

TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 4

TOTC

NUMBERS

To my father John
and the memory of my mother Grace (1916–1980)

TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 4

GENERAL EDITOR: DONALD J. WISEMAN

NUMBERS

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

GORDON J. WENHAM



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GENERAL PREFACE

The aim of this series of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, as it was in the companion volumes on the New Testament, is to provide the student of the Bible with a handy, up-to-date commentary on each book, with the primary emphasis on exegesis. Major critical questions are discussed in the introductions and additional notes, while undue technicalities have been avoided.

In this series individual authors are, of course, free to make their own distinct contributions and express their own point of view on all controversial issues. Within the necessary limits of space they frequently draw attention to interpretations which they themselves do not hold but which represent the stated conclusions of sincere fellow Christians.

In the Old Testament in particular no single English translation is adequate to reflect the original text. The authors of these commentaries freely quote various versions, therefore, or give their own translation, in the endeavour to make the more difficult passages or words meaningful today. Where necessary, words from the Hebrew (and Aramaic) Text underlying their studies are transliterated. This will help the reader who may be unfamiliar with the Semitic languages to identify the word under discussion and thus to follow the argument. It is assumed throughout that the reader will have ready access to one, or more, reliable rendering of the Bible in English.

This commentary on Numbers from Dr Wenham provides a thorough, scholarly exegesis, readily understandable by any reader. He faces up to critical questions such as those of date and

authorship, and stresses the difference in theological emphasis between this book and the rest of the Pentateuch. Prominent topics well covered include the character of God, the land, and the people of God; nor does he neglect the Christian use of this book. His study should do much to rescue the book of Numbers from being a little-read, rarely-quoted source of Old Testament texts, and help us to appreciate it as an integral part of Scripture worthy of detailed study in its own right.

Interest in the meaning and message of the Old Testament continues undiminished and it is hoped that this series will thus further the systematic study of the revelation of God and his will and ways as seen in these records. It is the prayer of the editor and publisher, as of the authors, that these books will help many to understand, and to respond to, the Word of God today.

D. J. Wiseman

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

If 'Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah' is one of the best known hymns in the world, the book of Numbers, whose story that hymn summarizes, is much less familiar. Its very title puts the modern reader off. In ancient times numbers were seen as mysterious and symbolic, a key to reality and the mind of God himself. Today they are associated with computers and the depersonalization that threatens our society. Furthermore the pervasive influence of the romantic movement with its stress on spontaneity and individual freedom has made it yet more difficult for us to appreciate Numbers' insistence on organization, ritual and hierarchy. In time and ethos there is a great gulf between the book and our age, which it is the commentator's task to try to bridge.

Bridge-building demands that first and foremost the commentator should expound the plain historical meaning of the text, what it meant to the original author and his readers. Exegesis is therefore the main concern of this, as indeed of most biblical commentaries. Critical discussions of the sources, their date and the editorial processes by which they were combined to form the book tend to subjectivity, and anyway are of minor importance in recovering the original meaning of the text. For these reasons I have restricted discussion of such issues to the introduction and additional notes. More vital to the Christian reader is guidance on the abiding significance of the text. Speaking about the stories in Numbers, the apostle Paul remarked that 'they were written down for our instruction' (1 Cor. 10:11). Again limitations of space preclude a thorough treatment of

this theme, but in the introduction and at the end of each section of commentary I have very briefly indicated how the New Testament uses the material in Numbers. This I hope will be of value to those who have the task of applying the teaching of Scripture to the modern church.

Most of this commentary has been written during a year's sabbatical leave spent at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies. I am most grateful to these institutions for their support. I should also like to thank the Queen's University of Belfast for allowing me leave of absence, and particularly my colleagues in the department of Semitic Studies and in the faculty of theology who undertook my teaching and other university duties while I was away. Most of my scholarly debts are acknowledged in the footnotes. Professors Jacob Milgrom and Calum Carmichael, however, deserve special mention. Their friendly willingness to share their insights into the interpretation of the biblical text enriched my understanding of Numbers at many points. Finally, I must also thank Professor D. J. Wiseman for inviting me to write this commentary and for his personal encouragement throughout my academic career, Miss Lesley Townsend and Miss Gretta Totten for typing it, and David Payne, Desmond Alexander and my wife for help with proof-reading.

Originally I had dedicated this commentary to my parents. The present dedication reflects the sad circumstance that after the manuscript was complete my mother was killed in a car crash. Her family and friends miss her greatly. Her sons in particular owe her an incalculable debt. We thank God for all she taught us and did for us, and rejoice that she is now one with the church triumphant enjoying for ever the presence of her Lord and Saviour.

