



## An Introduction to the Book of Numbers

### Author, Title and Date

The composition of Numbers cannot be discussed just on its own, as it is an integral part of the Pentateuch. The evidence for the authorship of Numbers itself fits in easily with the position suggested there. Moses himself is said to have written Chapter 33, Israel's wilderness itinerary. He is also said to have received the many laws Numbers contains.

Some have objected, however, that the narrator does not seem to be Moses himself; comments like <<**Now the man Moses was very humble**>> (12:3b) seem to suggest this is biography rather than autobiography. In reply, it is fair to observe that clues as to when the book was written are sparse, but there are many indications of its antiquity.

These indications consist of similar texts, customs, or artefacts from places or periods close to the time of Moses and the wilderness wanderings. For example, a copper snake was found in a tent shrine at Timna dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century BC. The snake makes one think of the episode in 21:4-9, and the tent shrine recalls the tabernacle. In the Jordan Valley an inscription was found that mentioned the prophet Balaam and his oracles. The boundaries of Canaan as defined in Chapter 34 match those in Egyptian texts of the 15<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries BC. They do not correspond to the borders of the later state of Israel. The censuses find parallels in neighbouring countries from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries BC. The organisation of the Israelite camp has early Egyptian parallels. These are just some of the features that show the authenticity of the details of the book of Numbers.

The English title Numbers, Greek *Arithmoi*, is borrowed from the name of the book in the Greek translation of the OT, the Septuagint. This title is based on the presence of census returns in Chapters 1-4 and 26. The fifth word of the book in Hebrew, *bemidbar* meaning 'in the wilderness', constitutes its Hebrew title and perhaps gives a better summary of its contents.

### Theme

The theme of Numbers is the gradual fulfilment of the promises to Abraham that his descendants would be the people of God and occupy the land of Canaan. The

book shows the reality of God's presence with Israel in the cloud of fire over the tabernacle, but the repeated displays of unbelief by Israel delay the entry into Canaan and cost many lives. Nevertheless, by the end of the book, Israel is poised to enter the land.

### Purpose

Jews refer to the first five books of the Bible as 'the Law' or Torah, and Christians call them the Pentateuch or 'The Five Books of Moses'. Numbers is the fourth volume in this series and relates Israel's journey from Mount Sinai to the borders of the Promised Land, summarising some 40 years of the nation's history. The book begins with Israel making final preparations to leave Sinai. It then records their triumphal setting out, before relating a series of disasters in which the people grumbled about the difficulty of the journey and the impossibility of conquering Canaan. This response leads to God delaying the entry to Canaan by 40 years. The closing chapters of the book tell how the people at last set out again and reached the banks of the Jordan, poised to cross into the land promised to their forefathers.

Numbers thus relates a most important stage in the early history of Israel. Genesis begins with the creation of the world, but soon focuses on the life of the patriarchs and ends with their move to Egypt. Exodus tells how they left Egypt and came to Sinai to receive the law. Leviticus contains some of these laws, and Numbers still more. Numbers also summarises the 40 years in the wilderness, and Deuteronomy, the sequel to Numbers, has Moses expounding the laws and urging the people to obey them. Deuteronomy ends with Moses' death.

Another way of looking at the Pentateuch is as a biography of Moses. Numbers makes a vital contribution to this biography. First, it underlines Moses' unique role as mediator between God and Israel. As elsewhere in the Pentateuch, it is constantly reiterated that 'the Lord spoke to Moses'. And when this is challenged by his brother and sister, God himself intervenes and says of Moses: **<<With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord>>** (12:8). Second, it makes an astounding claim about Moses' character: **<<Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth>>** (12:3). Third, it explains why Moses never entered Canaan himself: his failure to follow God's instruction precisely is tersely told (20:10-13), as is the subsequent death of his brother Aaron for supporting Moses' action (20:22-29). The book closes with the reader left in suspense about when and how Moses himself will die.

Numbers is to be classed as an historical work, not only because various details in it are corroborated by archæological discoveries but also because it deliberately sets out to record what happened on the journey from Mount Sinai to the Jordan River. It does this to instruct future generations of readers with the lessons to be learned from the wilderness experience. It is saying in effect to the reader, **'Your forefathers made many mistakes on their journey to Canaan; make sure you do not repeat them'**.

