

NUMBERS – SHORT VERSION

The Book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible, is so named because it contains two censuses of the Israelite tribes (Chapters 1 and 26), along with various other listings of items with quantities and measures, e.g., gifts brought for the dedication of the altar (7:10-83), scouts sent to explore the Promised Land (13:4-13). The book is called “Wilderness” in Hebrew which, in a sense, is a more accurate title as it describes the thirty-eight years of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

The *central focus* of Numbers is God’s presence among his people as they journey through the wilderness. God walks with them and directs their lives. The challenge for the Israelites is to place their trust in God. Sadly, as we shall see, they often grumble, rebel, and lose their trust in God. But when their constant groaning eventually brings about God’s judgment and punishment, the people are brought to their senses, and they beg God’s mercy.

Division of chapters. Most Catholic scholars divide this book into three parts:

PART ONE: In the desert at Sinai—preparations for the journey (Chapters 1:1-10:10)

PART TWO: Journey from Sinai to the plains of Moab (Chapters 10:11-21:35)

PART THREE: Life and events in the plains of Moab—preparation for the entry into the Promised Land (Chapters 22-36)

The story of the Israelites’ journey from Egypt to the Promised Land was interrupted in Exodus 19. Numbers 10:10 picks up where the journey story left off.

The first nine chapters of Numbers are somewhat like Leviticus. They contain regulations and laws about worship, duties of the Levites, priestly tribes, and various other issues. We expect to find more chapters ahead that focus on laws, census lists and allotment of land to the tribes.

As you will see, the narrative sections in chapters 10-25 tell of the incessant grumbling and rebelling of the Israelites against God, and Moses has to constantly beg God not to let his anger destroy his rebellious people.

(For help with specific texts, you can go to my commentary on the individual chapters of the book.)

Suggested Texts to Read

Chapter 11:1-10—The Israelites grumble, Moses talks to God. Verses 11-15 show a wonderful example of a leader totally exhausted and despondent. Would that we could be so *honest* with God when we feel overwhelmed.

Chapter 11:24-30—God gets Moses some help.

Chapter 12—Moses’ siblings rebel against him.

Chapter 13:1-3, 17-24—Moses sends to Canaan one man from each of the twelve tribes to investigate the land, its people, its army, and determine whether it is suitable for Israel to take over and settle in.

Chapter 13:25-33—The twelve men commissioned to scout Canaan return with a majority and a minority report. The finding is that Canaan is rich and its cities fortified but the people are big and fierce. The majority report feels that Israel is no match for those people, but the minority report believes otherwise. The Israelites, fearing that they would get killed fighting the Canaanites, lose their faith and grumble again about going back to Egypt (14:1-4). In 14:11-12, God is mad with the people for their lack of trust. Moses seeks to calm God down and he succeeds (14:13-37).

Chapter 20:7-13—Moses and Aaron disobey God. As a result, they will not be allowed to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land.

Chapter 21:4-9—The incident involving the bronze serpent is important as it parallels Jesus on the cross (see my commentary in the long version).

Chapters 22-24—Oracles of Balaam. King Balak fears the wrath of the Israelites (22:4) that he hires the prophet Balaam to curse them. But Balaam is unable to curse Israel because God will not allow him. This story is famous for the talking ass (22:22-30).