Gordon Wenham

CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ANET</i>	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i> ²
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BZAW</i>	<i>Beibefte zum Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>DJD</i>	<i>Discoveries in the Judaean Desert</i>
E	Elohistic source
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IBD</i>	<i>The Illustrated Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>IDB</i>	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
<i>IDBS</i>	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary volume, 1976</i>
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
J	Yahwistic source
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
P	Priestly source
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>

<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>VTS</i>	<i>Supplements to Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

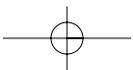
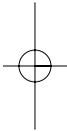
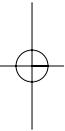
Commentaries

- Baentsch *Exodus, Leviticus, Numeri* by B. Baentsch (Hand-Kommentar zum Alten Testament), 1903.
- Binns *The Book of Numbers* by L. E. Binns (Westminster Commentaries), 1927.
- Calvin *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* by J. Calvin, 1563 (ET, 1852).
- Cazelles *Les Nombres*³ by H. Cazelles (Bible de Jérusalem) 1971.
- Dillmann *Die Bücher Numeri, Deuteronomium und Josua*² by A. Dillmann (Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament), 1886.
- Gispén *Het boek Numeri I–II* by W. H. Gispén (Commentaar op het Oude Testament), 1959, 1964.
- Gray *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* by G. B. Gray (International Critical Commentary), 1903.
- Greenstone *Numbers with Commentary* by J. H. Greenstone (The Holy Scriptures), 1939.
- Heinisch *Das Buch Numeri übersetzt und erklärt* by P. Heinisch (Die heilige Schrift des Alten Testaments), 1936.
- Keil *The Pentateuch III* by C. F. Keil (Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament).
- Noordtziĳ *Het boek Numeri* by A. Noordtziĳ (Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift), 1941.
- Noth *Numbers: A Commentary* by M. Noth (Old Testament Library), 1968.
- Rashi *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary: Numbers* (ET by M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann).
- Saalschütz *Das Mosaische Recht*² by J. L. Saalschütz, 1853.
- Snaith *Leviticus and Numbers* by N. H. Snaith (New Century Bible), 1967.
- Sturdy *Numbers* by J. Sturdy (Cambridge Bible Commentary), 1976.

- de Vaulx *Les Nombres* by J. de Vaulx (Sources Bibliques), 1972.
Wenham *The Book of Leviticus* by G. J. Wenham (New International Commentary on the Old Testament), 1979.

Texts and versions

- AV Authorized Version (King James)
BHS Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
LXX The Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of OT)
MT Massoretic Text
NEB New English Bible
NIV New International Version
RSV Revised Standard Version
TEV Today's English Version



INTRODUCTION

1. Title and contents

Numbers is the English translation of the Greek title of the book *Arithmoi*, a title no doubt given to it because of the census returns found in chapters 1 – 4 and 26. The fifth word of the book, *bēmidbar* ‘in the wilderness’, constitutes its Hebrew title. This more aptly describes its contents, for it is wholly concerned with the forty years the tribes of Israel spent wandering in the wilderness between Mount Sinai and the plains of Moab.

Numbers begins with a series of directions organizing the people to march from Sinai to the promised land. The tribes are counted, their arrangement in the camp and on the march is specified, the unclean are expelled from the community, the altar and the Levites are dedicated to the service of God, and a second passover is celebrated. The nation is now ready to begin the advance towards Canaan (1:1 – 10:10). Twenty days later the journey begins, difficulties are encountered on the way, but Kadesh on the borders of

Canaan is safely reached (10:11 – 12:16). From Kadesh twelve spies are sent out to inspect the land. Their report is so discouraging that the people propose returning to Egypt (13:1 – 14:4). God then threatens to annihilate the nation, but is persuaded by Moses' intercession to commute the sentence to forty years' wandering in the wilderness.

Chapter 15 contains laws about cereal offerings, libations, high-handed sins, and tassels on garments. Chapters 16 – 17 relate several rebellions against the prerogatives of the priests and Levites. Chapter 18 sets out the offerings they are to receive and chapter 19 the rules about purification after death.

In chapters 20 – 21, after an interval of nearly forty years, the movement towards the land resumes with conquests over Canaanites in the Negeb and Amorites in Transjordan.