However, Numbers does not paint an entirely gloomy picture: the book encourages its readers as well as warns them. By the end of the book the people of Israel have

conquered formidable opponents in the Transjordan, i.e. the land east of the Jordan River, taken possession of their territory, and are poised to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. In this way the book shows how the promises to the patriarchs are being fulfilled.

### Key Themes

The theme of the Pentateuch is the gradual fulfilment of the promises to the patriarchs, and Numbers makes a notable contribution to the exposition of that theme. There are four elements to the patriarchal promise set out first in Genesis 12:1-3:

1. Land.
2. Many descendants.
3. Covenant relationship with God.
4. Blessing to the nations.

These four aspects of the promise all play a role in Numbers.

1. **The land**. The land of Canaan is the goal of the book of Numbers. It is broached in the first chapter, where a census is taken of all the men who are able to go to war. Israel is being prepared to fight for the land. Chapter 10 sees them setting out from Sinai, led by the fire of God's presence. Chapter 13 relates their arrival at the southern border of the land and the mission of the spies. The spies' gloomy report causes Israel to lose heart about the land, and God sentences them to wander for 40 years in the wilderness. However, the second half of the book shows the people again on the move toward the land, overcoming opposition and reaching the eastern border of Canaan, marked by the Jordan River (Chapter 34). The last word from God in the book is both a command and a promise: each of the tribes of the people of Israel shall hold on to its own inheritance (36:9).
2. **Descendants**. Abraham had been promised that his descendants would be as many as the stars of heaven (Genesis 15:5). Jacob's family consisted of just 70 people when he entered Egypt (Genesis 46:27). Now they have increased immensely. The first census showed that the fighting men numbered 603,550. That did not include women and children. Surveying their camp from a hilltop, Balaam declared: <<***Who can count the dust of Jacob or number even a fourth of Israel?***>> (Numbers 23:10a NIV). Balaam went on to predict that Israel would become a powerful kingdom in its own right: <<***a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel***>> (24:17b), which many take to be a prophecy concerning the coming of Jesus.
3. **Covenant relationship with God**. The essence of the covenant was, '***You shall be my people, and I will be your God***'. The Lord's presence with Israel is constantly brought out in the book of Numbers. There are the dramatic manifestations of his presence in the cloud that guided them or that appeared at moments of crisis, e.g. 9:15-23 and 14:10. Then the design of the tabernacle and the harsh measures to be taken against intruders all emphasised the reality of God's holy presence (3:38). On the other hand, Israel was expected to trust God's promises and obey his laws. Failure to do

so resulted in death for the individual and sometimes for large groups, e.g. 15:32-36 and 25:6-9. Even Moses forfeited his right to enter the land because of disobedience (20:10-13). However, despite Israel's persistent failure to keep to the law, God never forsakes them or goes back on his promises. They may have to wait an extra 40 years to enter the land, but eventually they do reach it: <<**The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love**>> (14:18a).

4. **Blessing to the nations**. This is the aspect of the promises that is least apparent in Numbers. To a greater or lesser degree, the nations that Israel encounters are all hostile: the Edomites refuse Israel passage; the Moabites try to have Israel cursed; Sihon and Og attack them and are defeated (Chapters 21-22). Nevertheless Balaam recalls the phrasing of Genesis 12:3 when he says: <<**Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you**>> (24:9b). The implication is that nations who treat Israel generously by blessing her will themselves be blessed.

### Place in the Bible

The events of Numbers are often mentioned elsewhere in Scripture. Its episodes are taken as showcase examples of Israel's sinfulness and God's reaction to it. Deuteronomy relates the story of the spies (Numbers Chapters 13-14) to remind the new generation not to repeat the unbelief of their parents, who, having reached the border of Canaan, refused to enter it (Deuteronomy 1:19-32). The Book of Ezekiel draws on the laws of Numbers to demonstrate the guilt of Jerusalem and explain why it deserved to be destroyed. The Psalms refer to incidents from the wilderness wanderings, e.g. Psalm 95:8-11 and 135:10-12, and Psalms 105 and 106 relate the story in more detail. The priestly blessing (6:24-26) seems to have inspired various psalmists; refer to Psalms 67 and 120-134. These episodes are used both as reminders of God's goodness in the past, e.g. Psalm 136:16-22, and to encourage future loyalty to the law (Psalm 105:45).

