

## **An Introduction to Numbers**

Numbers is probably one of the most difficult books to characterise or categorise in the whole of the Bible. It contains a diverse collection of different types of literature, from census results to oracles of a foreign prophet and from narrative to legal case studies. The Biblical scholar Jacob Milgrom identifies fourteen distinct genres in the one book. This makes it quite a difficult read and readings from Numbers only appear three times in the Revised Common Lectionary, so we rarely hear it being read aloud in our church services. So how do we go about understanding this fourth book of the Bible?

### **Who?**

Like the book of Leviticus, which immediately precedes it, Numbers is most strongly identified with the priestly tradition. Like Leviticus, it contains laws that relate to a wide range of situations, and there are sections that seem addressed specifically to priests. The tribe of the Levites is singled out from the other tribes and particular groups are given special roles in the running of the tabernacle, or tent of meeting. Unlike Leviticus, though, Numbers also contains large narrative chunks and sometimes it is hard to tell where the legal material ends and where the story begins.

Structurally, there is an argument for seeing Numbers as focussing on two separate censuses of the people, the first taking place in the desert and the second on the plains of Moab, just before the people enter Canaan. The cluster of narratives around the first census can be understood as offering an explanation for forty years spent in the desert after leaving Egypt. One can see a priestly interpretation of events at work here. For rebelling against God, an entire generation is refused entry to the promised land. The second census takes place once the rebellious generation has passed away and the new one has grown up to take their place.

For the author of Numbers, failure to keep the law will result in good things being withheld from the people.

### **When?**

The priestly source is usually dated the latest of the sources of the Pentateuch. This would mean it was written around the sixth century BC and is either from the period of the exile in Babylon or just after the return to the land. If we bear in mind the

theme of the generational delay in God's blessing, it makes sense that the author, or final editor of the text had in mind something similar that was occurring in his own time. Rebellion against God accounted, according to a great deal of theology developed during the exile, to the conquest of Jerusalem and it may have become popular during this period to restate the laws that had given to Moses at Sinai.

### **Why?**

Numbers, like the other books of the Pentateuch, looks back to the time spent by the people of Israel in the desert, recounts the Sinai event and brings the narrative to the brink of entry into Canaan. However, although there are other threads running through the book, it considers in some detail the negative behaviour of the people towards God. As the second census in chapter 26 effectively disinherits the people of the first census, the author asks us to understand why exactly it was that they lost their rights. Even Moses, the hero of the exodus, is told in chapter 27 that he will not enter the promised land. This is a book that locates disappointment and loss in a state of rebellion against God.