

Num. 1:1

On the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt, the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, saying:

...

Num. 36:13

These are the commandments and regulations that the Lord enjoined upon the Israelites, through Moses, on the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho.

Nili Fox, "Numbers," *Jewish Study Bible*

The book of Numbers can easily be divided by subject and other criteria into several primary units; these can be further subdivided into smaller sections and subsections. It is, however, often difficult to determine the relationship between contiguous segments. Based on geographical criteria and ideological motifs, three major units can be distinguished, reflecting a literary sandwich of sorts:

- (1) the final encampment at **Sinai** and preparation to resume the wilderness trek (1:1-10:10);
- (2) the generation-long march in the desert **from Sinai to Moab** (10:11-22:1);
- (3) the encampment on **the plains of Moab** and preparation to enter Canaan (22:2-36:13).

Unit one — Israel readies itself for the march.

Unit two — a bridge between the first and last units.

Unit three — a new generation prepares to embark on a journey to enter the promised land.

Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary

A striking feature of Numbers is that law and narrative alternate regularly, as follows:

<u>Law</u>	<u>Narrative</u>
1-10:10	10:11-14:45
15	16-17
18-19	20-25
26-27:11	27:12-23
28-30	31-33:49
33:50-56; 34-36	

[But note that (e.g.) Numbers 7 is actually a narrative.]

In the main, the narrative is confined to the wilderness march; the law, to the three main stations of the march: Sinai (1-10:10), Kadesh (chaps. 15, 18-19), and the steppes of Moab (chaps. 28-30, 34-36). However, there are exceptions. Certain events are associated with stations, for example, the scouts (chaps. 13-14), the Korahite rebellions (chaps. 16-17), the Midianite war and Transjordanian settlement (chaps. 31-32). And some laws arise from test cases composed in narrative style, for example, the *pesah* (9:1-14), the wood gatherer (15:32-36), and Zelophehad's daughters (27:1-11). Thus this alternation is not a function of whether Israel was stationary or in motion....

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David Frankel, review of *Numbers: The Road to Freedom* (by Eryl Davies), *RBL*

Much of the first chapter of the book is dedicated to the theme of the structure of Numbers. Davies offers a fine review and an insightful critique of many of the scholarly suggestions on this topic. His conclusion, however, is disappointingly negative. Since, as Davies astutely shows, all of the scholarly suggestions are based on a selective highlighting of the materials in the book, Davies concludes that the book has no coherent structure at all and raises the possibility that “to expect the book to possess some kind of literary coherence is to impose modern expectations on an ancient text” (15). But the fact that certain structural elements that have been identified in Numbers fail to account for all the details in the book does not mean that these elements are meaningless. There can be varying degrees of coherence and structure within a book. These are not “all or nothing” categories. Furthermore, assuming that the book of Numbers underwent a relatively extended period of growth and development, it is only to be expected that coherent, structural elements would have been introduced at certain stages and overlooked and disrupted at others. It thus seems best to acknowledge real elements of coherence within the structure of Numbers without pretending that they fully account for the placement of each textual unit in the form of the book as we now have it.

#### **NAHMANIDES:**

Having explained the instructions for the sacrifices in the third book of the Torah, this book begins by setting forth the things commanded with regard to the Tent of Meeting. The permanent instructions concerning uncleanness have previously been issued; now boundaries are set around the Tabernacle as it travels the wilderness, just as they were set around Mount Sinai while the Presence was there. The warning that “any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death” (v. 51) matches that in Exod. 19:12, “Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.” “Let not the Kohathites go inside and witness the dismantling of the sanctuary, lest they die” (4:20, and see my comment there) parallels “Warn the people not to break through to the Lord to gaze, lest many of them perish” (Exod. 19:21). Similarly 18:4–5 matches Exod. 19:22 and 24. Our text further commands how the Tabernacle and its furnishings are to be protected and how the Israelites are to be encamped around it at a safe distance, while the priests who do approach the Lord are similarly instructed how to behave, both while the Tabernacle is encamped and while it is being transported, and how to discharge their duties. All of this is a mark of high respect for the Tabernacle. As the Sages said, “There is no comparison between a palace with a guard and a palace without a guard.”

Now this book is made up entirely of commandments that were relevant specifically to the Israelites’ situation while they were traveling through the wilderness and of the miracles that were performed for them there, to recount all the marvelous deeds of the Lord who dealt so wondrously with them. It tells further how He began to put their enemies in their power, and commands how the land is to be apportioned among them. There are no commandments in this book that apply outside the wilderness situation except for a few of the commandments about sacrifices that were begun in Leviticus but not fully explained there; these are completed in Numbers.

e-mail: [torahtalk@earthlink.net](mailto:torahtalk@earthlink.net)

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