CE) were based on the Syriac.⁴⁴ Our study indicates what is true for other biblical books: the Syriac and Vulgate were sometimes influenced by the LXX. For example, in Num. 25:3a the Hebrew narrator writes, “So Israel joined themselves to Baal [*ba’al*] of Peor.” The Syriac translator selected the verb, “And Israel *completed itself* [from **šmly*] to Baal Peor,” which makes no sense in conventional Syriac usage but makes perfect sense in later Greek usage: “And Israel *was initiated* [*etelesthe*] to Beel-Phegor” (NETS).⁴⁵ Investigation of the Latin Vulgate reveals that its Hebrew source was nearly identical to the MT; although Jerome was careful to represent that source, he was frequently influenced by the exegesis of the LXX and its recensions (Symmachus, Aquila, and Theodotion).⁴⁶ Once we isolate the LXX-influenced readings in the Syriac and Latin versions, we then discover that although they were produced later chronologically than the other witnesses (Qumran, MT, SP, LXX), they attest to countless original readings. Their primary value is in giving us a polyphony of early interpretive voices.

43. Flesher and Chilton, *Targums*, 24–26.

44. Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*, 129–32.

45. Weitzman, *Syriac Version*, 71.

46. Tov, *Textual Criticism* (2nd ed.), 153.

There are many reliable modern translations of the book of Numbers. For pragmatic reasons, in this commentary I will interact primarily with seven, produced by translators from three backgrounds—Jewish (NJPS), Protestant/ecumenical (ESV, NET, NIV, NLT, NRSV), and Roman Catholic (EÜ). These seven range from formal equivalence, preserving the Hebrew word order and syntax when possible, to dynamic equivalence, conveying the meaning of the text in common English syntax, style, and idiom.⁴⁷

Formal Equivalence			↔	Dynamic Equivalence		
ESV	NRSV	NJPS	NET	EÜ	NIV	NLT

One potential fallacy that pastors, teachers, and students alike can fall into is thinking that by simply evaluating an array of English translations on a given passage, they are then equipped to choose the best variants (textual criticism) and translational meanings (exegesis). As post-Renaissance interpreters, however, we must rigorously return to the primary sources to ascertain the best text and interpretation. The apostle Paul is an exemplar. Already saturated in the Hebrew and Aramaic Scriptures, Paul expressed a desire while imprisoned to regain possession of the scrolls, probably containing biblical sources, and parchments of either papyri or vellum for his writing (2 Tim. 4:13). The textual notes in this commentary provide an entry into the ancient and modern witness for all who by their “labor of love” (1 Thess. 1:3) study to be “approved by God” in rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) so that they are prepared to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2) in season and out.

Literary Genre and Structure

The book of Numbers, as we have said, is not fundamentally a book of numbers but an unfolding story containing an anthology of literary forms through which Yahweh reveals himself and his will. The importance of literary genres cannot be overstated, even if we cannot always reconstruct the oral prehistory of a genre (*Gattung*) in its original life setting in society (*Sitz im Leben*), as Hermann Gunkel and his enduring form-critical school endeavor to do (*gattungsgeschichtliche Schule*).⁴⁸ As one teacher has claimed: “You cannot understand what a text means unless you understand how a text means.”⁴⁹ What a text means, its message, is bound up with how a text means, its literary form.

47. See van der Louw, *Transformations*, 10.
48. See Gunkel’s *Sagen der Genesis* (1901) and *Psalms* (1930).
49. John I. Lawlor, 2007, in the course “Hebrew Exegesis: Pentateuch,” Grand Rapids Theological Seminary.

The question of the genre of Numbers operates on two basic levels, the book as a whole and the individual units that compose it, but the distinction is not clean. The individual units, or genres of discourse, in Numbers are embedded in one another, so that the interpreter must aim to distinguish each concentric ring of genre based on its form and content.⁵⁰

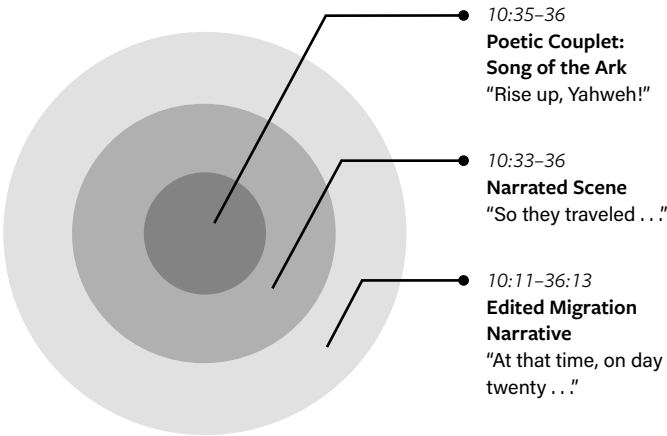


Figure Intro.1. Embedded Discourse Genres (I)

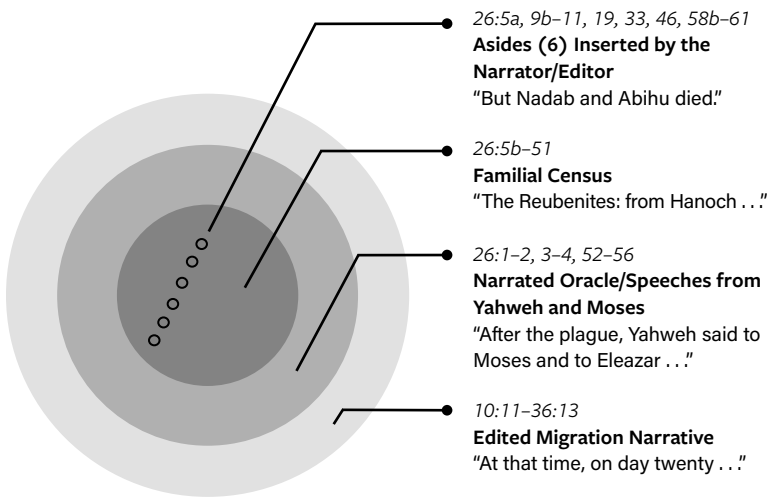


Figure Intro.2. Embedded Discourse Genres (II)

50. In figure Intro.2, the “Asides (6) Inserted by the Narrator/Editor” are not one unit but six units dispersed throughout the familial census.

These individual units have also been strategically positioned so that together they build the entire structure of Numbers. As a whole, Numbers is a composite, yet essentially coherent, Hebrew narrative⁵¹ and warrants using narrative-critical tools to make sense of it.⁵² What are the perspectives and convictions of the storyteller, the so-called implied narrator? How do they⁵³ withhold and reveal knowledge between characters and readers to create curiosity and suspense? How do they use characterization to advance the story line? How do they use repetition and variation, evaluation (explicit) or representation (implicit) of characters, and other limiting features to guide readers to interpret characters? The Numbers story line is driven by monologues and dialogues, principally from Yahweh to the Israelites through Moses (see 1:1) and from Moses to the people (see 31:14). Many other speakers, however, saturate the story line.⁵⁴ One could conceive of Yahweh's monologues as dialogues cut short for readers, if one imagines Moses lingering and responding to Yahweh in the tent, with his ear against the inner curtain (Num. 7:89). In an oral culture, the speeches are critical to advancing the narrative,⁵⁵ revealing not just divine *tôrâ* (instruction) but also the characterization of the personae throughout the book.

Moreover, the narrative details of Numbers have led some to support its historicity, some to reconstruct its history, and some to reject its historicity altogether. Persons of faith will generally accept the Numbers accounts as reliable, even though many details cannot be confirmed with archaeological and epigraphic data.⁵⁶ Other believers interpret Numbers as a theological narrative, whose transformative power substantiates its divine nature. Those holding to a naturalistic worldview will read Numbers, with its hyperbolic stories and talk of Yahweh as supreme among the gods of the ancient world, as unreliable. Regardless of what one concludes about the historicity of the accounts, the

51. See Frevel, *Desert Transformations*, 23–52.

52. See Alter, *Biblical Narrative* (1981); and Sternberg, *Poetics* (1985).

53. “They” is used for the implied narrator: although scribal education was largely restricted to the male upper class, in Mesopotamia, for instance, princesses and a few other elite females could learn to write (van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 55).

54. Speakers include Yahweh; Moses; unclean men at Passover (9:7); Hobab, Moses's father-in-law (10:30); the Israelites (11:4; 14:2, 4, 7; 16:34; 17:12; 20:19; 21:2); Joshua (11:28); Miriam and Aaron (12:2); Aaron (12:11); Joshua and Caleb (13:30; 14:6–9); the discouraging explorers (13:31); Dathan and Abiram (16:12–14); a collective Edom (20:18, 20); the Moabites (22:4); Balaam, Balak, the Moabite officials, Balaam's donkey, the angel of Yahweh, and Elohim (chaps. 22–24); Moses and Eleazar together (26:3–4); Zelophehad's daughters (27:2–4); Eleazar the high priest (31:21–24); Israel's military officers (31:49); the Gadites and Reubenites (32:2–5, 16–19); and the leaders of Israel's patriarchal families (36:1–4).

55. Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 79–110.

56. There is no extrabiblical archaeological evidence of Israel's migration and campaigns from Sinai to Moab, only broad Late Bronze Age and Iron Age parallels, including cultural trends, toponyms, onomastics, archaeological surveys, religious parallels (see Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel*; Wenham, *Numbers*, 81–91).

composition of Numbers presents itself as “assumed historiography”—that is, as a narrative that *claims* to record historical individuals and events, and we should take that claim seriously if we want to read the story on its own terms.⁵⁷

It will continue to be debated whether we can classify the book of Numbers as a *specific form* of historiographic narrative within its ANE literary world. Is it a saga; legend (irrespective of its historicity); report of a campaign, migration, pilgrimage, or procession; or some combination of these?⁵⁸ Few would disagree that the book presents “a prophetic or theological history in that it interprets Israel’s founding events in terms of God’s promises made to the patriarchs.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, the bipartite structure of Numbers does not mean it conveys essentially two genres—*tôrâ* (instruction) at Sinai (1:1–10:10) versus migratory campaign to the desert valleys of Moab (10:11–36:13). This is because the instructions of part 1 are crafted as a narrative that anticipates the migration, and the migratory story of part 2 is infused with *tôrâ* and concluded by the colophon, “These are the commandments and the decisions that Yahweh commanded the Israelites by the authority of Moses, in the desert valleys of Moab by the Jordan River across from Jericho” (36:13).⁶⁰ In its bipartite structure one can see a parallel with the so-called royal novellas of Egypt: “The Egyptian accounts about campaigns and the construction of temples and tombs, mainly contained in the Royal Novellas, frequently consist of two parts, one about the preparation, especially the deliberation in Pharaoh’s council, and the other about the actual execution of the campaign or construction.”⁶¹

The first part of Numbers (1:1–10:10) is like the pharaoh’s council in the royal novellas: Yahweh as the divine king and Moses as his prophet are preoccupied with preparing for Israel’s migration toward and conquest of Canaan. The New Kingdom pharaohs were optimally concerned with subjugating the land of Canaan,⁶² and now Yahweh orients his people specifically to conquer Canaan. In the second part (10:11–36:13), the story line turns out to be a migratory campaign on the way to the land,⁶³ and in that sense it reflects the second part of the royal novella genre. Perhaps more important, the entire composition of 10:11–36:13 is premised on the reader’s expectation that the story line should instead be about Israel’s conquest of Canaan (10:36b–11:1a α ;

57. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 25–26; contra Alter’s “prose fiction” (*Biblical Narrative*, 23–24).

58. See Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 17–23.

59. Wenham, *Numbers*, 29.

60. In 10:10–36:13, Douglas (*Wilderness*, 103, 123) thinks there are alternating law and story sections, but this is unpersuasive.

61. Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 21–22. Egypt’s royal novellas are not paralleled in Mesopotamian reports that appear to restrict their content to the campaigns themselves.

62. Redford (*Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 192–213) notes that Nubia to the south, after the Hyksos age, could be more easily colonized and Egyptianized, but Canaan posed a far greater challenge.

