

NUMBERS

Introduction

Author. See Introduction to Genesis and Exodus.

Date. Because the book spans the time of the wilderness wanderings and ends with the nation in the transjordan area awaiting entrance into the land, the date of the events and also the writing was probably around 1406 B.C.

Structure. The book can be divided into basically four sections. The first and the last demonstrate God's sovereignty over the nation as He orders their camp and prepares them for war. The first ordering of the camp involves the exodus generation while the second ordering involves their children, the second generation. The two middle sections involve God's dealings and his will with the people. Chapters ten through twenty-one demonstrate the nation's rebellious nature and how their sinful will can delay the promises of God. The third section, chapters twenty-two through twenty-five provide an answer to the second section, by displaying the sovereign and protective hand of God which works on behalf, and sometimes in spite of, his people.

Message Statement. The focus thus far in the Pentateuchal narrative has been upon the faithfulness of God to fulfill his promises to Abraham. He selected a seed in every generation through whom He blessed in Genesis, while in Exodus He delivered the people from Egypt, formed them into a nation and dwelt among them. In Leviticus He showed Himself holy to the people and provided a way for fellowship in the desert. The natural expectation of the reader at this point might be the immediate invasion and settlement of the land based upon a well established confidence in God's commitment to, and fulfillment of His promises. This expectation would fail, however, to take into account the contingency in God's plan which is dependent upon the people's response to His plan. Because of their unbelief, the generation of the Exodus failed to enjoy the promises which God offered them. The message of Numbers is: *Israel's walk*

in covenant relationship is initiated and ordered by God, but is delayed and disrupted by Israel's disobedience.

Argument

1A ISRAEL'S CAMP AND MILITARY STRUCTURE IS ORDERED BY YHWH IN PREPARATION TO LEAVE AND CONQUER THE PROMISED LAND 1:1--10:10

In a book which so clearly focuses upon the permissive will of God, this section provides a stunning backdrop. For ten chapters, God orders all of Israel's collective life with commands for arrangement of, and purity in, the camp given without a break in the narrative. The only interruptions are numerous mentions of exacting obedience to the commands which are given. The picture of this section is of an obedient people at peace with their God, poised to inherit His promises. Thus, their failure and God's judgment in chapters ten through twenty-one, stands out in bold relief.

1B The Commands for the Order of the Camp 1:1--4:49

God's arrangement of the camp is meticulously obeyed by the people. Moses' and the people's obedience is carefully noted at the end of each of these chapters (1:54; 2:34; 3:51; and 4:49). God first counted those males who were eligible for the army (1:1-54) and then arranged the placement of the twelve tribes for both encampment and movement (2:1-34).

He then focused attention upon the Levites by ordering their placement while encamped and taking a census of all their males from one month old and up (3:1-51). The purpose of the census was so that He could redeem or exchange them for the firstborn which were His by right of the Passover. The Levites were thus God's own possession devoted to His service alone. He then took another census of the Levites, this time to determine how many were ready for the service of the Tabernacle.

2B The Commands for Purity of the People 5:1--10:10

God's desire for purity among the camp covers numerous aspects of Israel's life. As before, however, this section is thoroughly punctuated with affirmations of Israel's obedience (5:4; 8:4,20; 9:5,23). This leads to a people who are mindful of God's commands and who enjoy the blessings of their covenant relationship with their God (6:22-27; 9:15-23).

1C Regulations against defilement 5:1-31

Moses' regulations about defilement in the camp move from that which is outward and obvious to that which is inward and hidden. Rules for skin diseases are listed first (5:1-4) while the test for an unfaithful wife is last (5:11-31). The more sensitive and difficult case receives the majority of ink.

2C Regulations for special consecration 6:1-21

The law of the Nazarite allowed expression for the one who desired special separation to God either temporarily or permanently. If Korah and his followers had really desired special consecration to God, as Aaron's sons enjoyed, they could have achieved it in this divinely approved way.

3C Regulations for Aaronic blessing 6:22-27

Aaron's role of mediator not only allowed men to approach God through him but also for God to communicate special blessing to the people.

