

Chapter 7: Numbers

Key Terms

- census: enumeration or enrollment of peoples
- Documentary Hypothesis: an approach to the authorship of the Pentateuch associated with source criticism that understands the five books as a patchwork composition of four (or more) literary documents.
- foil: in literature, that which sets off or heightens (often a contrast between themes, characters, symbols, etc.)
- Kadesh: area where Israel camped after leaving Sinai
- seer: a technical term applied to certain Old Testament prophets, especially signifying divine revelation received in the form of a dream or vision.
- Moab: area where the second generation of Israel camped just before entering Canaan
- Sinai: mountain where the children of Israel camped after leaving Egypt
- supracultural: divine revelation prohibiting or superseding the cultural norms of the Old Testament world

Key Ideas

- God's faithfulness to his covenant promises.
- Divine testing of human motives.
- God communicating his truth through the medium of culture.
- God's sovereign rule of the nations.

Chapter Summary

The book of Numbers continues the narration of Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan, focusing on Israel's rebellion and testing in the wilderness. The book is traditionally credited to Moses, though Moses is only once mentioned as the author. The text implies that priests were also instrumental in writing down God's instructions regarding priestly duties. Though some view the book as a compilation of at least four literary sources, others argue for the antiquity and unity of the work. The authors of this text assume that most of the literary material originated with Moses, though the book did not reach its final form till sometime after Moses' death.

Numbers covers a period of approximately thirty-eight years, divided into the completion of Israel's sojourn at Sinai, the wilderness wandering, and the journey of the second generation from Kadesh to Moab. The dating of Numbers (whether early or late) depends largely on the date assigned to the exodus. Though some scholars have questioned the historicity of Numbers (based on the lack of corroborating archeological evidence), the authors of this text find such skepticism unwarranted.

The purpose of the book of Numbers is to extol the patience and faithfulness of Yahweh and to further explicate the nature of his covenant with Israel. Though holiness dominates the portrayal of God, other aspects of God's character also emerge in his interactions with his people. Numbers explains how the people came to enter Canaan after their flight from Egypt and sojourn at Sinai, and records the early history of God's covenant with the people after he forms them into a community. The book also serves as a warning to future generations as it records the tragic consequences of rebellion and disobedience against God.

One major theme of Numbers, the census lists, has caused difficulty for interpreters. Some prefer a literal interpretation, others a literary reading. The authors of this text suggest that the problem, while not categorically solved, is greatly reduced by reading the word usually translated "thousands" instead as military "units" or individual fighters.

This book demonstrates the manner in which God reveals himself to Israel in the midst of the ANE culture. Through the covenant stipulations, God rejects certain cultural practices, tolerates others, and embraces others. By situating his revelation in the midst of human culture, God reveals his respect for culture but also his higher commitment to holiness among his people.