63. See W. Lee, *Migratory Campaign*.

13:30–31; 20:12b; 26:1–2). Israel’s definitive conquest, part 2 of the royal novella form, is subverted by the rebellious Israelite community, which takes a generation-long detour to the south and east of the land. At the same time, although the war campaign in Canaan is deferred until the Hexateuch’s consummative book of Joshua, the antecedent battles in Numbers—against the Canaanite king of Arad, Sihon, Og, the Midianites, and the Transjordan towns (Num. 21, 31–32)—function rhetorically to assure the audience that Yahweh’s power to conquer Canaan is indisputable. Also, the Reubenites and Gadites reimagine that the conquest of the land promised to Abraham did not have to be restricted to Canaan proper (Cisjordan) but could include the Transjordan territories Yahweh had already defeated (Num. 32). In other words, the conquest of the land begins internally within Numbers prior to Joshua. By one reading of Numbers, the Pentateuch’s editors imagined Num. 25–36 as a replacement for the book of Joshua,⁶⁴ and even if we do not find this persuasive, it points toward an internal coherence to Numbers’ plotline of conquest and land inheritance. Finally, the writers of Numbers are skilled in employing ANE genres, and the editors of Numbers have organized the materials in the narrative for compelling reasons, increasing the probability of an overarching literary form, like Genesis as a family history (*tôladôt*) or Deuteronomy as a political treaty (cf. Esarhaddon’s).

Within the bipartite structure of preparation (1:1–10:10) and migratory campaign (10:11–36:12), the thematic movement operates from obedience (chaps. 1–10) to disobedience (chaps. 11–25), so that a strong thematic break occurs not at 10:11 but at 11:1.⁶⁵ The thematic cycle of travel→rebel→death dominates chaps. 11–25, so that the geographic (migration) notices form only softer transitions, including the final notice at 22:1b, on Israel’s arrival in the Desert Valleys of Moab. On the literary level, the two censuses form an *inclusio* in chaps. 1 and 26, so that the break between 25 and 26 is slightly harder than between 20 and 21 but softer than between 10:10 and 10:11. The effect of the *inclusio* is primarily twofold: the old generation dies in judgment along their journey from Sinai through the wilderness to Moab (Num. 11–25), but a new generation with renewed hope in Yahweh and his land promise emerges from the ashes (Num. 26–36).⁶⁶ While interpreters can detect this overarching compositional unity, it is only natural that readers will be mentally preoccupied with the book’s substructure: the individual units of discourse, which the editors collect into multiunit segments that share a related theme, whether travel, war, cult, ethics, or land. This chart exhibits the geographical shifts, overarching structure, and substructure of the composition.

64. Albertz, “Pentateuchal Redaction,” 220–33.

65. Olson, *Death of the Old*, 121–22; Leveen, *Memory*, 81. Wenham (*Numbers*, 13) sees a literary unity with five parts: 1:1–10:10 (Sinai); 10:11–12:16 (Sinai to Kadesh); 13:1–19:22 (forty years near Kadesh); 20:1–22:1 (Kadesh to Moab); 22:2–36:13 (Moab).

66. See Olson, *Death of the Old*, 55, 198; Leveen, *Memory*, 37–39.

Exod. 19:1		Josh. 3←	
→ 1:1→Mt. Sinai→10:10		10:11→Migration→22:1a	22:1b→Desert Valleys of Moab→36:12→
1:1-10:10/10:36 Preparations for the Canaan Campaign by Divine Instruction <i>*Old generation prepares militarily, cultically, ethically</i>		10:11/11:1-25:18 Migratory Campaign: Phase I <i>*Old generation's cycle of travel→rebellion→death (11-25*)</i> <i>*Anticipatory wars (21)</i>	26:1-36:13 Migratory Campaign: Phase II <i>*Campaign and settlement begins in Transjordan (31-32; 34:13-14; see 36:10-12)</i> <i>*New generation prepares familially, cultically, geographically</i>
1	OLD GENERATION (EXODUS→WILDERNESS→MOAB)		26 NEW GENERATION (MOAB)
1st CENSUS	2nd CENSUS		
1-2 Travel/War	26 Travel/War	27 Land	28-30 Cult
3-4 Cult			31-35 Land
5-6 Ethics/Cult ^a			36 Land
7:1-9:14 Cult			
9:15-10:36 Travel/War			
11-12 Ethics			
13-14 Travel/War			
15 Cult			
16-17 Ethics/Cult			
18-19 Cult/Ethics			
20-21 Ethics/Travel			
22-25 Cult/Ethics			
26 Travel/War			
27 Land			
28-30 Cult			
31-35 Land			
36 Land			
1st Census, Camp Arrangement	2nd Census	Daughters of Zelophehad Inherit Land, Moses Disinherited, Joshua Succeeds Moses	Sacrificial Calendar, Vows to Yahweh
Levites Belong to Yahweh, Levites in the Meeting Tent	Levites, Red Cow Ritual	Arrival at Moab, Balaam Narrative, Israel Worship Ba'al of Peor	Midian War, Transjordan Inheritance, Itinerary, Cisjordan Borders, Levite-Refuge Towns
Remove Impurity, Restore Wrongs, Adultery Ritual, Nazirite Vow, Priestly Blessing	Liability and Portion of the Levites, Aaron's Staff Produces Almonds		Daughters of Zelophehad Keep Land, Colophon
Chieftains Dedicate Meeting Tent Altar, Tent Lamps, Consecrate Levites	Korah-Dathan-Abiram Rebel, Aaron's Staff Produces Almonds		
Passover, Cloud and Fire, Trumpets, Israel Departs from Mt. Sinai	Explore Canaan, Report Discouraging, Israelites Complain, Invasion Fails		
Complaining-Burning-Death in the Camp, Miriam-Aaron Speak against Moses	Offerings, Violating Sabbath, Tassels		

a. Contra Seybold (*Der Segen*, 61), who sees Num. 6–7 as P's disordered junk pile, a concentric structure of chaps. 1–10 is identifiable (Leveen, "Variations," 208).

Figure Intro.3. Structure of the Book of Numbers

When teaching or preaching from or through Numbers, it is helpful to explain concisely the location of the text within (1) the Hexateuch epic (creation→conquest), (2) the Moses story (Exodus→Deuteronomy), (3) the Sinai pericope (Exod. 19:1–Num. 10:10), (4) part 1 (1–10:10/10:36) or part 2 of the book (10:11/11:1–36:13), and finally (5) after the first census (1:1–25:18) or the second (26:1–36:13). This latter category indicates whether the Israelites in view experienced the exodus and will rebel and die in the wilderness (chaps.

1–25) or did not experience the exodus but anticipate life with Yahweh in the promised land (chaps. 26–36).

Composition

Our study of literary genres and structure can be called *synchronic* because we examine Numbers “with time,” that is, in its final form now frozen in time. Our study of the book’s composition can be called *diachronic* because we examine how Numbers developed “through time,” that is, how sources and editorial activity shaped the contours of the book over centuries. Both approaches have value for the Jewish and Christian scholar, teacher, and pastor.⁶⁷ Jesus, Paul, and Peter teach that the Torah, Prophets, and Writings were composed by human authors who were guided by the Holy Spirit to write the very words of God.⁶⁸ With this as our interpretive boundary, there is no biblical evidence that Moses *composed* the book of Numbers.⁶⁹ Instead, Numbers is written in the third person, that is, it presents itself as the product of later scribes, who not only transmitted the words of Yahweh through Moses but also conveyed many short stories and other literary forms (see “Literary Genre and Structure” above) associated with Israel’s experience from Sinai to the desert valleys of Moab (1:1a; 12:7). Only rarely do the scribes reveal their inherited sources: “That is why it is said in *The Scroll of the Wars of Yahweh*, ‘Waheb in Suphah and the wadis . . .’” (21:14). How, then, did the scribes decide what to include and what to exclude? This is impossible to answer definitively. Communicating the teachings (*tôrôt*) and cherished stories (or testimonies, *‘ēdawōt*) of Yahweh’s character and actions must have been a determining factor (see “Theology” below), but sometimes Numbers gives the impression of being more like an anthology of materials belonging to the Mosaic wilderness tradition.

The scribes of Numbers have left clues throughout their work that they did not belong to the wilderness era: “*When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering wood on the Sabbath day*” (15:32; also 22:4c). So from the text itself, the hermeneutical question arises: In what historical eras did the Hebrew scribes write and later edit the book of Numbers? Contrary to the opinion of some, the way we answer this question does not drastically affect interpretation. The reader can capture the imagery and message of Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad*, about the purported Trojan War (13th or 12th

67. For a canonical interpretation that appreciates both dimensions of text formation, see Childs, *Old Testament as Scripture*, 60–83.

68. E.g., Matt. 22:29; John 5:39; 2 Pet. 1:20–21; 2 Tim. 3:16–17.

69. As a shorthand citation device, Second Temple scribes began to refer to the whole Pentateuch, from Genesis before Moses through the record of Moses’s death, as “the book of Moses” (2 Chron. 25:4; 35:12; Ezra 6:18; Neh. 13:1; Mark 12:26; Tob. 6:13; 7:11–12; 1 Esd. 1:11; 5:49; 7:6, 9) or “the law of Moses” (many times).

cent. BCE), but remain clueless about Homer's own life, his historical context, and the transmission of this epic traditionally attributed to him. Yet there will be some trace effects, just as the writers and producers of today's historical dramas seek to make their films relevant to their contemporary audiences by including themes of interest to them.

Some characteristics in the text can be interpreted as either revealing different sources or stylistic variation by a single author. For instance, scholars will continue to debate whether the interchange of the divine names/appellatives God (*'ēlōhīm*), Yahweh (*yhw̄h*), and El (*'ēl*), as in the Balaam Cycle (Num. 22–24), indicate separate sources or stylistic variation. Similarly, redundancy can point toward interwoven sources (Num. 16) or emphasis within a single source (Num. 17). However, three characteristics cannot be explained away as stylistic variation and indicate distinct sources or contributions by subsequent redactors:

1. Competing information: Did Yahweh's cloud, word, ark, or Hobab guide the Israelites in their departure from Sinai (10:11–36; see chart below)?
2. Ideological and perspectival differences: How can Moses be called the most humble man on earth (Num. 12:3) and yet rebel against Yahweh by not honoring Yahweh as holy (deity) in the eyes of the people (20:10–12)?
3. Name and phraseology preferences: Is Moses's father-in-law named Reuel (Exod. 2:18), Jethro (Exod. 18), or Hobab (Num. 10:29–30; Judg. 4:11)?⁷⁰

There is a basic consensus today that the internal evidence from Numbers points toward vacillation between non-Priestly (traditionally JE) and Priestly materials.⁷¹ The Priestly materials are identified generally as P or *Priesterschrift*, “Priestly writing,” or particularly as the Priestly *Grundschrift*, “foundational writing” (P^s), and Priestly supplements (P^s).⁷² Further analysis of the language of each discursive unit suggests that the compositional process was more complex and included Holiness (H) contributions from the same scribes who wrote Lev. 17–26 and editorial work in two phases: first a Hexateuch redaction (Hex^R), then a Pentateuch redaction (Pent^R). Conceivable but debatable is the theory that the Torah was perfected by three late revisions (Num. 1–10*, 26–36*), which emphasize Israel as a theocratic and hierocratic community ruled by the high priest (*Theokratischen Bearbeitung* = ThB).⁷³ Similar Priestly revisions are posited by other scholars.⁷⁴ A Deuteronomistic composition or redaction in Numbers is also

70. See Baden, “Documentary Hypothesis,” 13–33.

71. Even Wenham (*Numbers*, 79), who stresses a unified composition, holds to a fragmentary hypothesis.

72. See two-source (JE and P) of de Vaulx, *Nombres*, and Levine, *Numbers* (2 vols.).

73. See Achenbach, *Vollendung*, 635–38. For a critique, see Nihan, review of R. Achenbach (2006).

74. E.g., PB¹⁻⁵ proposed by Albertz, *Pentateuchstudien*, 471–85.

unclear.⁷⁵ Scholars will endlessly debate the date, provenance, and literary parameters (verses and parts of verses) of each source and redaction. Interpreters will also take many different paths to explain how Numbers was integrated into the Pentateuch.⁷⁶ The scholarly conflict, however, does not discredit the overwhelming evidence of identifiable sources and unifying redactions.⁷⁷ My own approach in this commentary is to note common attributions of sources and redactions but not to speculate about the social and political context of the scribes involved.