- 4C The response of a pure people 7:1-89
The spontaneous offering of gifts from the people shows, once again, the healthy benefits of living within the boundary of the covenant. The conclusion of this chapter finds Moses in the Tabernacle enjoying uninhibited communication with God (7:89). None of this is to be found in chapters ten through twenty-one.
- 5C Regulations for the tabernacle 8:1-26
The consecration of the Levites allows them to serve and protect Israel from unwittingly defiling the tabernacle and thus incurring wrath (8:19).
- 6C Regulations for observance of the first Passover 9:1-14
In response to the command about observing the Passover, all Israel obeyed (9:5) and those with special circumstances conscientiously approached moves for specific direction (9:6-14).
- 7C Regulations for guidance 9:15--10:10
This obedient people enjoyed the benefit of God's guidance among them. All of this happy situation was soon to end, however, as the people began to test God in unbelief.
- 2A ISRAEL'S WALK IN COVENANT RELATIONSHIP IS DISRUPTED BY ISRAEL'S DISOBEDIENCE 10:11--21:35
Unlike the first major section of the book (1A) this portion introduces the effects of the people's disobedience on God's plan. While this plan to bless His people according to the promises of Abraham (3A) will ultimately be fulfilled, unbelief of this generation did delay that fulfillment by 40 years. Each generation's enjoyment of the promises is dependent upon their response of faith.
- 1B The Journey from the Wilderness of Sinai to the Wilderness of Paran 10:11--14:45
In these chapters the spread of unbelief moves from the outskirts of the camp all the way to leadership. Its final form is manifest in the nation's deliberate rejection of God at Kadesh-Barnea where he declares that their disobedience has caused them to irrevocably forfeit their claim on the land.
- 1C Moses' lack of faith in God's direction 10:11-36
Israel's problems may have stemmed in some small part from the lack of faith of their leader. Moses' insistence on Hobab's service for Israel as a scout seems to be a denial of the sufficiency of God's promised guidance through the glory cloud.
- 2C The peoples' complaint on the outskirts of the camp 11:1-3
Sin begins at the fringes of the camp and the judgment of God is only stopped through Moses' mediation.
- 3C The mixed multitudes' complaint about food 11:4-35
The sin soon spread throughout the camp and even resulted in some grumbling on the part of Moses. God does not judge Moses although He does judge the people by giving them their desires and striking them with a plague.
- 4C Miriam's and Aaron's complaint against God's leader 12:1-16
Next the sin spread to Miriam and Aaron who first attacked Moses, and then after punishment, repented of their foolishness. This confrontation allowed opportunity for a divine endorsement of Moses' role as revealer. Miriam's name is listed first (12:1) presumably because she was the more responsible party.

- 5C The nation rebels against God's direction to enter the land 13:1--14:45
The climax of the nation's rebellion is seen in their rejection of God. When the spies return with their report of the land, the nation follows the report of ten of the men, by responding in fear rather than faith. The narrative makes clear that the whole nation (14:2) made an informed and deliberate (14:6-10) decision not to trust God.

God's judgment that fell was both extended and ironic. The people would be judged not by death but by living out the years outside the land of promise. What they feared, dying in the desert, ultimately came upon them not because of God, as they charged, but because of their own sin. Their culpability is shown one final time (in this section) by their presumption in attempting to take the land after God had disallowed all such attempts. Their self-sufficiency was alive and well.

- 2B The Journey from Paran to Zin 15:1--19:22
The only recorded events of the next thirty-eight years are recorded in this section. Israel continued to rebel, each time suffering the consequences of her sin.

- 1C Revelation for the disobedient nation 15:1-41
While God had cursed the present generation, He had not abandoned the nation. In a startling move, God's next piece of revelation involves regulations for the next generation of entering the land, a sure signal of his ultimate intentions for the nation (15:1-16).

As if to prick the collective conscience of the people, God next delivers revelation concerning deliberate sin. The penalty, both stated (15:30-31) and demonstrated (15:32-36) was to place one outside of covenant blessing.

- 2C Rebellion against the priesthood of the nation 16:1--18:32
This attack, while ultimately against God (16:11), was particularly aimed at Aaron (16:10). As with the attack against Moses (Chapter 12) this again allowed opportunity for divine endorsement of the established order (17-18).

The first stage of the rebellion was judged by God as the ground consumed Korah and his fellow rebels. Unfortunately, the people did not learn by example and they rebelled the next day (16:41).