The rest of the book (chapters 22 – 36) relates what happened to Israel as they waited to cross the Jordan opposite the city of Jericho. These chapters include Balaam's prophecies about Israel's future (22 – 24), idolatry at Baal Peor (25), another census (26), laws about land, festivals and vows (27 – 30). The defeat of the Midianites and the request of the tribes of Gad, Reuben and Manassch to settle in Transjordan are the subject of 31 – 32. Finally there is the list of places at which Israel camped (33) and a group of laws dealing with the distribution of the promised land (34 – 36).

2. Structure

This brief summary of the contents of Numbers highlights one of the gravest problems it poses for commentators: how is the order, or disorder, of the material to be explained? Is there any reason for the apparently random juxtaposition of law and narrative, which makes Numbers look like 'the junk room of the priestly code'? Most commentators offer no explanation except a source-critical one, suggesting that the laws come from a priestly source (P) whereas the narratives are for the most part derived from the epic JE traditions. That Numbers contains various sources is obvious, but this does not solve the mystery of the editor's method. Why should he have arranged his source material as he did, when the material itself shows he was a person deeply concerned with order and organization?

De Vaulx suggests that the mixture of law and narrative enables

the editor to put over the idea that ‘the saving history and the law are not simply past events, but that they are always contemporary. The successive redactors of stories and laws all remind their contemporaries that the saving history concerns everyone and that it is today that they must do the will of God.’¹ In his commentary he endeavours to show that there is a coherence between the theme of the laws and the narratives: both are concerned with the nation’s journey towards Canaan. The laws prescribe how Israel is to travel organized as the holy army of God to the land of promise, and what they are to do when they arrive there (cf. 1 – 10, 28 – 30, 34 – 36), while the narratives describe the twists and turns in the journey (11 – 14, 20 – 21). This analysis is basically correct, though it does leave certain features in the centre of the book (e.g. chapter 15 and the Balaam episode) unexplained. More detailed study suggests a motive for the inclusion and position of much of this other material.

Throughout the Pentateuch chronological notices divide the material into large cycles of narrative or blocks of law. Shorter units are indicated by inclusion, that is, by the repetition at the end of a section of a sentence or phrase with which it began, and by the three-fold groupings of laws and narratives. All these devices are used in Numbers.²

Another principle explains the position of certain laws at apparently inappropriate points in the narrative. The promulgation of a law carries with it the implication that God will put Israel into a situation where she can fulfil the law. Thus laws can function as promises. The clearest example of this is to be found in chapter 15, where the demand to offer grain, oil and wine along with animal sacrifice is an implicit pledge that one day Israel will enter Canaan despite the events described in the previous chapters 13 – 14. The six laws about the land (33:50 to the end) similarly remind the reader that the promise is on the verge of fulfilment.

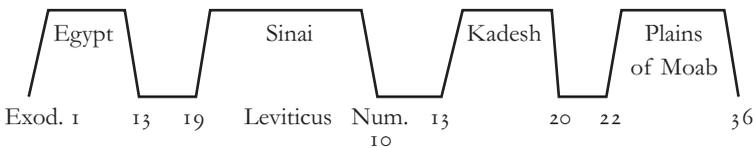
Much the most important principle in the arrangement of the

1. de Vaulx, p. 29.

2. Chronological notes 1:1; 10:11; 20:1; inclusion 4:24, 28; 6:2, 13, 21; 7:1/9:15; threefold groups of laws 5:5 – 6:21; ch. 15; 33:50 – 36:12; of narratives 11:1 – 12:16; 16:1 – 17:12; 22:2 – 24:25.

book of Numbers is its use of rondo form, or perhaps more exactly variation form. It is cast in large cycles in which three important eras of revelation, at Sinai, Kadesh, and in the plains of Moab, are separated by two bridge passages describing the journeys from Sinai to Kadesh, and from Kadesh to the plains of Moab. Theologically these cycles exemplify the principle of typology: history repeats itself, with variation of course, because it is based on two factors which do not change: God's character and man's sinfulness. Though Numbers like other parts of the Bible³ does present history as cyclical, there is a development within each cycle, and it is by comparing each cycle with the preceding one that the full significance of the later phase becomes apparent. If typology determines the overall structure of the book, we should also note that it also underlines the threefold grouping of the murmuring stories in chapters 11 – 12, 16 – 17 and the Balaam narrative in chapters 22 – 24, as well as the sixfold pattern of encampments in chapter 33.