The evidence within the book of Numbers indicates a composition that has incorporated available sources, composed new texts, and redacted diverse materials to unify them. How can such a deeply human process correlate with an orthodox view of divine revelation and inspiration? Without assigning dates to the transmission process, of which I am far less confident, below I offer a sketch of the model to which I hold:

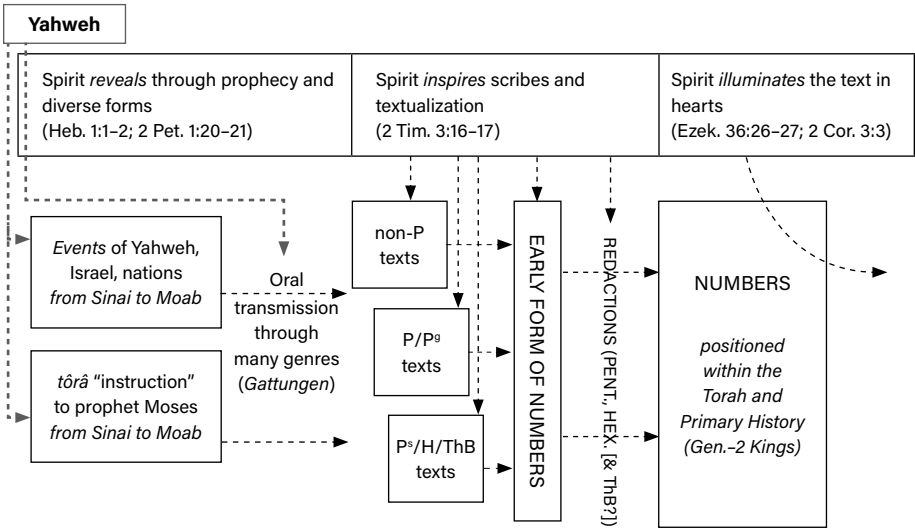


Figure Intro.4. Scripture as Divine-Human Communication

Evangelicals, as well as many Jews and Catholics, believe that the origin of the Scriptures is fully human and fully divine, trustworthy to communicate through human forms the very Word of God. Therefore, the fundamental question is

75. See Schmid, *Der sogenannte Jahwist* (1976), positing a Deuteronomistic composition from creation to the fall of Judah; and Erhard Blum, *Komposition des Pentateuch* (1990), arguing for a pre-P D-Komposition (KD) in the Moses story. Also unclear is Thomas Römer, “De la périphérie” (2008), with Numbers created to be a bridge between the priestly texts of the Tritoteuch and Deuteronomy (and the Dtr traditions); see critique by Frevel, “Book of Numbers,” 20–22.

76. See Frevel, *Desert Transformations*, 53–142.

77. On this logical fallacy, see Wible, “Inflation of Conflict,” 280–81.

not whether the oral transmission and textualization of Numbers was a fully human process; the evidence indicates that it was. Rather, the question is How much freedom did the Spirit give to the post-Moses storytellers (oral), scribes, and editors (textual) to shape traditions and sources creatively, even create new texts or redactionally unify diverse materials for theological purposes? If we readily acknowledge the creative genius of books like Job, Jonah, and Esther, why would we not say the same is true of artfully fashioned materials in Numbers? More important, why could the Creator not inspire creative and diverse literature that still faithfully reveals his nature and actions in the world?

Finally, let me offer five points on how the pastor-teacher, even the evangelist, can teach sources and redactional layers in Numbers (or the Pentateuch) for the edification of the body of Christ and glorification of the head, Christ himself (Eph. 4:11–16).

1. When exegeting a passage, *identify intertexts* with the same phraseology, ideations, and theology between the passage and other parts of the Pentateuch (or Hexateuch). Group these together and succinctly describe their unique focus and perspective.
2. *Identify contrasting materials*, apparently from other sources, and find their intertexts elsewhere in the Pentateuch. Scholars have not solved many source and editorial mysteries, so you can make your own observations about the distinct materials in the text.
3. *Summarize the discrete theology of each layer*, whether it is an oral form (originally), source, or redaction. Try to capture each layer's convictions about Yahweh/God and what he desires for his covenant people.
4. When preaching or teaching your passage, *clearly describe the different theologies* coexisting in tension within a given text. Omit scholarly jargon, which will probably confuse and frighten the audience. Each theology can be fruitfully traced throughout the canon to its culmination in the NT witnesses to the Messiah. This step can be compared to appreciating the contribution of each tile in a mosaic.
5. *Explain the overarching theological message* that emerges from the composite form of the text. This is like appreciating the complete image of a mosaic.

While the gospel of Jesus Christ (*euangelion Iēsou Christou*) is singular and not complex (1 Cor. 15:3–4), the gospel can be clarified when the teacher does not conflate the disparate textual layers to say only one thing but allows the polyphonic discourse to bear testimony to God in Christ from different perspectives. A diamond in a dark room looks monochromatic, still lovely, but its beauty is more fully appreciated when sunlight is refracted through its many facets. The following survey of Num. 10 illustrates this approach.

**Table Intro.2. Divine Guidance in Numbers 10:
From Sources to Theologies to Theology**

Verses	Description	Plausible Source	Intertexts (same or related sources)	Theologies	Composite Theological Message
10:11–12 10:13–28, 34	Tent cloud guides the Israelites	P or post-P ^a	<u>Intertexts:</u> →Exod. 13:21–22; 14:19–24; 40:36–38 and Num. 9:15–23*; 14:14 depict customary tent cloud guidance → <i>Inclusio</i> with camp departure in Num. 2	Yahweh’s cloud in his dwelling place is the source that guides his people to the promised land.	Sovereign Yahweh, by any mode he (not Moses) chooses, has resolved to guide Israel into the land he promised to their ancestors.
10:13	Word of Yahweh, by the authority of Moses, guides the Israelites	P (a second concept) ^b	<u>Intertexts:</u> →Num. 9:18a–b, 20b–c, 23	Yahweh’s word by his intermediary Moses is the source that guides his people to the promised land.	
10:29–32	Moses asks Hobab to guide the Israelites through the desert	a non-P ^c , self-standing fragment ^d , pre-Dtr ^e	<u>Intertexts:</u> →Judg. 4:11 with Hobab as Moses’s father-in-law <u>Independent texts:</u> →Jethro as Moses’s father-in-law (Exod. 3:1; 4:18; 18*), but in Exod. 18, like Num. 10:29–32, Jethro, not Yahweh, meets Moses’s need (contra Num. 11) →Reuel as Moses’s father-in-law (Exod. 2:18; cf. Num. 10:29)	Moses does not depend on Yahweh’s guidance, but asks his non-Israelite father-in-law, Hobab, to guide the Israelites through the desert.	
10:33 10:35–36	Ark searches for a resting place for the Israelites Song of the Ark	non-P ^f , maybe Dtr ^g	<u>Intertexts:</u> →Possibly Josh. 3–4, 6; 1 Sam. 3:3–7:2; 2 Sam. 6; Ps. 132:8	The ark, containing Yahweh’s covenant, guides and fights for the Israelites.	

a. Numbers 10:11–28 as P: Gray, *Numbers*, 90–92; de Vaulx, *Nombres*, 141–43; Levine, *Numbers*, 1:303; Seebass, *Numeri*, 2:12–13; but 10:11 not ending P^g (Frevel, *Mit Blick*, 50, 77–82). Many see vv. 11–12 as P’s superscription to the *Priesterschrift* of vv. 13–28 (Schmidt, *Numeri*, 13). Others distinguish vv. 13–28 from 2:1–31(P) and see vv. 13–28 as post-P (Noth, *Numbers*, 76–77); similarly, Achenbach (*Vollendung*, 635) attributes these verses to his post-P ThB and PentR.

b. But still P or P^g, as Boorer (*Priestly Narrative*, 72) notes the “word of Yahweh through Moses” is characteristic of P^g.

c. JE: Gray, *Numbers*, 92–97; Levine, *Numbers*, 1:311.

d. Seebass, *Numeri*, 2:8.

e. Achenbach (*Vollendung*, 635) also splices vv. 29–32 into PentR and HexR.

f. Römer, “L’Arche,” 98–99; Van Seters, *Life of Moses*, 329, 344.

g. Utzschneider, *Heiligtum*, 122.

Ancient Near Eastern Background

Not just words, literary forms, and editorial techniques but the very contents of Numbers bear the marks of the ANE and Mediterranean world.⁷⁸ That world has become increasingly clear to us through the history of research in four primary domains: historical geography, archaeology, literature, and iconography.⁷⁹

Historical geography is important because the land, it has been said, functions like the chessboard on which the game of the biblical narrative is played.⁸⁰ Consider, for instance, the major expanse of the Hexateuch story when Israel encamps at the edge of the promised land, from Num. 22 through Josh. 3, “along the Jordan River across from Jericho,” in what the Hebrew narrator consistently calls the *‘arbôt mô’āb*. The great majority of English translators still default in following the KJV’s “the plains of Moab,” which perpetuates the meaning of the Latin Vulgate, “*campestribus Moab*” (so NRSV, ESV, NASB, NLT, NIV, CEB, CSB). I am convinced that when most readers arrive mentally at the “the plains of Moab” in the story, they imagine flat grasslands without mountains in view. The NJPS supplies a different term, “steppes of Moab,” but this gives the same connotation, since a steppe is “a large area of land with grass but no trees, especially in eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia.”⁸¹ By contrast, what the narrators in the Hexateuch story pictured comes much closer to “the desert valleys of Moab,”⁸² since the Israelites encamped on the east bank of the Jordan River basin, of the Jordan Rift Valley, which put them right in the middle of the visible Transjordan (east) and Cisjordan (west) mountain ranges. The adjective *desert* valleys does not appear explicitly in the Hebrew phrase, but it provides additional clarity because the specific area north of the Dead Sea where the Israelites camped is classified as a desert, with only from zero to four inches of annual rainfall.⁸³ The place Israel camped in Moab stood in contrast to their future home, now visible to them in the form of the spring-fed oasis of Jericho, later called “the city of palms” (*‘îr hattāmārîm*; Judg. 1:16; 3:13).

Archaeology is important for many biblical scholars since it provides an independent source for reconstructing the history reflected in the biblical text.⁸⁴ This commentary will reflect on the material cultures left behind by Israel’s

78. Mesopotamia (Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, western Iran), Anatolia (Turkey), the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Israel), the Arabian Desert (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the other Arabian Peninsula countries), Egypt, and the Mediterranean (primarily Greece).

79. See Greer, Hilber, and Walton, *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament*.

80. Rasmussen, “Encountering the Holy Land.”

81. Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/steppe>.

82. Num. 22:1; 26:3, 63; 31:12; 33:48, 49, 50; 35:1; 36:13; Deut. 2:8; 34:1, 8; Josh. 13:32. For more, see the translation note on 22:1.

83. Rasmussen, *Atlas*, 30.

84. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel*, 6–11.

neighbors insofar as they illuminate Israel's story. For example, the English reader of Num. 33:51–52 may wonder what exactly Yahweh has in mind when he demands: “Speak to the Israelites and tell them, ‘When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you must drive out all the land’s inhabitants before you. Destroy all their *carved images* [*maškit*], destroy their *cast images* [*šalmē massēkôt*], and demolish all their *high places* [*bāmôt*].” Archaeology has revealed many such carved and cast images—humanlike (anthropic), animallike (theriomorphic), and part human- and part animallike (anthropomorphic)—as well as high places (open-air cult platforms) in Canaan and its neighboring lands in the Bronze and Iron Ages.⁸⁵ These cultic sites and objects, known to us today through archaeological discoveries, help us to imagine how they enticed the ancient Israelites (cf. 2 Kings 17) and how countercultural it was for Israel to demolish them and remain loyal to Yahweh alone (cf. 2 Kings 23).⁸⁶

Literature and *iconography* from the diverse yet intersecting cultures of the ANE are the most significant extrabiblical domains for interpreting the book of Numbers. Yahweh's, Moses's, and Israel's words and actions can be compared and contrasted with discovered writings (literature) and pictures, cult statues, figurines, and other symbols (iconography) produced by societies contiguous to Israel. The best comparisons will be not just *analogous*, but what Jack Sasson has called *homologous*, comparisons between cultures close in their location, language, and time.⁸⁷ Comparing texts or images with a “functionally equivalent genre” is also optimal.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, since we cannot verify the time span when or the locations where Numbers was composed and edited,⁸⁹ we do not know if we are reaching the ideal of homologous comparisons (location-language-time) of the same genre. However, because there are textual and iconographic trends across the empires of the ANE and over the *longue durée* (long term) of its history, we will find many analogies—some will be homologies—that are germane to reading Numbers in its cultural context. Finally, because literature and iconography always communicate some aspect of the worldview of its culture, temple, or royal institutions, we can often discern when Numbers is assuming, adapting, or rejecting the ethical values and theologies of Israel's neighbors.

Theology

In the commentary proper, I try to answer two questions: (1) How does Numbers portray the nature or character of Yahweh in each of its units of discourse

85. See Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 81–140; Stern, *Archaeology*, 1:478–513.

86. See the “Implications” essay in chap. 30, “Canaanite Cultic Sites.”

87. Sasson, “‘Mari and the Bible,’” 97–123.

88. Hallo, “Compare and Contrast,” 13.

89. See “Literary Genre and Structure” and “Composition” above.

and in its collections of discourse (Num. 1–10, 11–25, 26–36)?⁹⁰ (2) How does Numbers compare and contrast Yahweh with the deities depicted in the literature and iconography of the ANE?