This time the plague among them is stopped by Aaron's unique mediation (16:47-48).

After the people have apparently been stifled by two separate judgments, God finally answers with a two-fold endorsement of Aaron's ministry: one miraculous and one verbal. The first answer involved the budding of Aaron's staff as a miraculous choice of Aaron's ministry (17:1-13).

The second answer emphasized the necessity of the priestly role. First, God taught that the priests alone bore the responsibility dealing with sin by the people. Although Moses had been instrumental in mediating for the people in the past, the wording here seems to establish the priesthood as the office uniquely suited for such purposes in the theocratic economy. "You, your sons and your father's family are to bear responsibility for offenses against the sanctuary, and you and your sons alone are to bear the responsibility for offenses against the priesthood" (18:2).

- 3C The necessity of cleansing from death 19:1-22

Perhaps all of the death which had occurred as a result of Korah's rebellion encouraged the giving or the placement of this revelation here. The red heifer was in all respects distinct from traditional sacrifice. Its sole purpose was to purify people from death, the ultimate reminder of sin's defilement.

- 3B The Journey from the Wilderness of Zin to the Plains of Moab 20:1--21:35
At this point at least thirty-nine years have transpired and the transition from the first generation is nearing completion. Both Miriam's and Aaron's deaths are recorded. His more significant role in the theocracy garners more ink for the account of his death. Moses' sin of striking instead of speaking to the rock prevents both he and Aaron from entering the promised land.

Although still rebellious, Israel does experience some victory over her enemies. But even those victories are not over inhabitants of the promised land. Their murmuring at Meribah (20:3) and around Edom (21:5) are hauntingly reminiscent of the exodus generation. At this point there is no tangible evidence that this generation deserves or will enjoy any other fate than what befell their fathers.

- 3A ISRAEL'S WALK IN COVENANT RELATIONSHIP IS ASSURED BY GOD'S ELECTION AND PROMISE TO ABRAHAM 22:1--25:18
At this point the reader might have reason to question any Suzerain's commitment to Israel. The first generation had proven itself treasonous at Kadesh and not at Meribah; this generation appeared to be no better. This section which takes a unique view of the divine workings from within the enemies camp firmly answers any doubts the reader might have concerning God's commitment to this people. Challenged at the heart of the Abrahamic covenant this episode powerfully affirms God's intention to honor His promise to Abraham and lead this nation into the land of promise.

- 1B God Blesses Israel Through Balaam and Protects Her from Unknown Danger 22:1--24:25
Although Israel was totally unaware of the spiritual battles which surrounded her, God protected, and even used that attack to bless the nation.

- 1C Balaam's summons by Balak 22:1-20
Balak's flattering invitation to Balaam is couched in terms which offer an obvious challenge to God's promise to Abraham, "For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed" (22:6b).

- 2C Balaam's rebuke by the donkey 22:21-41
God's rebuke of the prophet by a donkey is a case of studied irony and insult. The diviner was instructed by the proverbially foolish beast. God nevertheless uses the wicked prophet to accomplish His purposes of blessing Israel and bringing glory to Himself.

- 3C Balaam's oracles for Israel 23:1--24:14
In each of the three oracles in which Balaam attempts to curse Israel, God causes blessings of the Abrahamic variety to come forth. In the first, Balaam states "who can count the dust of Jacob.." (23:10; cf. Gen. 22:17). In the second, Balaam asks the question "Does he [God] speak and then not act?" Does he promise and then not fulfill which is answered well by the words of the promise of Genesis 12 in to a request "May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed!"

(24:9).