The material in Numbers cannot be understood apart from what precedes it in Exodus and Leviticus. The three middle books of the Pentateuch hang closely together, with Genesis forming the prologue, and Deuteronomy the epilogue to the collection. Diagrammatically the material in Exodus to Numbers may be represented as follows:



Exodus to Numbers thus falls into three cycles, of which the second and third belong entirely to Numbers. The material in the later cycles does not repeat that found in the first in any mechanical way. In particular the episodes in Exodus 1 – 13 are of a markedly different character from the later periods of dramatic revelation associated with Sinai, Kadesh and the plains of Moab. But from Exodus 13:17 the recurrence of similar topics and motifs at the same point

3. E.g. Judges, Kings.

in the cycle seems more than coincidental. This impression is confirmed by explicit allusions to the previous occasions in the stories themselves (e.g. Num. 28:6; 32:8ff.). The synopses below bring out the parallels between the three journeys, and between the three occasions of law-giving, at Sinai, Kadesh and the plains of Moab. By definition it overlooks the differences between the three cycles, which are exegetically at least as important as the similarities. The reader is expected to compare and contrast the nation's behaviour on the different occasions.

Journeys

Red Sea to Sinai	Sinai to Kadesh	Kadesh to Moa
Led by cloud <i>Exod. 13:21</i>	= <i>Num. 10:11ff.</i>	
Victory over Egypt <i>14</i>		cf. <i>21:21-35</i>
Victory song <i>15:1-18</i>	cf. <i>10:35f.</i>	<i>21:14-15</i>
Miriam <i>15:20-21</i>	= <i>12</i>	= <i>20:1</i>
People complain <i>15:23-24</i>	= <i>11:1</i>	= <i>21:5</i>
Moses' intercession <i>15:25</i>	= <i>11:2</i>	= <i>21:7</i>
Well <i>15:27</i>		= <i>21:16</i>
Manna and quails <i>16</i>	= <i>11:4-35</i>	
Water from rock <i>17:1-17</i>		= <i>20:2-13</i>
Victory over Amalek <i>17:8-16</i>		cf. <i>21:1-3</i>
Jethro <i>18:1-12</i>	cf. <i>10:29-32</i>	

Stops

Topic	Sinai	Kadesh	Moab
Divine promises	<i>Exod. 19:5-6; 23:23ff.</i>	<i>Num. 13:2</i>	22–24
40 days	24:18	13:25	—
Rebellion	32:1–8	14:1ff.	25:1–3
Moses' intercession	32:11–13	14:13–19	—
Judgment	32:34	14:20–35	25:4
Plague	32:35	14:37	25:8–9
Laws of sacrifice	34:18ff.; <i>Lev. 1–7, etc.</i>	15:1–31	28–29
Trial	<i>Lev. 24:10–23</i>	15:32–36	27:1–11
Rebellion against priests	<i>Lev. 10:1–3</i>	16:1–35	—
Atonement through priests or Levites	<i>Exod. 32:26–29</i>	16:36–50	25:7–13
Priestly prerogatives	<i>Lev. 6–7; 22</i>	17–18	31:28–30 35:1–8
Impurity rules	<i>Lev. 11–16; Num. 9:6–14</i>	19	31; 35:2ff.
Census	<i>Num. 1–4</i>	—	26

Some of the correspondences between the cycles have long been recognized by commentators, e.g. the two stories about water from the rock (*Exod. 17:1–7 // Num. 20:2–13*); but the overall arrangement of the material in three extended cycles has not been noted hitherto. It is not however unique. Deuteronomy is based on three

long speeches by Moses (1–4, 5–28, 29–30). An even closer parallel is provided by the book of Genesis. The three major cycles about the patriarchs, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph, are each introduced by the formula ‘These are the generations of Terah, (Isaac, Jacob)’ (Gen. 11:27; 25:19; 37:2), and interrupted by shorter blocks of material introduced by the same formula (25:12; 36:1). The primeval history (Gen. 2–11) follows a similar pattern; narrative (2:4–4:26), genealogy (5:1–6:8), narrative (6:9–9:28), genealogy (10:1–32), narrative (11:1–9), genealogy (11:10–26). Except in 11:1, each section again begins with the formula ‘These are the generations of’.

These parallels with Numbers suggest that casting material in triadic form was an established literary device for the biblical writers. It does not mean that they have distorted the record by using what seems to us a rather contrived form. All history writing involves selection (cf. John 20:30–31; 21:25) if any sense is to be made of the past. The Bible focuses our attention on events of theological significance, first by recording them, and second by setting them in a context which conveys their meaning. Though its methods may not be those of modern critical historians, neither ancient nor modern methods of history writing necessarily involve creating facts or being untruthful. The honesty of the biblical records is attested by their inclusion of much material that does not fit the cyclical scheme exactly: the traditions they inherited had to be handed on faithfully even where they were inconvenient from a purely literary standpoint.