The *nature of Yahweh*⁹¹ is arguably disclosed in the literary structure (see above) and in every discursive unit of Numbers. The narrator explains that Yahweh, who sits enthroned between the cherubim, would customarily speak in his meeting tent with his chosen liaison, Moses (7:89). Yahweh reveals himself through a polyphony of voices, which can be briefly illustrated here.

First, as a reminder to obey the covenant terms, the Israelites were to wear tassels on the edges of their clothes (15:38–40), but as a motivation to obey, God self-identifies in the formula now circumscribed by *inclusio* (v. 41):

I am Yahweh your God,
 who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God.
 I am Yahweh your God.

In the frames, the divine speaker repeats the copula-complement to self-identify by the name Yahweh (*yhw*h),⁹² Israel’s national deity;⁹³ in the center, Yahweh explains that he rescued Israel out of Egypt for the purpose of entering into a covenant relationship with them. Thus Yahweh presents the Sinai covenant (Exod. 19–24) as the telos of the exodus (Exod. 1–15).

Yahweh’s actions toward his covenant people also communicate his nature. One of several negative examples appears in chaps. 13–14, where ten of the twelve explorers discourage the community from inheriting the promised land, and Yahweh responds by cursing the entire exodus generation to die in the wilderness, outside the land (14:28–35). Does this episode, building on Israel’s complaining and insubordination (chaps. 11–12), reveal the limit of Yahweh’s patience? Or is it that failing to trust Yahweh to fulfill his patriarchal land promise is so offensive to Yahweh, and a defiant contravention of the covenant, that it invokes Yahweh to exterminate the very Israelites he has just redeemed (cf. Exod. 32–33; Lev. 26:14–39)? Yahweh’s actions, even his lack of action, toward *nonelect* nations also reveal his nature.⁹⁴ Yahweh

90. On thematic and kerygmatic approaches to the book’s theology, see Wenham, *Numbers*, 92–102.

91. For this commentary, the vocalization “Yahweh” was selected for reading, teaching, and preaching purposes; otherwise, a vowelless spelling (YHWH) is better since we still do not know how the divine name was vocalized. Tropper (“Divine Name,” 1–21) has made a convincing case that YHWH was a nominal lexeme of the *qatl*-pattern, with a basic form **yahw* (> *yahû* ≈ Late Babylonian *ia-a-hu-û*) and a name form with an absolutive case ending *-a* marked by the final *h* as a mater lectionis, *yahwa(h)* (≈ *ia-a-wa*_o).

92. See GBHS 9–10, §2.1.2.

93. See the translation note on 10:9.

94. See Kaminsky, “Election,” 397–425.

does not order Israel to attack Edom, Moab, or Ammon (Num. 20:14–21; 21:10–20, 24), so do the authors assume the Deuteronomistic theology that Yahweh has given specific territories to these Transjordan peoples (Deut. 2)? Likewise, Yahweh’s actions toward the *anti-elect* nations display his nature: he responds favorably to Israel’s vow and enables the Israelites to completely destroy (**hrm* hiphil stem) the Canaanite king of Arad and his towns in the Negev (Num. 21:1–3). Through this abridged scene, both Israel’s and Yahweh’s loyalty to their word is displayed.

Words to and about Yahweh from the lips of Moses can also communicate theology. In Exod. 34:5–7, Yahweh pronounces his name, YHWH, and “a virtual exegesis of this name”⁹⁵ in a rich creed about his character. Moses innerbiblically prays this creed, with some adjustments, in Num. 14:17–20, and Yahweh responds congruously with his gracious nature by forgiving the Israelites. Moses’s theological logic here is rooted in the conviction that Yahweh, as he revealed himself in Exod. 34, is internally predisposed to bless his people.⁹⁶ Yahweh affirms this perhaps nowhere more majestically than through the Priestly or Aaronic Blessing (Num. 6:24–26). Similarly, Aaron’s plea to Moses on behalf of their skin-diseased sister reveals Aaron’s conviction that Yahweh and his intermediary, Moses, are merciful toward repentant sinners (12:11). Other covenant members by their words and actions reveal their beliefs about Yahweh, which, if not questioned or rejected, could be taken as theologically sound. Israel’s officers, for instance, believe that Yahweh will be pleased and that atonement can be accomplished on their behalf without a blood sacrifice by their impressive war tribute of gold jewelry (31:48–50). Moses and Eleazar accept this tribute and bring it into Yahweh’s meeting tent as a memorial, which implies that they, too, believed Yahweh would accept the bloodless atoning offering (31:51–54; cf. Lev. 5:11–13). Since Torah readers know that Yahweh does reject aberrant offerings (Exod. 32; Lev. 10:1–3), Yahweh’s silence in this instance implies his acceptance of the officers’ sacrifice and, with it, their theological appropriation of an offering method.

The rituals in Numbers also promulgate Yahweh’s nature insofar as the participants embody the values that Yahweh espouses: the consecration of the Levites shows that they belong uniquely to Yahweh (Num. 3, 8, 18); the adultery ritual and vows underscore Yahweh’s passion for fidelity (Num. 5, 30); the Nazirite vow beautifully embodies total devotion to Yahweh (Num. 6); the chieftains’ lavish altar dedication stresses Yahweh’s worthiness to receive extravagant worship (Num. 7); perpetually burning lamps symbolize the light of Yahweh’s presence (Num. 8; cf. 6:24–26); trumpets signal movement toward Yahweh’s promised land, to fight for Yahweh and worship him (Num. 10); individual sacrifices and the cultic calendar orient Israel toward a

95. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 301.

96. See the “Implications” essay in chap. 14, “Exegeting and Applying Yahweh’s Character.”

lifestyle of Yahweh worship (Num. 15, 28–29); tassels dangling from clothes visually remind the Israelites to obey their deity (Num. 15); the budding of Aaron’s staff elevates him and his sons as Yahweh’s sole priestly intermediaries (Num. 17); the red-cow ritual enacts Yahweh’s demand for purity, physical and spiritual (Num. 19); the raised bronze serpent accentuates Yahweh as the one who provides the means of healing and survival for his rebellious and wounded people (Num. 21); and the leadership-transfer ritual presents Joshua as Moses’s divinely appointed successor (Num. 27).

Why should we think the words of non-Israelites about Yahweh’s nature should be dismissed *a priori*? There are no biblical grounds for this.⁹⁷ However, the Hebrew storytellers do caution readers against uncritically adopting non-Israelite theology and guidance. Balaam is a perfect case in point (Num. 22–24). He is the Moabite prophet who fails to see the angel of Yahweh in the road (22:21–34), so it is only natural for the reader to question if Balaam’s self-introductions are presumptuous, even ironic: “The prophecy of Balaam, Beor’s son, the prophecy of *the man whose eye is opened, who sees a vision from the Almighty, falling flat on the ground with eyes uncovered*” (24:3–4; also 24:15–16).⁹⁸ However, the narrator gives us no clear reason to question the theological perspectives in Balaam’s oracles that fit within the guardrails of the Hebrew canon: “I see him, but not now. I look at him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob, and a scepter will rise out of Israel. . . . One from Jacob will reign” (24:17–19*; see Gen. 49:10; Ps. 2:9; et al.). This stands in contrast to the claims of Job’s friends, which the reader must critically appraise since Yahweh in the end says, “You have not spoken about me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7c). Can animals, if given a voice, convey theological truths? In a scene of incisive dramatic irony, Balaam’s donkey sees and rightly fears the angel of Yahweh in the road, but Balaam, the visionary prophet, does not see or fear (22:21–34).⁹⁹ His donkey rebukes him, saying, “What have I done to you that you would beat me these three times?” This retort marks Balaam as a man of questionable character who mistreats an animal, for which God cares.¹⁰⁰ Balaam’s way is “perverse” before the angel of Yahweh, while Balaam’s reliable donkey saves his life and receives praise and protection from the angel of Yahweh (22:30, 33).

Theological reflection by the authors of Numbers is not confined to the book’s own internal discourse but interacts with the conceptions of deity prevalent in the ANE. By *comparing and contrasting* Numbers with the

97. Non-Israelite sages in Proverbs include King Lemuel (31:1–9) and Agur (30:1–33) (see Waltke, *Proverbs*, 465); Prov. 22:17–24:22 borrows from the Instruction of Amenemope (see Römheld, *Wege der Weisheit*, 1–12); cf. Dan. 1:4; Acts 7:22; 17:27–28.

98. See the “Implications” essay in chap. 22, “The Irony and Satire of the Balaam Cycle.”

99. In dramatic irony, the audience knows the fuller significance of a character’s words or actions, but the character remains in the dark (Garmendia, *Irony*, 6).

100. See Prov. 12:10; Jon. 4:11; Matt. 10:29; 12:11.

theologies of ANE literature and iconography, we find fascinating similarities and meaningful differences. As a whole, Numbers consistently mirrors the distinctive worldview of the Hebrew Scriptures that Yahweh, Israel's deity, is transcendent, ontologically distinct from and sovereign over his creation.¹⁰¹ By contrast, the cultures of the ANE held on to a worldview of continuity: that gods emerge from and ontologically extend the creation.¹⁰² Illustrating this continuity are the cosmogonies of Mesopotamia, Enuma Elish and Atrahasis, and of Egypt, Memphite Theology. In the book of Numbers, one finds a dominant worldview of divine transcendence, but this appears variously to be contextualized into the surrounding world of divine continuity.¹⁰³ For example, Yahweh does not hypostatically inhabit a cult image, but he does place his name—his essence or presence?—on his people (6:27),¹⁰⁴ and the ark comes curiously close to being a tangible extension of Yahweh himself (10:33–36).

Or consider when Aaron and Miriam act insubordinately to Moses, and Yahweh retorts in anger: “I speak with him [Moses] face-to-face, in an appearance and not in riddles, and he looks at the form of Yahweh” (12:8a–b). If “face-to-face” can be explained as an idiom for unmediated, interpersonal communication (as in Exod. 33:11), the synonymous parallelism of “in an appearance” and “the form of Yahweh” most straightforwardly implies that Yahweh takes on a physical form when revealing himself to Moses,¹⁰⁵ perhaps echoing the episode of Yahweh's visible appearance in Exod. 24:9–11. The implication, in view of other aniconic orders (Exod. 20:4–6), is that Israel must not create a form for Yahweh, but Yahweh holds the prerogative to create a form for himself.

One also thinks of Balaam's oracle: “Yahweh their God is with them, acclaimed as king among them. God brought them out of Egypt, *like the horns of a wild bull for them*” (Num. 23:21c–22). The reference to Egypt and Yahweh like a bull draws an association with the Apis bull, one of the earliest gods worshiped by the Egyptians, and the Canaanite and Phoenician god El, who held a common epithet, “Bull El his Father.”¹⁰⁶ El, Baal, and other gods were frequently represented iconographically in pictures, cult statues, and figurines as a bull in order to replicate their divine form, symbolize them, or display them with superhuman virility (see the translation note on 23:22).

101. J. Oswalt, *Bible among the Myths*, 63–84.

102. J. Oswalt, *Bible among the Myths*, 47–62.

103. On various approaches to ancient Israel's religious and theological contextualization, see Cross, *Canaanite Myth*; Machinist, “Question of Distinctiveness”; Smith, *Monotheism*; Smith, *History of God*; Niehaus, *Themes*; Hess, *Israelite Religions*; Sparks, “*Enūma Elish*”; Sparks, *God's Word*; Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*; Arnold, “Singular Israel”; Hilber, *Divine Accommodation*.

104. Cf. Mettinger, *Dethronement of Sabaoth*.

105. See the “Implications” essay in chap. 12, “Did Moses See Yahweh?”

106. Ugaritic: *tr 'il 'abh* (KTU 1.3 V 35–36; 1.4 I 4–15, etc.).

The simile in Num. 23:21–22 comes from the lips of a non-Israelite, who later is killed in divine judgment (31:8, 16); yet as I suggested earlier, it is not at all clear that the narrator reporting his oracle intends for readers to dismiss Balaam’s imagery as syncretic. Yahweh, who defeated the Apis bull and the other gods of Egypt (33:4b), is now supplanting the position of El and Baal of Canaan (see the excursus in chap. 22).