- 4C Balaam's oracles against Israel's enemies 24:15-25
The final two oracles, true to the emphasis of Genesis 12, curse two of Israel's most notorious enemies, Edom and Amalek (24:15-25).
- 2B God Judges Israel for Intentional Sin 25:1-18
Although God was intent on fulfilling His promises to this generation, they were not exempt from judgment. And, while God protected them from unknown dangers, he would swiftly judge them for intentional sin. Twenty-four thousand corpses would attest to that. God used this trial though to develop and reveal a new leadership (Phinehas) which would help lead the new generation into the land.
- 4A ISRAEL'S CAMP IS ORDERED BY GOD IN PREPARATION TO ENTER THE LAND 26:1--36:13
Although Israel's sin delayed the entrance of the nation into the land, their eventual entrance was inevitable. This section forms somewhat of an inclusio to the first ten chapters as God once again orders the nation and prepares this generation to enter the land.
- 1B The Numbering of the Men for War and Settlement 26:1-65
In remarkable and designed similarity with the first generation God numbered the people for the army and excepted the Levites from military service. A new and significant addition to this census, however, is the direction for land allotment. This surely signalled God's intentions for this second generation. A disclaimer, that none of those counted in this census was counted in the first, fulfills God's promise of judgment at Kadesh-Barnea.
- 2B Instructions and Teachment Concerning the Settlement of the Land 27:1--36:13
While all of the teachings in this section seem to be intended for the benefit of those who will inhabit the land, not all of them are new. It seems that God repeats material already contained in Leviticus just to reaffirm His covenant relation to this new generation which had not experienced the Exodus or the ensuing Sinaitic agreement and legislation.
- 1C The preservation of tribal land allotment 27:1-11
Once in the land, legislation of this type for Zelophehad's daughters would insure the original tribal land allotments.
- 2C The transition of leadership for land settlement 27:12-23
This transition of leadership while Moses was still alive would allow this people, notorious for rebelling against their God-ordained leaders, ample time to adjust to Joshua's new role.
- 3C The regulations for religious rituals in the land 28:1--29:40
The confirmation of these rituals was necessary for the new generation.
- 4C The regulations for vows 30:1-16
The headship of the male would be reinforced by this legislation as God exercises his rule and orders the camp.
- 5C An example of warfare for land settlement 31:1-54
The destruction of Midian may have served as an example of total destruction and divisions of the spoils of war for the new generation or it may have simply been a necessary part of the unfinished business of God's vengeance which had to be

exercised before Israel entered the land (15:14-18).

- 6C The settlement of the Transjordan 32:1-42
Moses' initial anger with the plan of the Transjordan tribes may be the only divine commentary on this interaction. Moses' extended comparison of this request to the rebellion of Kadesh-Barnea would seem to make the boldest inquirer desist but the tribes appeal a second time. Moses eventually relents and grants their request based upon their participation in the conquest. In the context of a book which so emphasizes the permissive will of God, this may be an example of a request which is granted due to the questioner's persistence but ultimately not in his best interest.
- 7C The motivation for conquering the inhabitants 33:1-56
The 40 year travelogue of the nation would seem to serve little purpose for the new generation unless it is intended to remind them of God's provision in the wilderness, or perhaps better, as a sobering reminder of the consequences of failing to attain God's promises by faith. When the first generation considered entering the land, they allowed the fear of the inhabitants to prevent them from obtaining what God promised and spent the lives wandering. God may then be warning this generation with this reminder from the past (33:1-49) and from the future (33:50-56) to fully drive out the inhabitants of the land so that they can obtain the promises God has for them.
- 8C The boundaries of the land 34:1--36:13
The final revelation for this generation upon the eve of entering the land concerned the boundaries of their new homes. In order to possess all the promises they would have to know exactly what land was to be theirs. Moses outlines the boundaries of the nation, then selects men who will help Joshua decide tribal allotments. Then God makes land allotments for the Levites and for the six cities of refuge among the Levites' forty-eight towns.

Finally, a further development in the case of Zelophehad's daughters allows one more instance to insist upon the preservation of the original tribal allotments. This case may serve as second part of the inclusio which closes this major section (27:1--36:13).

Thus, God's covenant relation, with Israel, though delayed, is now ready to be completed in this second generation.