3. Sources

The ultimate source of most of the material in Numbers is divine. Nearly every section begins ‘The LORD spoke to Moses’ or with some similar remark. But to determine how the inspired words were preserved and passed on prior to their incorporation in the Pentateuch is much more difficult and has occasioned warm controversy. This is partly because there are so few statements within the Pentateuch about the sources which its editor or editors used in compiling the book, and partly because much of the material it contains supposedly reflects conditions a long time after the Mosaic period.

Explicit indications of sources are rare in Numbers. 33:2 states that 'Moses wrote down their starting places', evidently implying that a Mosaic document was used to compile the list of Israelite encampments found in this chapter. 21:14–15 contains a quotation from the Book of the Wars of the LORD, an otherwise unknown document, usually supposed to consist of poetry.

Especially striking is the inclusion in Numbers of material that is expressly attributed to non-Israelites. There is the Amorite song recounting their victory over the Moabites (21:27–30), and the oracles of Balaam, the Mesopotamian seer hired by the Moabites and Midianites to curse Israel (23–24). How such material came into Israelite hands must remain conjectural. It is possible that captured Amorites or Moabites reported these sayings to their conquerors, but this is only surmise.

According to the most widely received critical theory, there are four major sources in Numbers: J the Yahwistic source, E the Elohist source, P the Priestly source and P_s, a supplement to the Priestly source. In many passages scholars who believe in these sources confess themselves uncertain whether the material is to be assigned to J or E. A similar uncertainty surrounds the differentiation of P and P_s; but there is a wide measure of agreement on the distinction between the epic JE material on the one hand and the priestly (P and P_s) material on the other. The legal material and narratives illustrating legal points are assigned to P, whereas pure narratives are ascribed to JE.

According to Gray, who presents the arguments for this type of analysis most judiciously, the following passages belong to J or E:

10:29 – 12:15; 13:17b–20, 22–24, 26–33; 14:1b, 3–4, 8–9, 11–25, 39–45;
16:1b, 2b, 12–15, 25–26, 27b–34; 20:1b, 5, 14–21; 21:1–9, 11b–32;
22:2 – 25:5; 32(?) ; 33(?).

In chapters 32 and 33 Gray believes both JE and P are present, but he does not think they can be disentangled convincingly. The rest of the material Gray assigns to P, P_s or editors.

Three main arguments are put forward in favour of this documentary analysis. First, it is argued that the diversity of the material in Numbers is best explained by the presence of several sources.

Secondly, the existence of the documents JE and P in Genesis and Exodus makes it probable that they continue in Numbers. Thirdly, the laws and traditions show evidence of having originated in different periods. This last argument will be considered in more detail in the next section 'Date and authorship'. Here I shall concentrate on the other two arguments.

The argument from diversity of subject-matter proves little about sources. Indeed once the plan of Numbers is grasped, the mixture of law and narrative is less suggestive of multiple sources. Nor does the diversity of style necessarily prove the book had several authors. If I had to draft a law, I should adopt a very different style and vocabulary from that used in commentary writing. Poets can also write prose, but again their syntax, style and vocabulary will vary as the form of their writing dictates. The style and vocabulary of the narrative sections of Numbers will therefore inevitably differ from the cultic laws in the book: such differences are a function of the subject-matter.

To prove the existence of different sources it is necessary to compare like with like, cultic laws with cultic laws and narrative with narrative, and utilize the minutest points of morphology and syntax to demonstrate diversity or homogeneity of authorship.⁴ The crude vocabulary counts used in traditional source criticism do not demonstrate diversity of source, only diversity of subject-matter. Until such refined techniques are used in pentateuchal studies one can still talk of priestly (P) material or epic material (JE) in Numbers, as long as it is not asserted that this material must necessarily derive from different sources or authors.