Canon and Reception

What can we say about when Numbers was incorporated into the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures? One Numbers scroll from Qumran on the Dead Sea (4QLev-Num^a) dates to the middle-to-late second century BCE.¹⁰⁷ Also, most Septuagintalists date the Old Greek (original LXX) translation of the Pentateuch to the third century BCE, and Numbers was no doubt included among “the scrolls” (*ta teuchē*) mentioned in the Letter of Aristeas (line 310).¹⁰⁸ This means that Second Temple Jews considered Numbers to belong to the canon of Hebrew Scriptures *before* the mid-third century BCE (*terminus ante quem*). Although we cannot speak precisely regarding the date of the whole composition, we can say that *well before* the third century BCE various textual traditions now incorporated into the book of Numbers were honored in ancient Israelite and Judahite societies. The two silver amulet scrolls inscribed with the Priestly Blessing (Num. 6:24–26) come from Jerusalem around the seventh or sixth century BCE. They were probably used in a private apotropaic ritual,¹⁰⁹ suggesting that common, preexilic Judahites venerated the Priestly Blessing.

Since Gabriel Barkay and his team discovered these amulets by accident, it is not unreasonable to postulate that other Sinai and wilderness stories and instructions were also honored in preexilic Judahite and Israelite societies. Based on analogies of textualization in other ANE cultures, it is conceivable that these texts may have begun as part of a scribal school curriculum and eventually were arranged into the scroll of Numbers and incorporated into the sacred library of the Jewish nation.¹¹⁰ This theory, which stresses the human role in including some traditions and excluding others from the book, is compatible with divine inspiration. As a NT analogy, the evangelists were highly selective in composing their Gospels (Luke 1:1–4; John 20:30–31; 21:25).

What, then, were the scribes’ guidelines for selecting, omitting, and editing the Sinai and wilderness materials to compose the Numbers scroll? We can only guess. But we can invert the question and answer it with confidence: How

107. R. Kugler and Baek, *Leviticus at Qumran*, 3.

108. See de Troyer, “Pentateuch,” 269–86, esp. 278.

109. See Smoak, *Priestly Blessing*; and chap. 6 in the commentary below.

110. See van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 244–64.

do the materials that made it into the Numbers scroll now contribute to the narrative and theology of the canon of the two Testaments? We can begin to answer this by summarizing nine narrative and theological realities that culminate in the NT witnesses to Jesus the Messiah and the new-covenant people of God that Jesus is creating through his life, death, and resurrection.

1. The final Sinai instructions of Num. 1–10 stress the centrality of Yahweh’s presence in the middle of Israel’s camps (Num. 2:2, 17; 9:15–23).¹¹¹ His presence was itself the ultimate blessing for his covenant people (Lev. 26:11–12; Num. 6:24–27).
→ *John 1:14; Rev. 21:3*
2. After a continuum of Israelite obedience from Lev. 25—when they stone the one who cursed the Name (Lev. 24)—through Num. 10, the reader expects Num. 11 to narrate how Israel follows Yahweh’s cloud-fire and moves toward the promised land. Instead, Num. 11 introduces the horrific cycle of journey→camp→complain and rebel→death, which recurs throughout Num. 11–21 and 25.
→ *Matt. 4:1 (cf. Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1); Heb. 3:7–11, 15–19; 4:15–16*
3. When the people of Yahweh slander him or his appointed leaders, this profoundly offends Yahweh, and he righteously punishes them for it (Num. 11–12, 14, 16–17, 20, 21).
→ *Phil. 2:14–15; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 2 Pet. 2:9–10*
4. The sins of ingratitude, idol worship, and sexual infidelity transgress Yahweh’s boundaries, reflecting his own nature, and must be purged from the community of Yahweh’s people (Num. 11–12, 14, 16–17, 20, 25; Lev. 18–20).
→ *Rom. 1:21–25, 32; 1 Cor. 5:1–2, 12–13; 10:1–11*
5. Yahweh’s great prophet, Moses, and high priest, Aaron, do not enjoy impunity. Even they fail to honor Yahweh as holy (as deity) in the eyes of his covenant people and thereby forfeit their inheritance in the promised land (Num. 20, 27; Deut. 32).
→ *Rom. 14:10–12; 2 Cor. 5:10; James 3:1*
6. After magnifying his righteous judgment against the old (exodus) generation who rebel against the covenant (Num. 11–25),¹¹² Yahweh is relentless in his covenant faithfulness to bring the new generation into the land, which he promised long ago to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
→ *Heb. 4:1; 11:8–10; 2 Pet. 3:13*
7. Israel must never put Yahweh to the test by their unbelief and complaining. Even though Yahweh does not tempt his people to sin, he does lead

111. See Frevel, *Desert Transformations*, 143–54.

112. Except for Caleb and Joshua (Num. 14).

them into situations where they are tested and tempted (Num. 14:22; cf. Exod. 16–20).¹¹³

→ *Matt. 4:1, 7; 6:13; Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 10:13; Gal. 5; James 1:13*

8. God's people must not fear scarcity or the lethal powers or the unknown future (Num. 11–20), but must trust him to provide everything they need for life with him living in their midst (Num. 6:24–26; chaps. 26–36; cf. Lev. 26:1–13).

→ *Matt. 7:11; Rom. 8:35–39; Phil. 4:19; Heb. 13:5–6*

9. Yahweh provides Israel with the sacrificial means to bring him delight, make atonement for their sins, avert his own wrath, and be forgiven (Num. 5, 6, 7, 15, 16, 25, 28–29, 31).

→ *Rom. 3:22–25a; 6:23; Heb. 7:26–27; 1 Pet. 2:5*

Finally, if readers today might prefer to skip over Numbers and its companion, Leviticus,¹¹⁴ it is not because Numbers was overlooked by later biblical authors, rabbinic Jews, or Christian interpreters at any time in the history of the church. Rather, the earliest Israelite, Judahite, and Jewish faith communities received and, by the Spirit's inspiration, shaped the composition of Numbers to convey the dynamic word of God to his people.¹¹⁵ The student-scribes of preexilic Israel and Judah, exilic Babylon, and Persian Yehud were also being shaped by the Sinai and wilderness texts that they were shaping. In Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, there was a common practice of enculturating the literate elite through oral and written mastery of their cultures' canonical works, like the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Instruction of Dua-Kheti, and the Iliad and Odyssey.¹¹⁶ In a similar way, the scribes of ancient Israel, Judah, and Yehud fluidly drew upon Numbers and other sacred texts to craft their own works. Sometimes they did this through innerbiblical exegesis and application of Numbers,¹¹⁷ but sometimes they drew upon other historical sources that differ from the accounts in Numbers.¹¹⁸ It may be true, however, that most later scribes reused Numbers texts from memory, consciously and subconsciously.¹¹⁹ Of the countless reflections on the book of Numbers and its enduring power in the lives of individuals and faith communities throughout history, this sampling must suffice.¹²⁰

113. The testing theme emerges predominantly in later reflection on Numbers (Deut. 8:2–3; Pss. 78:18, 40–41; 106:14; Heb. 3:8).

114. See Strawn, *Old Testament Is Dying*, 33–34.

115. See Childs, *Old Testament as Scripture*, 127–35, 194–200.

116. Carr, *Writing*, 287–93.

117. E.g., Fishbane (*Biblical Interpretation*, 329–34) explores the haggadic exegesis of the Priestly Blessing of Num. 6:24–26.

118. E.g., Choi (*Traditions at Odds*, 127–31) discusses the discrepancies between the narrative poem of Ps. 106 and the stories of Num. 11, 14, 16, 20, 25.

119. On memorized reuse, see Bergland, *Reading*, 102–6.

120. See index of Beale and Carson, *Commentary*, 1168–69; also Wenham, *Numbers*, 103–21.

So Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole, so that if a snake had bitten someone, when they looked at the bronze snake, they lived. (Num. 21:9)¹²¹

He [Hezekiah] also crushed the bronze snake that Moses had made, because up until that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. It was called Nehushtan. (2 Kings 18:4)

And Mōysēs made a bronze snake and set it up on a sign, and it so happened that when a snake was biting a person and they looked at the bronze snake, then they lived. (Num. 21:9 LXX)

But your children were not conquered even by the fangs of venomous serpents, for your mercy came to their help and healed them. (Wis. 16:10 NRSV; cf. 16:5–13)¹²²

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. (John 3:14–15 NRSV; cf. 12:32–34; 19:37)

We should not put Christ to the test, as some of them tested [the Lord], and were destroyed by snakes. (1 Cor. 10:9)¹²³

He promises that he would deliver from the bites of the serpent (that is, evil actions, idolatries, and other sins) all those who believe in him who was put to death by this sign, namely, the cross. (Justin Martyr)¹²⁴

So Moses made the bronze snake and put it in a suspended place, and it so happened that when a (the) snake bit a (the) man and he looked at the bronze snake, and he set his heart to the name the word of Y—[Yahweh], then he lived. (Tg^{PJ})¹²⁵

To be made whole of a serpent is a great sacrament. What is it to be made whole of a serpent by looking upon a serpent? It is to be made whole of death by believing in one dead. (St. Augustine)¹²⁶

G'd's purpose in commanding Moses to make a snake and for the people to focus on it was to show them that it was not the snake that causes death but the sin. (Bachya ben Asher)¹²⁷

121. MT SP ≈ Vulg, no Qumran MSS. My translations of Num. 21:9, Hb. and LXX; 2 Kings 18:4; 1 Cor. 10:9; Tg^{PJ}; and Seebass, *Numeri*, 2:327.

122. Wisdom of Solomon (1st cent. BCE) in the Apocrypha.

123. Possible biblical allusions: Jer. 8:17; Mark 16:18 (Byzantine); Luke 10:19; Acts 28:3–6.

124. Justin Martyr, ca. 100–165 CE (Lienhard, *Numbers*, 242–43).

125. Aramaic Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (4th cent. CE). Targum Onqelos (early 2nd cent. CE) does not include the final phrase about the word of Yahweh.

126. Saint Augustine of Hippo (4th–5th cent. CE) (Lienhard, *Numbers*, 243).

127. Jewish commentator on the Torah (13th–14th cent. CE), https://www.sefaria.org/Rabbeinu_Bahya_%2C_Bamidbar.21.9.

Sistine Chapel mural (Michelangelo)

For, just as no healing was conveyed from the serpent to any who did not turn their eyes towards it, when set up on high, so the look of faith only causes the death of Christ to bring salvation to us. (John Calvin)¹²⁸

That hereby he may purchase salvation for all believers: all those who look to him by faith recover spiritual health, even as all that looked at that serpent recovered bodily health. (John Wesley)¹²⁹

One of the principal truths of Christianity, a truth that goes almost unrecognized today, is that looking is what saves us. The bronze serpent was lifted up so that those who lay maimed in the depths of degradation should be saved by looking upon it. (Simone Weil)¹³⁰

As soon as the people asked for forgiveness, God was ready to make this goal possible again. Yet, as an exception, he did not choose to abolish the evil, but to separate the people from the evil by looking at a symbol that would not allow them to forget their failure. (Horst Seebass)¹³¹

So Moses made a metal snake,
And nailed it to a pole
Sent out the saving word so they would know
That the symbol of their suffering was now the focus of their faith
And with a faithful glance, the healing power would flow. (Michael Card)¹³²

128. Calvin, *Harmony*, 137.

129. On John 3:15, from Wesley, *Wesley's Notes*, 197.

130. See the 20th cent. French philosopher and activist Weil, *Waiting for God*, 192–93.

131. Seebass, *Numeri*, 2:327, my trans.

132. Song by Michael Card, “Lift Up the Suffering Symbol” (2012), <https://www.invubu.com/music/show/song/Michael-Card/Lift-Up-the-Suffering-Symbol.html>.

1

Military Census of the First Wilderness Generation

(1:1–54)



Overview

Within the Hexateuch narrative, from the creation of the world to the conquest of the land, Num. 1:1–10:10 supplies the final segment of the so-called Sinai Pericope (Exod. 19:1–Num. 10:10). Surprisingly, Num. 1:1–10:10 does not continue the sacrificial and other rituals of Leviticus but rather resumes the instructions of Exod. 25–40 regarding Yahweh’s meeting tent, its furnishings, and the priesthood—thus forming an *inclusio* around the book of Leviticus.¹ Even so, the opening chapter of Numbers begins with a superscription (1:1) that continues Yahweh’s revelatory speeches from Mount Sinai to the Israelite community below—or to Moses, Aaron, or his sons—primarily but not exclusively mediated through Moses. The Qumran scribes of the second century

1. Blum, *Komposition des Pentateuch*, 301. Ruwe (“*Heiligkeitsgesetz*,” 42) contends that the institutions of Num. 1–10*—the tribal census (Num. 1) and arrangement around the meeting tent (Num. 2); the census, tasks, location and consecration of the Levites (Num. 3, 4, 8); and the votive offerings of the chieftains at the sanctuary’s consecration (Num. 7)—are all subordinate to the primary institutions of the meeting tent in Exod. 25–40*. The consensus sees Num. 1–10* as growing out of a priestly environment (Cardellini, *Numeri 1,1–10,10*, 44), but many have more specifically assigned it to the Priestly writing (see, i.e., Kellermann, *Priesterschrift*), a Priestly *Grundschrift* “foundational writing” (P^s), or a P-*Komposition* (KP) (Blum, *Komposition des Pentateuch*, 287–32). Others see Num. 1–10* as containing post-P/P^s materials, called supplements (P^s) (Gray, *Numbers*, 1–89), Holiness writings related to Lev. 17–26 (H) (Knohl, *Sanctuary*, 105), a theocratic revision of the Torah (ThB) (Achenbach, *Vollendung*, 638), or other post-P explanations (see Boorer, *Priestly Narrative*, 70–71).