Outline

1A	ISRAEL'S CAMP AND MILITARY STRUCTURE IS ORDERED BY YHWH IN PREPARATION TO LEAVE AND CONQUER THE PROMISED LAND	1:1--10:10
1B	<u>The Commands for the Order of the Camp</u>	1:1--4:49
1C	The numbering of the men for war	1:1-54
1D	The commands given	1:1-4
2D	The assistants named	1:5-16
3D	The men numbered	1:17-46
1E	the introduction	1:17-19
2E	from Reuben	1:20-21
3E	from Simeon	1:22-23
4E	from Gad	1:24-25
5E	from Judah	1:26-27
6E	from Issachar	1:28-29
7E	from Zebulun	1:30-31
8E	from Ephraim	1:32-33
9E	from Manasseh	1:34-35
10E	from Benjamin	1:36-37
11E	from Dan	1:38-39
12E	from Asher	1:40-41
13E	from Naphtali	1:42-43
14E	the summary	1:44-46
4D	The Levites excepted	1:47-54
2C	The placement of the twelve tribes for encampment and movement	2:1-34
1D	On the east	2:1-9
2D	On the south	2:10-17
3D	On the west	2:18-24
4D	On the north	2:25-31
5D	Summary	2:32-34
3C	The placement and service of the Levites while camped and their census for redemption	3:1-51
1D	God's design for the Levites outlined	3:1-13
2D	God's design for the Levites executed	3:14-51
1E	their census and placement	3:14-39
1F	introduction	3:14-20
2F	for the Gershonites on the west	3:21-26
3F	for the Kohathites on the south	3:27-32
4F	for the Merarites on the north	3:33-37
5F	for the Aaronites on the east	3:38
6F	the summary	3:39
2E	their redemption	3:40-51
4C	The placement and service of the Levites while moving and census for service	4:1-49
1D	Of the Kohathites	4:1-20
2D	Of the Gershonites	4:21-28
3D	Of the Merarites	4:29-33

4D	Summary	4:34-49
2B	<u>The Commands for Purity of the People</u>	5:1--10:10
1C	Regulations against defilement	5:1-31
1D	Those which are obvious	5:1-4
2D	Those which are less obvious	5:5-10
3D	Those which are hidden	5:11-31
1E	the husband's suspicious	5:11-15
2E	the wife's test	5:16-28
3E	the summary	5:29-31
2C	Regulations for special consecration	6:1-21
1D	During the period of consecration	6:1-12
2D	When the period of consecration is over	6:13-21
3C	Regulations for Aaronic blessing	6:22-27
4C	The response of a pure people	7:1-89
1D	The purpose of the gifts: dedication of the tabernacle	7:1-11
2D	The sources of the gifts: the twelve tribes	7:12-83
1E	Judah	7:12-17
2E	Issachar	7:18-23
3E	Zebulun	7:24-29
4E	Reuben	7:30-35
5E	Simeon	7:36-41
6E	Gad	7:42-47
7E	Ephraim	7:48-53
8E	Manasseh	7:54-59
9E	Benjamin	7:60-65
10E	Dan	7:66-71
11E	Asher	7:72-77
12E	Naphtali	7:78-83
3D	The summary	7:84-88
4D	The result	7:89
5C	Regulations for the tabernacle	8:1-26
1D	For the setting up of the lamps	8:1-4
2D	For the consecration of the workers	8:5-26
1E	their purification	8:5-14
2E	their presentation	8:15-22
3E	their limitations	8:23-26
6C	Regulations for observance of the first Passover	9:1-14
1D	The commands	9:1-5
2D	The conscientious observance	9:6-14
1E	their requests	9:6-8
2E	their directions	9:9-14
7C	Regulations for guidance	9:15--10:10
1D	Through the glory cloud	9:15-23
2D	Through the trumpets	10:1-10

	1E	in movement of the camp	10:1-7
	2E	in battle	10:8-9
	3E	in festivals	10:10
2A	ISRAEL'S WALK IN COVENANT RELATIONSHIP IS DISRUPTED BY ISRAEL'S DISOBEDIENCE		10:11--21:35
1B	<u>The Journey from the Wilderness of Sinai to the Wilderness of Paran</u>		10:11--14:45
1C	Moses' lack of faith in God's direction		10:11-36
	1D	God's direction through the cloud	10:11-13
	2D	The people's initial obedience in marching formation	10:14-28
	1E	Judah's division	10:14-17
	2E	Reuben's division	10:18-21
	3E	Ephraim's division	10:22-24
	4E	Dan's division	10:25-28
	3D	Moses' misplaced trust in the Hobab	10:29-32
	4D	The ark of God used as a scout	10:31-36
2C	The peoples' complaint on the outskirts of the camp		11:1-3
	1D	God's judgment	11:1
	2D	Moses' mediation	11:2-3
3C	The mixed multitudes' complaint about food		11:4-35
	1D	Their grumbling	11:4-9
	2D	Their effect upon Moses	11:10-30
	1E	Moses' first grumbling	11:10-15
	2E	God's response	11:16-20
		1F promise of help for Moses	11:16-17
		2F promise of meat for the people	11:18-20
	3E	Moses' second grumbling	11:21-22
	4E	God's response	11:23
	5E	God's provision of help	11:24-30
	3D	Their judgment	11:31-35
4C	Miriam's and Aaron's complaint against God's leader		12:1-16
	1D	Their question concerning Moses' prophetic role	12:1-2
	2D	God's response	12:3-13
	1E	His appearance	12:3-5
	2E	His defense of Moses	12:6-8
	3E	His judgment of Miriam	12:9-13
	3D	God's mercy	12:14-16
5C	The nation rebels against God's direction to enter the land		13:1--14:45
	1D	The spies sent out	13:1-25
	1E	God's command concerning the spies	13:1-3
	2E	the identity of the spies	13:4-16
	3E	the mission of the spies	13:17-25
	2D	The spies report their findings	13:26-33
	1E	the initial report	13:26-29
	2E	the response of faith	13:30
	3E	the response of fear	13:31-33