If it is accepted that Genesis is composed of J, E and P, it is natural to suppose that the same sources continue into Numbers. However, it is universally admitted that the clearest criteria for distinguishing sources in Genesis do not apply in Numbers. For example the divine name criterion (Yahweh = J, Elohim = P or E) does not serve to distinguish between the sources after Exodus 6. And real

4. See the studies of Y. T. Radday, *The Unity of Isaiah in the Light of Statistical Linguistics* (Gerstenberg, 1973), 'The Unity of Zechariah in the Light of Statistical Linguistics', *ZAW*, 87, 1975, pp. 30–35, 'The Book of Judges Examined by Statistical Linguistics', *Biblica*, 58, 1977, pp. 469–499.

doublets, that is duplicate narratives or laws, are rare in Numbers, and even some of the most plausible cases are not regarded as proof of diverse origin by source critics.⁵

The source analyses of those stories which are split between J and E (e.g. Balaam 22 – 24) or between JE and P (the spies (13–14), Korah, Dathan and Abiram (16) prove equally dubious. They are dealt with in more detail at the appropriate point in the commentary. There it is shown that the supposedly early version of the stories (JE) presupposes elements found only in later versions (P or P_s), and it is argued that division into sources spoils the literary design of these tales. Finally, the way chapter 33 brings together elements from the travelogues of JE and P speaks against assigning the travel notes to different sources, if the integrity and antiquity of Numbers 33 is admitted.⁶

Were it not assumed by commentators on Numbers that J, E and P had been shown to be continuous documents in Genesis, they would have looked for alternative critical hypotheses to explain the phenomena in Numbers more economically. Recently it has been argued that Genesis has been composed by bringing together large blocks of material, e.g. the stories of Abraham, the primeval history, and joining them end to end.⁷ (The classical documentary theory sees the main sources as long strands, each containing a little bit about each topic, creation, flood, Abraham, etc., which have been knitted together to form the present narrative.) The structure of Numbers outlined above lends itself to the type of analysis proposed by Rendtorff for Genesis. Thus we may think of an editor bringing together a block of material dealing with Kadesh, a block dealing with the plains of Moab and linking them to the Sinai material using short travelogues. This would avoid splitting up well-constructed

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5. For example Gray (p. 389) recognizes that the two censuses, Numbers 1 and 26, may both derive from P, while Noth (pp. 211, 257) argues that both stories about the daughters of Zelophehad are later additions to P.
 6. On the originality and coherence of Numbers 33, see G. I. Davies, *The Way of the Wilderness* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 58ff.
 7. By R. Rendtorff, *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch* (de Gruyter, 1977).

units within these blocks (the spies, Balaam) into contradictory sources.

4. Date and authorship

Traditionally it was held that Moses was the author of the entire Pentateuch except for the account of his death in Deuteronomy 34. This would mean it was composed in either the middle of the thirteenth century BC or in the late fifteenth century BC.⁸ The chief arguments in favour of this view are statements within the Pentateuch that Moses did write some of it down (Exod. 24:4; Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:9, 22), the constant claim that the laws were revealed to him (Exod. 25:1; Lev. 1:1; Num. 1:1, etc.), and the assumption by the New Testament of Mosaic authorship (Matt. 8:4; 19:7; Luke 24:44; John 1:45).

Towards the end of the last century an entirely different view of the composition of the Pentateuch came into vogue. The analysis of the material into the sources J, E, D and P was combined with dating them long after Moses. Nowadays J is customarily dated to the tenth century BC, E to the ninth, P to the sixth and P_s later still. There is thus an immense gap between these sources and the time of Moses. It is admitted that JE may contain some old traditions reaching back to Mosaic times, but P is regarded very much as an idealization of the past, not a reliable historical record. Its laws and institutions are held to reflect the much later period in which it was written, not the Mosaic period. Numbers in particular is therefore considered a mixture of the relatively early J and E sources and the very much later P and P_s sources. These various sources were combined by a succession of editors, the last of whom worked in about the fifth century BC.

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8. The dating of the Mosaic period is itself controversial. Till recently the scholarly consensus has favoured the thirteenth century for the exodus and conquest. J. J. Bimson, *Redating the Exodus and Conquest* (University of Sheffield, 1978) has however recently argued that the archaeological evidence fits an Israelite invasion of Canaan at the end of the Middle Bronze Age (15th century) better than at the end of the Late Bronze Age.

Full discussion of the various theories will be found in Introductions to the Old Testament.⁹ Here it must suffice to indicate some of the chief objections to the late dating of the P material in Numbers.