BCE perceived this continuum, and surely other connections, when they copied Leviticus and Numbers together onto a single scroll (4QLev-Num^a).² In Num. 1:2–16, Yahweh commands Moses directly and Aaron in the third person, with the assistance of the head of each of the twelve tribes, to take a census of the Israelite males, twenty years old and upward, who could fight in Israel's campaigns in Canaan. In vv. 17–19, the narrator recounts the people's obedience to Yahweh in registering themselves and then in vv. 20–43 supplies the census. The chapter closes in vv. 44–54 with the sum of military personnel (vv. 44–46) and an explanation for why the Levites are exempted from going to war: they are to stay back and guard Yahweh's dwelling place (vv. 47–53). The remark that Israel obeys "as Yahweh commanded Moses" (v. 54) recurs at the ends of the subsequent three chapters and editorially unifies Num. 1–4.³

Translation

¹Then Yahweh spoke to Moses in the Sinai wilderness inside⁴ the meeting tent,⁵ on day one of the second month in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt:⁶

²"Take a census⁷ of the entire Israelite community by their families,⁸ by their patriarchs' households,⁹ counting the name of every individual male.¹⁰ ³You and Aaron must enlist¹¹ everyone eligible for military service,¹² twenty years old and up, by their divisions. ⁴A man from each tribe, each the head¹³ of his patriarchal household, will assist

2. See "Title and Hebrew Manuscripts" in the introduction.

3. Num. 1:54; 2:34; 3:51; 4:49; see Leveen, *Memory*, 34–35.

4. A spatial *b* marking the location within an area (IBHS §11.2.5b); cf. *m*- for *min* in Lev. 1:1, "from out of the meeting tent."

5. LXX^{ed}: "tent of witness"; Tg^o: "dwelling place/tent of assembly."

6. Throughout my translation of Numbers, a colon will often represent the complementizer "saying" (*lē'mōr*), which marks reported speech (BHRG §20.1.5).

7. Formally, "lift up a head."

8. "Families" (*mišpāḥôt*) is often translated "clans" (NRSV, ESV, NIV, NLT, NJPS), but that term today can have a divisive or even racist connotation (KKK). The Hebrew term refers simply to an association of "very large families" (King and Stager, *Life*, 36).

9. Formally, "by the house of their fathers"; see Stager, "Archaeology," 1–35; Schloen, *House of the Father*.

10. Formally, "by the number of names of every male, by their skulls."

11. Throughout Num. 1–4^s, "enlist" renders the verb **pqd*, which in Hebrew and a few Semitic and cognate languages frequently means "'to enroll' or 'to muster' in association with militaristic and/or cultic activities" (Spencer, "PQD," 546).

12. Formally, "all who go out for war [or, in the army]"; LXX^{ed}: "everyone who goes out in the force of Israel."

13. "Head" (*rōš*) refers to a tribal leader, which LXX^{ed} captures well by "rulers" or "princes" (*archontōn*). Staubli (*Leviticus, Numeri*, 208, 389) sees a possible resemblance in an Egyptian depiction of a donkey-riding tribe driver in central Sinai.

you.¹⁴ ⁵Now these are the names of the men who will assist you.¹⁵ From Reuben, Shedeur's son Elizur.¹⁶ ⁶From Simeon, Zurishaddai's son Shelumiel. ⁷From Judah, Amminadab's son Nahshon. ⁸From Issachar, Zuar's son Nethanel. ⁹From Zebulun, Helon's son Eliab. ¹⁰From Joseph's sons: from Ephraim, Ammihud's son Elishama; from Manasseh, Pedahzur's son Gamaliel. ¹¹From Benjamin, Gideoni's son Abidan. ¹²From Dan, Ammishaddai's son Ahiezer. ¹³From Asher, Ocran's son Pagiel. ¹⁴From Gad, Deuel's son Eliasaph. ¹⁵From Naphtali, Enan's son Ahira." ¹⁶These were the ones chosen¹⁷ from the community, chieftains¹⁸ of their ancestral tribes. They were the leaders of Israel's thousands.

¹⁷So Moses and Aaron took these men who were mentioned by their names,¹⁹ ¹⁸and they assembled the entire community on day one of the second month.²⁰ The people registered themselves²¹ by families and patriarchs' households, and the men twenty years old and up were listed individually by name, ¹⁹just as Yahweh commanded Moses. So he enlisted them in the Sinai wilderness. ²⁰They were as follows:

The descendants of Reuben, Israel's firstborn: according to the family history²² of their families and patriarchs' households, every male²³

14. Formally, "there must be with you."

15. Formally, "will stand with you."

16. The syntax of vv. 5–15 repeats the pattern: "From/with regard to tribe A [l of class, *IBHS* §11.2.10d]: proper name B, namely, the son of C." The format, "Shedeur's son Elizur," calls attention to the ANE societal importance of identifying every son by his father's name.

17. Formally, "the called/named ones."

18. Speiser ("nāšī", 111–17) argues persuasively that *nāšī* was used by the Priestly authors to designate a pre-monarchic leader who could suitably be called a chieftain, not a prince, and who was responsible for normal administrative processes. The Deuteronomic authors prefer the term *šōpēt* (judge) for a political authority relied on in times of crisis.

19. Formally, "who were marked by names"; the niphal verb "were marked" (*niqqəbū*) has a passive sense: their names were acted on by Yahweh in vv. 5–13 (*IBHS* §23.2.2a).

20. LXX^{ed}, possibly to adjust to Num. 1:1, reads "on the first of the month of the second year."

21. This root in the hithpael stem (*wayyityalədū*) probably indicates a direct-reflexive force whereby the people acted to have their own names recorded on an ancestral list (*IBHS* §26.2c; "yld," *HALOT* 2:411–12; "register genealogy," *DCH* 4:213–20).

22. "Family history" (gloss no. 3 of "*tōlādōt*," *DCH* 8:604–5) communicates more closely the meaning of what is often translated as "descendants, successors" ("*tōlādōt*," *HALOT* 4:1699–1700). LXX^{ed} seems to perceive this nuance, "according to kindred" (LEH) or "according to families" (NETS). This Hebrew *Leitwort* in Num. 1 creates a literary continuity with the primeval and patriarchal "family histories" (*tōlādōt*) that organize the book of Genesis and that appear later (Exod. 6:16, 19; Num. 1:20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42). The precise formula in Genesis "these are the *tōlādōt* of" recurs with the progenitors Aaron and Moses in Num. 3:1. See Arnold, "Holiness Redaction"; Tengström, *Toledotformel*; Weimar, "Toledot-Formel," 65–93; Scharbert, "Toledot-Formel," 45–56; Thomas, "Toledot Formula," 96–103.

23. In this census "every male" (*kol-zākār*) qualifies only the descendants of Simeon and Reuben (see the descriptor in 1:2) for no apparent reason (Kellermann, *Priesterschrift*, 10).

twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service,²⁴ was listed individually²⁵ by name. ²¹Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Reuben came to 46,500.²⁶

²²From the descendants of Simeon: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, every male (of those who were enlisted)²⁷ twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, was listed individually by name. ²³Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Simeon came to 59,300.

²⁴From the descendants of Gad: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, the men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, were listed by name. ²⁵Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Gad came to 45,650.

²⁶From the descendants of Judah: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, the men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, were listed by name. ²⁷Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Judah came to 74,600.

²⁸From the descendants of Issachar: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, the men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, were listed by name.

²⁹Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Issachar came to 54,400.

³⁰From the descendants of Zebulun: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, the men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, were listed by name.

³¹Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Zebulun came to 57,400.

³²From the descendants of Joseph, the descendants of Ephraim: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, the men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, were listed by name. ³³Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Ephraim came to 40,500.

³⁴From the descendants of Manasseh: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, the men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, were listed by name. ³⁵Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Manasseh came to 32,200.

24. Probably “everyone eligible for military service” (*kōl yōšē’ šābā’*) is appositional, describing the condition “every male twenty years old and up” (*kol-zākār mibben ‘eśrīm šānā wāma’lā*); IBHS §12.3.

25. Formally, “by their skulls” (see 1:2); like “every male,” this phrase qualifies only Simeon and Reuben. “Every male” and “individually” may belong to a later redaction (Kellermann, *Priesterschrift*, 10), or the writer felt no need to repeat this phrase throughout the rest of the census (Judah to Naphtali in 1:26–43).

26. The verb is a qal pass. ptc. from *pqd* (HALOT 3:959; DCH 6:737–45, gloss 3b) with a subject suffix that functions as a predicate adjective: “The ones who were enlisted of them [*pəqudēhem*] of the tribe of Reuben were 46,500.”

27. “Of those enlisted” (*pəqudāyw*) occurs in this census only here and may indicate a redactor who clarified the referent as not every male but only those enlisted—but why here and not in 1:20?

³⁶From the descendants of Benjamin: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, the men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, were listed by name.

³⁷Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Benjamin came to 35,400.

³⁸From the descendants²⁸ of Dan: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, the men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, were listed by name. ³⁹Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Dan came to 62,700.

⁴⁰From the descendants of Asher: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, the men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, were listed by name. ⁴¹Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Asher came to 41,500.

⁴²From the descendants of Naphtali: according to the family history of their families and patriarchs' households, the men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for military service, were listed by name.

⁴³Those who were enlisted from the tribe of Naphtali came to 53,400.

⁴⁴These were the men whom Moses, Aaron, and the twelve Israelite chieftains enlisted, each one representing²⁹ his³⁰ patriarchal household.

⁴⁵All the Israelite men twenty years old and up, everyone eligible for Israel's military service, were enlisted according to their patriarchs' households.³¹ ⁴⁶All those who were enlisted came to 603,550. ⁴⁷But³²

the Levites, representing their ancestral tribe,³³ were not enlisted among them.³⁴ ⁴⁸Yahweh had said to Moses, ⁴⁹"Only the tribe of Levi you must not enlist or count³⁵ with the other Israelites. ⁵⁰But you must appoint the Levites over the dwelling place of witness,³⁶ over all its

28. 4Q23 reads sg., "From the descendant of Dan" (*lbn dn*), probably due to haplography since this Q fragment elsewhere matches the MT plurals (*lbrny* 'šr], 4Q23 Num. 1:40; Ulrich, *Qumran*, 138).

29. "Representing" interprets the preposition as a *l* of class (IBHS §11.2.10d), but the *l* may also be used here to avoid a three-term const. chain (IBHS §11.2.10f).

30. SP and LXX^{ed} add "his tribe and the tribe of." This may be an early scribal gloss to describe only the chieftains (see 1:4). Instead, MT's "each one representing his father's household" ('iš 'iš-'ehād lābêt-'ābōtāyw) describes all the men who were enrolled in the census (vv. 20–43).

31. Against MT (= Tg^o Vulg) "by the households of their patriarchs," SP and LXX^{ed} read "by/with their divisions/forces." This reading form creates an *inclusio* with 1:3 that highlights the fulfillment of Yahweh's census stipulation, "by their divisions."

32. "But" (*wə*) marks the contrast with v. 46 (IBHS §39.2.3b).

33. Formally, "by the tribe of their fathers," in contrast to all other Israelite men who were enrolled "according to their patriarchs' households" (v. 45).

34. LXX^{ed} specifies "among the sons of Israel," probably to clarify that the Levites were not counted among the Israelite men enrolled in the census.