3D	The people rebel	14:1-45
1E	their high-handed rebellion	14:1-10
2E	God's intention to destroy	14:11-20
1F	His threat	14:11-12
2F	Moses' intercession	14:13-19
3F	God's repentance	14:20
3E	God's decision to judge	14:21-38
1F	the unbelieving nation	14:21-35
2F	the unbelieving spies	14:36-38
4E	their presumption and disobedience	14:39-45
2B	<u>The Journey from Paran to Zin</u>	15:1--19:22
1C	Revelation for the disobedient nation	15:1-41
1D	Regulations for the generation which inherits the land	15:1-16
2D	Regulations for unintentional sins	15:17-36
1E	the command	15:17-21
2E	the potential failure	15:22-29
3E	the distinction	15:30-36
1F	the principle	15:30-31
2F	the example	15:32-36
3D	Regulations for remembering God's commands	15:37-41
2C	Rebellion against the priesthood of the nation	16:1--18:32
1D	The initial rebellion of Korah	16:1-40
1E	their confrontation of Aaron and Moses	16:1-7
2E	their insolence of Aaron and Moses	16:8-15
3E	Moses ironic test	16:16-35
1F	the peoples' defense	16:16-21
2F	Moses' mediation	16:22
3F	God's execution	16:23-35
4E	God's instructions for a memorial	16:36-40
2D	The continuing rebellion of the people	16:41-50
1E	their rebellion	16:41
2E	Moses and Aaron's mediation	16:42-46
3E	Aaron's success	16:47-50
3D	God's reaffirmation of Aaron's challenged role	17:1--18:32
1E	the miraculous	17:1-13
2E	the verbal	18:1-32
1F	Aaron's unique responsibility	18:1-7
2F	Aaron's unique privilege	18:8-24
3F	Aaron's unique commands	18:25-32
3C	The necessity of cleansing from death	19:1-22
1D	The preparation of water	19:1-10
2D	The examples of application	19:11-22
3B	<u>The Journey from the Wilderness of Zin to the Plains of Moab</u>	20:1--21:35
1C	Miriam's death	20:1
2C	Moses' sin	20:2-13

	1D	The nation's complaint	20:2-5
	2D	God's instruction	20:6-8
	3D	Moses' disobedience	20:9-11
	4D	God's judgment	20:12-13
	3C	Edom's Resistance	20:14-21
	4C	Aaron's death	20:22-29
	5C	Arad's destruction	21:1-3
	6C	Israel's sin	21:4-9
	7C	Israel's movement	21:10-20
	8C	Israel's victory over Sihon and Og	21:21-35
3A		ISRAEL'S WALK IN COVENANT RELATIONSHIP IS ASSURED BY GOD'S ELECTION AND PROMISE TO ABRAHAM	22:1--25:18
1B		<u>God Blesses Israel Through Balaam and Protects Her from Unknown Dangers</u>	22:1--24:25
	1C	Balaam's summons by Balak	22:1-20
	1D	Balak's challenge of God's design	22:1-6
	2D	Balak's enticement of Balaam	22:7-20
	2C	Balaam's rebuke by the donkey	22:21-41
	1D	Balaam beats the donkey	22:21-27
	2D	the donkey speaks to Balaam	22:28-30
	3D	the angel of the Lord warns Balaam	22:31-41
	3C	Balaam's oracles for Israel	23:1--24:14
	1D	the first	23:1-12
	2D	the second	23:13-26
	3D	the third	23:27--24:14
	4C	Balaam's oracles against Israel's enemies	24:15-25
	1D	against Edom	24:15-19
	2D	against Amalek	24:20-25
2B		<u>God Judges Israel for Intentional Sin</u>	25:1-18
	1C	Their sin	25:1-3
	2C	Their judgment	25:4-9
	1D	the general solution	25:4-5
	2D	a defiant example	25:6-9
	3C	The result	25:10-18