The case for a late date of P depends on a hypothetical reconstruction of the history of Israelite religion, that is at odds with what the Bible itself asserts about that history. Were it not for our age's philosophical romanticism, which views the supposed unfettered freedom of JE as a primary early and positive manifestation of the human spirit, and the law-bound rituals of P as a later and less desirable development, it is doubtful whether an exilic or post-exilic date for P would have become so widely accepted, for such a dating raises major problems. For example, in post-exilic times the ratio of priests to Levites was 12:1 (Ezra 2:36ff.; cf. 8:15), whereas the tithe law in Numbers 18:26 implies a ratio of priests to Levites of 1:10. Other institutions such as the ark, the anointing of the high priest, the Urim and Thummim, so important in the P material, had also disappeared in the post-exilic era.¹⁰

If this were the only evidence for the early origin of P, it might be put down to the reliability of its tradition. Other data cannot be so easily explained this way. For example, much of the technical terminology of P became obsolete after the seventh century BC: the books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah use different terms for the same concepts as P discusses, while the book of Ezekiel (7th/6th century) stands linguistically between P and Ezra in its usage.¹¹

A comparison with Ezekiel is instructive in other ways. Ezekiel quotes from and alludes to the book of Leviticus a great deal,¹²

9. See, for example, G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the OT* (Abingdon, 1968) or R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the OT* (Tyndale, 1970).

10. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Allen and Unwin, 1961), pp. 175ff.

11. A. Hurvitz, 'The Evidence of Language in Dating the Priestly Code', *RB*, 81, 1974, pp. 24–56. J. Milgrom, 'Priestly Terminology and the Political and Social Structure of Pre-Monarchic Israel', *JQR*, 69, 1978, pp. 65–81.

12. Wenham, pp. 9, 359. For fuller list of parallels see D. Hoffman, *Das Buch Leviticus* (Poppelauer, Berlin, 1905–6) I, p. 478; II, pp. 3f., 81f., 319f., 359–361, 384–386.

especially the laws in Leviticus 18 – 26. But he also uses Numbers 34 to describe the limits of the new promised land, and Numbers 35:1–8 is the basis of his conception of the priestly and levitical land around Jerusalem. But whereas Numbers 35 thinks of villages of Levites scattered throughout the land, Ezekiel envisages long strips of land adjacent to Jerusalem inhabited by priests or Levites. The programme of Numbers is a practical one, but Ezekiel's is that of an utopian visionary.¹³

Similarly Deuteronomy, dated by no-one much later than the 7th century, shows great familiarity with the contents of Numbers.¹⁴ It is important to note that it is not merely to the JE parts of Numbers that Deuteronomy alludes, Miriam's leprosy (Num. 12; Deut. 24:9), the journeys of Israel (20:14 – 21:20; Deut. 2:1–25), the conquest of Transjordan (21:21–35; Deut. 2:26 – 3:10), Balaam (22 – 24; Deut. 23:4–5), but also to material found only in P, the laws on priestly dues (18; Deut. 18:2), the incident at Meribah Kadesh (20:12; Deut. 32:51–52), vows (30; Deut. 23:21–23) and the cities of refuge (35:9–34; Deut. 19:1–13). In episodes split between JE and P (e.g. the spy story, the settlement of the two and a half tribes in Transjordan), Deuteronomy is aware of details found in both P and JE (13 – 14; 31; Deut. 1:19–46; 3:12–29). This suggests that all of Numbers is prior to Deuteronomy. And if JE and P are no longer to be regarded as originating in widely different periods of history, a reformulation of the source analysis along the lines suggested in the previous section no longer presents great difficulties.

Comparison of Numbers with other Old Testament books permits only a relative not an absolute dating, as long as the date of these other books is disputed. Rendtorff has rightly underlined the uncertainty of most critical discussion of these issues. 'We possess hardly any reliable criteria for dating pentateuchal literature. Every

13. Cf. M. Greenberg, *JAOs*, 88, 1968, pp. 59–66; M. Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel* (Clarendon, 1978), pp. 112ff.

14. See M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 179ff. J. Milgrom, 'Profane Slaughter and a Formulaic Key to the Composition of Deuteronomy', *HUCA*, 47, 1976, pp. 1–17.

dating of the pentateuchal “sources” rests on purely hypothetical assumptions, which only have any standing through the consensus of scholars.¹⁵ Such candour from one of the most eminent scholars in the field of pentateuchal criticism is noteworthy. If he is right, one could date almost any part of the Pentateuch to any period between the time of Moses and the time of Ezekiel.

There are some pointers in Numbers that its contents should probably be dated early within this broad period. Parallels to the census lists (Num. 1 and 26) are found in the Mari texts (18th century BC) from Mesopotamia, in old kingdom Egyptian documents, and in classical sources. The names of the tribal leaders (1:5–15) are characteristically second millennium in form. So was their mode of encampment. The tribes of Israel camped in a square with the tent of their divine king at the centre (Num. 2). This arrangement was followed by Rameses II (13th century) on his campaigns, whereas first-millennium Assyrian royal tent enclosures were circular. The role of the priests and Levites guarding the tabernacle (Num. 4) finds parallels in Hittite texts.