35. Formally, "you must not enlist, and their head you must not lift up."

36. The head noun, "The dwelling place [*miškan*] of witness," is often translated "tabernacle" ("miškan," DCH 5:527–31, gloss 1: "[tent] tabernacle as dwelling place of Y"; HALOT 2:646–47, gloss 4). Whereas "tabernacle" can be archaic in some sociolects of English today, the metonym "dwelling place" draws immediate attention to its primary function in the ancient Near East, which the Priestly authors of the Pentateuch understood, as an abode or dwelling place for the Deity, Yahweh. The metonym, "meeting tent" or "tent of meeting" ('ohel mō'ēd), connotes the

utensils, over all its belongings. They will carry the dwelling place and all its utensils, and they will attend to it,³⁷ and they will camp all around³⁸ the dwelling place.⁵¹ Whenever the dwelling place is to set out on a journey, the Levites must take it down; and whenever the dwelling place is to camp, the Levites must set it up. But³⁹ the unauthorized person⁴⁰ who encroaches must be put to death.⁵² The Israelites must camp each man with his company, and each man with his division of troops.⁴¹ ⁵³ But the Levites must camp around the dwelling place of witness, so that wrath will not fall on the Israelite community. So the Levites must protect⁴² the dwelling place of witness.” ⁵⁴ The Israelites did everything Yahweh commanded Moses. Indeed, they did.⁴³

Interpretation

1:1. The two subscriptions of Leviticus doubly concluded Yahweh’s instructions from Mount Sinai (Lev. 26:46; 27:34), so this superscription surprisingly restarts the divine revelation that will extend up until the Israelites depart from Sinai (Num. 10:11–12).⁴⁴ Numbers 1:1 matches the design of Lev. 1:1 but with some key differences. In Exod. 40:35, even Moses, who spoke directly with Yahweh on Sinai, could not enter Yahweh’s presence in the meeting tent (*’ohel mō’ēd*), the very place a deity in the ANE was supposed to meet with his people.⁴⁵ Moreover, in the Priestly texts of the Pentateuch, the meeting tent refers to Yahweh’s sanctuary as the place where cultic rituals were performed.⁴⁶ So in Lev. 1:1, with Moses outside, Yahweh speaks *from* inside the meeting tent to institute the sacrificial system and thereby provide a means to gradually break

place where the Deity, Yahweh, would meet with his people: see Hundley, “Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting?” 3–18. Also see the “Implications” essay in chap. 7, “The Yahweh-Moses Relationship.”

37. Formally, “they will serve/minister (at) it.”

38. *lā + sābīb* meaning, “All around the dwelling place” (BHRG §39.18e).

39. Fronting activates an identifiable entity in contrast with the entity in v. 51a–b: “the Levites must set it up. *But the unauthorized person who encroaches* must be put to death” (BHRG §47.2.1[a]b; IBHS §39.2.3b).

40. “The unauthorized person” (*hazzār*), elsewhere translated “stranger,” in the Priestly literature often refers to a non-priest not authorized to approach the divine dwelling.

41. Formally, “according to his division by their troops.” SP: “according to his hand.” The rare word *dgl* (division) occurs in the HB only in Numbers (9× in Num. 1–2; 4× in Num. 10) and Song of Songs (1×) (Num. 1:52; 2:2, 3, 10, 17, 18, 25, 31, 34; 10:14, 18, 22, 25; Song 2:4). See the translation note on 2:2.

42. A cognate accusative, formally, “The Levites must guard the guard of” (*wəšāmārû hal-wiyyim ’et-mišmeret*).

43. The second proposition of v. 54, “thus they did” (*kēn ’āsû*), is redundant and emphatic: “Indeed, they did.”

44. Otto, “Ende der Toraoffenbarung,” 197.

45. See the first translation note on 1:50.

46. See Rhyder, *Centralizing the Cult*, 119.

down the divine-human separation.⁴⁷ There is some ambiguity in Num. 1:1: Is Moses now *inside* the meeting tent with Yahweh, listening in the divine presence as he used to do?⁴⁸ Locating the place of revelation not on Mount Sinai⁴⁹ but “in the Sinai wilderness” (*bəmidbar sīnay*, Num. 1:1) prepares the reader for the book’s major theme of wilderness wanderings (Num. 10:11–22:1).⁵⁰ The chronological marker (1:1) giving the date Num. 1:1–10:10 was delivered⁵¹ presents this block of revelation as the next scene in Israel’s history, which indelibly began with Yahweh delivering Israel from Egypt. One year after the exodus, Yahweh’s dwelling place was set up at Sinai (Exod. 40:17), followed by the month-long revelation of Leviticus (no chronological marker) and then by the nineteen-day revelation of Num. 1–10 (see Num. 1:1; 10:11). Yahweh’s grace and power exhibited in his redemption of Israel from Egypt injects the Priestly instructions of Num. 1–10 with theological import.

1:2–16. Yahweh instructs Moses and Aaron to take a census of all the Israelite men eligible to serve in the military, those twenty years old and up (vv. 2–3). Census lists are widespread in the ancient world: from Old Kingdom Egypt, whose army staff counted their troops and pharaohs who issued biennial and annual surveys of land ownership,⁵² to Mari (Syria), Ras Shamra (Syria), and Alalakh (Turkey/ancient Syria); from Rome and Greece to India, Japan, and China.⁵³ These census lists were primarily intended either to levy and collect taxes or to enlist men who were obligated to serve in the military.⁵⁴ The census of the exodus generation in Num. 1 and of their surviving children in Num. 26 was not for taxation but for military conscription, as indicated by the recurring qualifier, “everyone eligible for military service” (throughout chap. 1; 26:2).⁵⁵ The census does not cover every family member, which one might wrongly infer from the phraseology (v. 2, 18a–bβ), but was specified further as recording only the names of the men qualified to serve in Israel’s military, twenty years and older (v. 3, 18by).⁵⁶ In Exod. 18, rather than consulting with Yahweh, Moses follows the advice of a Midianite priest, his father-in-law, in appointing leaders to assist in adjudication (cf. Num.

47. Nihan, *Priestly Torah*, 90–91.

48. See the first translation note on 1:1.

49. Since Exod. 19, “Mount Sinai” (*har sīnāy*) has been the central toponym for the Sinai revelation (cf. Num. 3:1; 28:6).

50. See Nihan, *Priestly Torah*, 70.

51. Cf. Brenner, “Introduction,” 1.

52. Valbelle, “Les recensements,” 37–49, esp. 46.

53. Olson (*Death of the Old*, 73) observes that the Babylonian and Egyptian census lists stem from a centralized administration, whereas the lists from Mari, like Num. 1 and 26, record “manpower among tribal groups.”

54. Mendenhall, “Census Lists,” 53–54.

55. Contra Albertz (*Israelite Religion*, 2:485), who thinks Num. 1 and 26 are for taxation (Exod. 38:25–26; cf. the temple tax in Exod. 30:11–16).

56. Ashley, *Numbers*, 49.

11:14-17).⁵⁷ Here, by contrast, Yahweh preemptively designates by name a patriarchal leader from each of the twelve tribes, who probably functioned like a chieftain over “Israel’s thousands” (v. 16),⁵⁸ to assist in carrying out this military census, which would be an overwhelming task for Moses and Aaron alone (vv. 4-16).⁵⁹ A Mari letter (18th cent. BCE) from Terqa governor Kibri-Dagan to King Zimri-Lim, illustrates the use of assistants in generating a military census.⁶⁰ An oath taken by the governor’s assistants is not paralleled in Num. 1:5-15, but illuminates the reality that if Israel’s tribal leaders were responsible to register their respective tribes, they must have carried this out with a measure of independence, and in their task they proved to be dependable (vv. 18, 44-45).⁶¹

1:17-43. The same day that Yahweh orders the census, a full thirteen months after the exodus (vv. 1, 18), Moses, Aaron, and the named assistants initiate the census by gathering the people (vv. 17-19), but the narrator credits the people themselves with obeying Yahweh precisely (v. 19; see the second translation note on 1:18). The military census of Israelite males twenty years old and up who can fight for Israel is recorded, tribe by tribe (vv. 20-43). The order in which the tribes are listed differs among the biblical traditions (note the items shaded gray in the table below):⁶²

Table 1.1. Order of the Tribes Compared

Birth Order (Gen. 29-30, 35)	Jacob Blesses Sons (Gen. 49)	Prologue to Exodus (Exod. 1)	Chieftain Assistants (Num. 1:1-16)	Military Census (Num. 1:20-43)	Number of Warriors (20+)
Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	Reuben	46,500
Simeon	Simeon and Levi	Simeon	Simeon	Simeon	59,300
Levi		Levi			
Judah	Judah	Judah	Judah	Gad	45,650
Dan	Zebulun	Issachar	Issachar	Judah	74,600
Naphtali	Issachar	Zebulun	Zebulun	Issachar	54,400
Gad	Dan	Benjamin	Sons of Joseph: Ephraim Manasseh	Zebulun	57,400

57. Moses’s father-in-law is called variously Jethro, Hobab, and Reuel; see “Composition” in the commentary introduction.

58. See the translation note on “ancestral tribe” in 1:47.

59. The Hebrew names in vv. 5-15, and throughout Numbers, have original meanings, which Ambrose (4th cent. CE) interprets allegorically (Lienhard, *Numbers*, 205).

60. Sasson, *Mari Archives*, 189.

61. Sometimes village leaders were resistant or unreliable in carrying out the census: Sagaratum’s governor Yaqqim-Adad bemoans that he had to deal severely with the leaders and make them “swear a powerful ‘oath of the gods’” to execute their task (Trimm, *Warfare*, 105).

62. See Frevel, *Desert Transformations*, 189-208.

Birth Order (Gen. 29–30, 35)	Jacob Blesses Sons (Gen. 49)	Prologue to Exodus (Exod. 1)	Chieftain Assistants (Num. 1:1–16)	Military Census (Num. 1:20–43)	Number of Warriors (20+)
Asher	Gad	Dan	Benjamin	Sons of Jo- seph: Ephraim Manasseh	40,500 32,200
Issachar	Asher	Naphtali	Dan	Benjamin	35,400
Zebulun	Naphtali	Gad	Asher	Dan	62,700
[Dinah]					
Joseph	Joseph	Asher	Gad	Asher	41,500
Benjamin	Benjamin	Joseph	Naphtali	Naphtali	53,400
Total					603,550

The round numbers indicate neither falsification nor specificity but a substantial conscription of soldiers and the respective size of Israel’s tribes: Judah (largest), Dan, Simeon, Zebulun, Naphtali, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh (smallest). All men twenty years old and older were conscripted.⁶³ It is surprising that there are no stated physical qualifications or exemptions, which one finds elsewhere in the Torah⁶⁴ and in the ANE.⁶⁵

The sheer number of registered warriors from the Israelite tribes could be a temptation for self-dependence, boasting, or royal propaganda,⁶⁶ but this is not the stress of the narrator in Num. 1, who instead presents Israel’s inventory of its military personnel as an act of obeying and therefore trusting Yahweh (vv. 19, 54). This positive perspective contributes to the larger narrative. First, the military size envisions a now populous Israelite tribal confederacy,⁶⁷ which implies that Israel has obeyed the Priestly command in Gen. 1:28, and the resultant divine blessing of fertility while in Egypt still describes their present condition in the Sinai wilderness: “But the Israelites were fruitful, increased greatly and multiplied, and became extremely strong” (Exod. 1:7a–c).⁶⁸ The

63. See the first translation note on 1:3.

64. Deuteronomy 20:5–8 exempts from war: new homeowners who have yet to dedicate their house (v. 5); farmers who have planted a vineyard but have yet to harvest any grapes (v. 6; ca. three years before a vineyard yields grapes); men engaged but not yet married (v. 7); and soldiers afraid of the war (v. 8).

65. See Sasson, *Mari Archives*, 189.

66. See esp. Judg. 7:2, but also, e.g., Deut. 17:16; Jer. 9:23; Ps. 20:7; Zech. 4:6.

67. The census lists of Num. 1 and 26 indicate a tribal alliance in early Israel (see D. Fleming, *Legacy*, 19).

68. On the link between the multiplication formula in Exod. 1:7 and Num. 1*, see Pola, *Priesterschrift*, 145. Furthermore, Exod. 1:7 (*pārû . . . wayyirbû . . . wattimmālê*³) echoes the language of Gen. 1:28 (*pārû ūrābû ūmil’û*), which corresponds to the creation theology of the so-called Holiness Code of Lev. 17–26; see Tucker, *Holiness Composition*, 70–73, 110–13, 187; Arnold, “Genesis 1,” 332–44.

warriors are registered by their family histories (*tôladôt*), which recalls the family-history (*tôladôt*) structure of Genesis that correlates with the motif of descendants and Yahweh's resolve to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham's family (Gen. 12:3).⁶⁹ Yahweh's promise of fertility to the patriarchs is manifested in Israel's tribal population.⁷⁰

Second, Israel's sizeable army is now poised to overthrow Canaan's inhabitants and actualize the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise of land to the patriarchs.⁷¹ The exodus generation witnessed Yahweh single-handedly defeat Egypt, its deities, and the watery chaos, and they sang, "Yahweh is a warrior; Yahweh is his name" (Exod. 15:3); but Yahweh's omnipotence does not prevent him from often appointing human agents, here Israel's military divisions, to accomplish his redemptive purposes (see Gen. 22:17 and the "Implications" essay below, "Counting the Army").