	1D	the covenant with Phinehas	25:10-13
	2D	the threat to Midian	25:14-18
4A	ISRAEL'S CAMP IS ORDERED BY GOD IN PREPARATION TO ENTER THE LAND		26:1--36:13
1B	<u>The Numbering of the Men for War and Settlement</u>		26:1-65
	1C	The command issued	26:1-4
	2C	The men numbered	26:5-51
	1D	from Reuben	26:5-11
	2D	from Simeon	26:12-14
	3D	from Gad	26:15-18
	4D	from Judah	26:19-22
	5D	from Issachar	26:23-25
	6D	from Zebulun	26:26-27
	7D	from Manasseh	26:28-34
	8D	from Ephraim	26:35-37
	9D	from Benjamin	26:38-41
	10D	from Dan	26:42-43
	11D	from Asher	26:44-47
	12D	from Naphtali	26:48-50
	13D	the total	26:51
	3C	Directions for land allotment given	26:52-56
	4C	Levites excepted	26:57-62
	5C	The disclaimer	26:63-65
2B	<u>Instructions and Teachment Concerning the Settlement of the Land</u>		27:1--36:13
	1C	The preservation of tribal land allotment	27:1-11
	1D	the people's care	27:1-4
	2D	the divine answer	27:5-11
	2C	The transition of leadership for land settlement	27:12-23
	1D	Moses' prayer	27:12-17
	2D	Joshua's anointing	27:18-23
	3C	The regulations for religious rituals in the land	28:1--29:40
	1D	daily offerings	28:1-8
	2D	Sabbath offerings	28:9-10
	3D	monthly offerings	28:11-15
	4D	Passover	28:16-25
	5D	Pentecost	28:26-31
	6D	Trumpets	29:1-6
	7D	Day of Atonement	29:7-11
	8D	Tabernacles	29:12-40

4C	The regulations for vows	30:1-16
1D	the principle	30:1-2
2D	the applications	30:3-15
1E	a father and daughter	30:3-8
1F	before marriage	30:3-5
2F	after marriage	30:6-8
2E	a widow	30:9
3E	a husband and wife	30:10-15
3D	the summary	3:16
5C	An example of warfare for land settlement	31:1-54
1D	the initial destruction of Midian	31:1-12
2D	the secondary destruction of Midian	31:13-18
3D	the necessary purification from war	31:19-24
4D	the division of the spoils from war	31:25-54
6C	The settlement of the Transjordan	32:1-42
1D	the request of the Reubenites and Gadites	32:1-5
2D	Moses' displeasure	32:6-15
3D	their amended request	32:16-19
4D	Moses' covenant with the tribes	32:20-33
5D	their settlement of the Transjordan	32:34-42
7C	The motivation for conquering the inhabitants	33:1-56
1D	from the past	33:1-49
2D	from the future	33:50-56
8C	The boundaries of the land	34:1--36:13
1D	the placement of national boundaries	34:1-15
2D	the provision for tribal boundaries	34:16-29
3D	the provision for Levitical boundaries	35:1-34
1E	general provisions	35:1-5
2E	specific provisions	35:6-34
1F	the principle	35:6-15
2F	the applications	35:16-34
1G	for murder	35:16-21
2G	for unintentional death	35:22-25
3G	for carelessness	35:26-28
4G	for ransom	35:29-34
4D	the preservation of family boundaries	36:1-13
1E	Zelophehad's daughter's request	36:1-4
2E	God's answer	36:5-9
3E	the daughter's obedience	36:10-13

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