The design of the lampstand (Num. 8) shows it comes from the Late Bronze Age (15th to 13th centuries). Trumpets were used in the Egyptian new kingdom to summon to war and worship (Num. 10). Tasselled garments (Num. 15) are attested among Israel’s neighbours from the mid-second millennium onwards. In style and form the letter to Edom (Num. 20) resembles second-millennium diplomatic notes. A bronze serpent (Num. 21) and a tent shrine used by Midianites in the 12th century have been found at Timna. The content and language of the Balaam oracles and the other poems in Numbers suggest an early date of composition and their committal to writing no later than the early monarchy period. The laws on sacrifice in Num. 28 – 29 resemble a 14th-century ritual calendar from Ugarit. Finally, the boundaries of Canaan as defined in Numbers 34 correspond to those of the Egyptian province of Canaan in texts of the 15th to 13th centuries BC.

This evidence lends weight to the book’s own testimony that the traditions on which it is based originated in the Mosaic period. How much expansion, revision and rewriting they underwent in the

15. R. Rendtorff, *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*, p. 169.

centuries before they reached their final form, possibly in the early days of the monarchy, is hard to determine by critical methods. It is perhaps fairer to give the tradition the benefit of the doubt, than to assume everything must be late unless there is evidence to the contrary. But precise dating of the material is largely irrelevant to exegesis, for it is the final form of the text that has canonical authority for the church, and that is the focus of interest in the chapters that follow.

5. The Hebrew text of Numbers

All modern English translations of Numbers are based on the Masoretic Text (MT), that is Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament produced in the 10th century AD. Fragments of Numbers from caves by the Dead Sea (6 from Qumran and 2 from Murabaat) show that the Hebrew text of the book was preserved very carefully in the thousand years preceding the production of the MT.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have yet to be fully published, but preliminary study has shown that sometimes they contain readings attested only in the Samaritan Pentateuch or presupposed in the Septuagint, the third-century BC Greek translation.¹⁶ Rarely are these readings superior to the traditional Massoretic Text, and as Gray has shown even when the ancient versions differ from the MT, they do not usually presuppose the existence of a different Hebrew reading but are attempts to interpret the MT.¹⁷

Only in the old poems contained in Numbers 21 – 24 is there a noticeable degree of textual corruption. Here the versions offer very little assistance in improving the text, and conjectural emendation and philological reinterpretation are necessary to make sense of the text in a few passages.

16. The fragments of Numbers so far published are to be found in *DJD* I, p. 53; *DJD* II, p. 78. Brief comments on other unpublished manuscripts are to be found in P. W. Skehan, 'The Qumran Manuscripts and Textual Criticism', *VTS*, 4 (1957), pp. 148–160 and idem in *Jerome Bible Commentary* II (R. E. Brown editor) (London, 1968), p. 564.

17. Gray's commentary offers the fullest and best treatment of the textual problems.

This commentary is based directly on the Hebrew text, but I have generally quoted the RSV translation except where I disagreed with its rendering. Differences between it and the NEB and TEV are noted where these involve emendation of the Hebrew or significant reinterpretation of problematic words.

6. Problems of interpreting Numbers

a. The importance of ritual

In the preface I alluded to the great gulf that separates the mentality of our age from that of Numbers, a gulf that makes it very hard for us to appreciate much of the book. We are moved by the tragedy of the spies and Moses' exclusion from the promised land, and we can enjoy the comedy of the Balaam story, but these narratives comprise a relatively small proportion of the whole book. Most of it concerns various rituals and organizational details that are dull to read, hard to understand, and apparently quite irrelevant to the church in the twentieth century. Of course, these problems are not confined to Numbers: the situation is similar in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and even less narrative is to be found in Leviticus.

Yet the sheer bulk of ritual law in the Pentateuch indicates its importance to the biblical writers. This judgment is confirmed by modern anthropologists; for them the key to understanding a society's fundamental values is its ritual system.

Rituals reveal values at their deepest level ... men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed. I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies.¹⁸

In short, if we do not understand the ritual system of a people, we do not understand what makes their society tick. It is not without purpose, then, that more than half of the Pentateuch, always

18. M. Wilson, *American Anthropologist*, 56, 1954, p. 241, quoted by V. W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 6.