1:44–54. Verses 44–46 form an *inclusio* with vv. 17–19, which encloses the military census as a unit (vv. 20–43). The stated size of the army, 603,550 strong, equals the sum of the eligible warriors from each tribe (v. 46 = vv. 20–43) and correlates with the 600,000 men of all ages, not counting their dependents, who exited Egypt (Exod. 12:37). If each male soldier had a wife and an average of three children, Israel's exodus generation would exceed two million, a huge number, spawning various reinterpretations of the data.⁷² In my view, the Priestly historiographers followed an ancient source, indicated by the randomness of the sum of each tribe's warriors,⁷³ while they also designed the census literarily to stress the fulfillment of the divine blessing of fertility and military power to possess the promised land of Canaan. It is plausible that the Priestly writers presented Num. 1 and 26 as a taunt of the military censuses of the great Late Bronze Age armies through a literary technique known as elite emulation, in which a peripheral culture's scribes (Israel's)

69. See the first translation note on 1:20.

70. Kellermann, *Priesterschrift*, 16.

71. Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–17; 15:18–21; 22:16–18; 24:60; 26:2–5; 35:11–12. See Douglas, *Wilderness*, 99–100.

72. The *Vetus Testamentum* journal was a center for this debate between Mendenhall, Bar-nouin, E. Davies, Humphreys, and Heinzerling. Developing the view of W. M. Flinders Petrie (*Researches in Sinai* in 1906), Mendenhall ("Census Lists," 66) argued that *ʾlp* (normally rendered "thousand") originally referred to a division of a tribe, which drastically reduces the Israelite population to modern sensibilities (see Kitchen, *Reliability*, 264–65). Mendenhall's view is unlikely because the author could have simply supplied the word for "troop" (*šāb'ā*) or "division" (*degel*) but did not (both are used throughout Num. 2). Jerry Waite ("Census," 487–91) takes *ʾlp* as "troop," but the second part of the number as the men: instead of 46,000 enlisted from Reuben, read "46 troops and 500 men" (v. 21); and instead of a total of 603,550, read "603 troops and 550 men." However, Waite's construction unnaturally bifurcates the typical formation of a Hb. number, and the number of divisions/troops is not reciprocal, as one would expect, with the number of men. For example, Gad would have 59 troops and 300 men, while Benjamin would have 35 troops and 400 men.

73. Mendenhall, "Census Lists," 63.

symbolically mimic the imperial cultures that threaten it (chiefly Egypt and Anatolia, i.e., Turkey).⁷⁴ The New Hittite Kingdom to the north loomed large, and the Canaanite city-states were an extension of the enduring New Kingdom Egypt, while a nomadic tribal Israel was camping in a life-threatening desert and afraid of Canaan's inhabitants.⁷⁵ The great army of Rameses II (13th cent. BCE) is estimated to have reached 100,000 males, with a field army on the ground made up of divisions of 5,000 men each.⁷⁶ The coalition forces of the Hittite vassal states were formidable, although the Hittite army itself may have been only 6,000 strong.⁷⁷ Unlike the Deuteronomic portrayal of Canaan's "seven nations more numerous and powerful than you" (Deut. 7:1), the Priestly writers offer a mimicry or even a mockery: the "very, very strong" Israelites in Egypt (*wayya'āsmû bim'ōd mā'ōd*, Exod. 1:7) now have over six hundred thousand registered male fighters, none of them mercenaries, making the Ramesside and Neo-Hittite forces look impotent and no match for Yahweh's blessed people.

Numbers 1 next turns abruptly to distinguish the Levites because they were not listed with the twelve tribes in the census (v. 47). Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, are now independent tribes, converting the original twelve tribes with Joseph and Levi (Gen. 29:32–30:24; 35:16–19) into twelve fighting tribes plus Levi, making thirteen. The divine speech in vv. 48–53 serves as a literary bridge from the census report devoid of Levites (1:2–47) to the wilderness camp arrangement with the Levites and meeting tent at the center (2:1–34).⁷⁸ Yahweh explains to Moses the occupational and theological reasons they were exempted from military service (vv. 48–53). Their vocation is to maintain and transport Yahweh's dwelling place, deconstructing and reconstructing it with all its accoutrements during Israel's migration from Egypt into the land of Canaan.⁷⁹ If accompanied by holiness, Israel's priests would effectively safeguard Yahweh's presence among his people, a crucial

74. On this technique by P, see Sparks, "Enūma Elish," 625–48.

75. See their fear in Num. 13:22–29 and in the stories of scarcity that frame the Sinai pericope in Exod. 16–17 and Num. 11.

76. Gabriel, *Great Armies*, 6. The Wilbour Papyrus, dating to Rameses V (12th cent. BCE), measures land zones in Middle Egypt for taxation purposes, and the Egyptian male warriors numbered 510,000 within a total population in that region of three million, but scholars believe the numbers are inflated and that the troops there came closer to 75,000 (Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt*, 264–65).

77. Gabriel, *Great Armies*, 75.

78. Kellermann, *Priesterschrift*, 32. Numbers 1:48–54 is intertextually connected to 3:5–10; both texts describe the special task of Levi's tribe in service to Yahweh's tent and its equipment. See Achenbach (*Vollendung*, 78–79), who further argues that Num. 1–4* initiates the first layer of a high-priestly theocratic revision of the Torah.

79. In Canaan the Levites continued transporting the ark containing the covenant until Solomon's temple was constructed (2 Sam. 15:24; 1 Kings 8:4; 1 Chron. 15:2, 14). Their function in the second temple, including gatekeeping, was complex (see 1 Chron. 9*; Leuchter and Hutton, *Levites and Priests*).

responsibility first assigned in the Sinai narrative to Aaron and his sons (Lev. 8–16, 21–22), and then expanded to the Levites (Num. 1–4, 7–8, 18, 31, 35).⁸⁰ The particulars of how the Levites must protect and maintain the meeting tent, which will affect the entire community, are specified later, in Num. 3–4.⁸¹ Across the ancient Near East, not only priests but also others protected the deity's temple. Egypt's pharaohs, represented by giant stone statues (colossi) at the monumental gate (pylon), protected the temple from chaos and so preserved *ma'at*. In Canaan, basalt guard lions flanked the entrance to the Area H temple in Hazor.⁸² In Assyria, protective deities (*kāribu*), a storm bird (*anzû*), and terrifying creatures like colossal lions were stationed in front of the portals and the inner sanctuary of the deity dwelling within. By contrast, winged statues of lions or bulls with human heads (*lamassu*) typically guarded Assyrian palaces. Along with statues of frightening creatures that defended the sacred space, the Hittites also considered the temple door, door bolt, and hearth as deities or spirits that deterred evil.⁸³ In Num. 1, neither human leaders, nor creatures, nor the meeting tent itself was deified, but the Levites were appointed as professional guardians of the physical space of Yahweh's dwelling, an integral function of cultic personnel in the ANE.⁸⁴

The narrator closes the unit in v. 54 with the second statement of Israel's obedience, which this time is redundant and emphatic (see the translation note on v. 54). With a formidable army (vv. 20–46) and Yahweh's presence guarded by his priests, who cared for, transported, and protected his dwelling place (vv. 47–53); with the leaders enacting their orders (vv. 17–19, 44); and with people responding to Yahweh in full obedience (vv. 19, 54), nothing but geography stands in Israel's way of conquering and inhabiting Canaan with divine blessing.

Implications

Counting the Army: Trusting in Human Power or in God?

In the story of the Pentateuch, the censuses of Num. 1 and 26 register soldiers for war to fight for and occupy the land of Canaan as the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to the patriarchs.⁸⁵ The military census of Num. 1, however,

80. See Nihan, *Priestly Torah*, 90, 93; Knohl, *Sanctuary*, 152.

81. Cardellini, *Numeri* 1,1–10,10, 96.

82. Keel, *Die Welt*, 110.

83. Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings*, 39, 43, 65–66, 73, 97, 101.

84. For the Hittite priesthood, with two guarding functions similar to the Levites (outer precinct) and priests (inner precinct), see Milgrom, "Shared Custody," 204–9; Taggar-Cohen, "Covenant Priesthood," 22.

85. Militant imagery appears in Gen. 22:17 and is echoed in 24:60; the land promise appears in Gen. 12:1; 15:13–21; 17:8.

presents a narrative twist because the exodus from Egypt was held up as the pattern for the conquest of Canaan: Yahweh alone, without Israel's armies, fought to bring Israel out of Egypt (Exod. 14:14; 15:17), so also Yahweh would bring Israel into the land of Canaan by sending his "hornet" to defeat and disinherit Canaan's inhabitants (Exod. 23:27–31; 33:1–2; 34:11; cf. Ps. 44:1–3). Later Yahweh told Gideon to dramatically thin out the number of his warriors against Midian, so that Israel would not boast, "Our own strength has delivered us" (Judg. 7:2). In a notoriously enigmatic text, Yahweh incites David and then punishes him for counting all the people, but the narrator's remark reveals that David's interest, and therefore pride, was in the number of "soldiers" and "warriors who could handle a sword" (2 Sam. 24:9).⁸⁶ So which is it in the book of Numbers? Israel takes Canaan through huge numbers of warriors (Num. 1; 26), with the temptation of arrogance and amnesia of the exodus? Or Yahweh alone fights for Israel and takes all the glory?

Later in Numbers it becomes clear that these approaches are not mutually exclusive. After Israel departs from Sinai and explores the land of Canaan (Num. 10–13), Caleb stresses their human capacity to conquer (13:30), while Joshua and Caleb also stress the cruciality of divine backing (14:6–9). Furthermore, the pattern of a divine promise achieved through a mobilized, powerful army is found elsewhere in ANE literature. For example, from LBA Ugarit comes an epic in which the god 'Ilu informs King Kirta that his future child-bearing wife would be a war captive. 'Ilu announces that Kirta will dispatch an army of formidable size to capture his wife in order to bring about the fulfillment of his promised child.⁸⁷ Or consider the divine-human symbiosis in war, for example, when Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE reign) rides into battle with his stretched bow while the god Assur, represented as a winged disc, fights in unison in the sky.⁸⁸

So also in Num. 1, and later in 26, it is a false dichotomy to pit divine promise and sovereignty against human forces in the fulfillment of Yahweh's redemptive purposes, but this highlights the fine line that God's people often face when God himself finally, usually after some agonizing delay, makes his people powerful and directs them to use their power for his appointed ends. The NT authors use this divine-human collaboration in warfare as a metaphor for the obedient and victorious Christ-follower. Hebrews venerates

86. David's census, 2 Sam. 24 (2 Chron. 2:17), is difficult to interpret (Park, "Census and Censure," 21–27), but violates the spirit of the law of the king in Deut. 17:14–20, which commands the king to read the *tôrâ* and prohibits the king from multiplying horses (military power), gold (glory), or wives (foreign alliances, sexual and spiritual infidelity).

87. "The Kirta Epic," COS 1.102:334. Kirta's army, "three hundred myriads" (*tl̄t . mat . rbt*: Parker, ed., *Ugaritic*, 15). This could refer to a countable three million (Rendsburg, "Additional Note," 393) or to myriads times three, which better fits with the ensuing synthetically parallel lines of incalculable soldiers and archers (see Num. 23:10).

88. Stone relief from Northwest Palace at Kalhu (Nimrud) (British Museum, rooms 7–8).

Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and David—war machines of controversial character—alongside godly Samuel and Israel’s honored prophets, all as those who conquered enemies by faith (Heb. 11:32–34). To the Corinthians, Paul explicates the divine source of their power and the spiritual nature of their warfare for Christ, who alone is worthy of obedience requiring a disciplined and submissive mind (2 Cor. 10:3–6).⁸⁹

89. See also Rom. 7:23; 2 Cor. 12:9; Eph. 6:10–20; 1 Tim. 1:18; 6:12; 1 Pet. 2:11; James 4:1. *Christus Victor* is in John 16:33; Eph. 1:20–23; Col. 2:13–15; 1 Cor. 15:54–57; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 5:5. God and his forces fight victoriously in Rev. 2:16; 12:7; 19:11, 14.