The NT also draws on Numbers to make similar points for the Christian church. John 1:14 speaks of the Word dwelling, literally 'tabernacling', among believers. John 3:14 refers to the serpent Moses set up (Numbers 21:4-9) as imaging Christ on the Cross. Both Jude 11 and Revelation 2:14 see Balaam's error as a danger facing the early church. But it is the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:2-11 who makes the most use of Numbers. After mentioning the water and manna God had supplied in the wilderness (Numbers 11:11-35 and 20:2-13), he continues: <<**Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness**>> [referring to events in Numbers Chapters 11, 14, and 16-17]. <<**Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.' We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day**>> [Numbers Chapter 25]. <<**We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer**>> [21:5-9]. <<**These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come**>>.

## History of Salvation Summary

Numbers continues the story of God's people, following them from Mount Sinai to the verge of the Jordan River. The book shows the steadfast purpose of God to fashion a people for himself who will display his image to the world, and out of which his appointed Saviour will arise. The unfaithfulness of the members of that people puts God's steadfastness to the test; but whereas the unfaithful members suffer God's punishment, the people as a whole are preserved and shaped.

## Literary Features

The overall genre of the book of Numbers is the historical chronicle. The largest quantity of material is narrative, and these parts require the usual attention to plot, character and setting. Specific narrative types are also important. Numbers especially uses the travel story, with prominent motifs of conflict, danger, adventure, suspense and testing. The travel story in Numbers begins as a quest story and ends as a story of wilderness wandering because of the sinfulness of the nation. The presence of Moses as a heroic leader makes the story a hero story as well.

Narrative accounts for only half of the book, however. The narrative sections alternate regularly with lists and collections of laws, comprising a religious instruction manual. Numbers is based on a predictable rhythm back and forth between sections of lists, instructions and regulations on the one hand, and narrative material on the other. The non-narrative units should not be read as interruptions of the narrative, but as complementary material in a historical chronicle. The law-giving sections are often phrased in quasi-narrative terms as what God told Moses, following the formula 'the Lord spoke to Moses'. Additionally, the sections of regulations can be viewed as telling the story of a nation's religious practices. The religious rituals and sacrifices express religious truths in visual form.

As a story of national destiny, Numbers also has the character of an epic. Moses is the epic hero who is representative of the nation. The main antagonists in the story of the nation are:

1. The physical locales in which the travelling group finds itself.
2. Other nations with whom the Israelites come into contact.
3. The nation itself, often in conflict with its leader, Moses.

## The Large Numbers in the Pentateuch

The census lists recorded in Numbers Chapters 1 and 26 have been a matter of considerable debate among scholars since the early 1900s. The grand total of warriors recorded in Numbers 1:46 comes to 603,550, which is the same number recorded in the first census (Exodus 38:26), and very similar to the number in the third census recorded in Numbers 26:51, which was taken nearly 40 years after the first census in Numbers. Since these totals include only male warriors between the ages of 20 and 60, excluding women, children and older men, 603,550 warriors would suggest a total population of something more than two million people.

The Problem. Three main problems have been raised regarding whether the actual number of Israelites who were delivered from Egypt and led by Moses through the wilderness for 40 years could have been this large.

The first objection suggests that it is difficult to imagine how so many people, more than two million, could have survived for 40 years in the wilderness, including their highly organised encampment around the tabernacle and their frequent relocation during these years. Although this certainly would not be impossible, given the fact of God's miraculous provision of manna, quail and water, and given the cloud of God's presence, the sudden influx of such a large population would nevertheless have been difficult to assimilate into this geographic area.

A second objection suggests that the archæological evidence for the overall population of the Promised Land just after the exodus seems to be well below 3 million. Related to this, other texts, e.g. Exodus 23:29-30, Deuteronomy 7:6-7 and 7:21, suggest that there were not enough Israelites to take possession of the Promised Land all at once.

A third objection suggests that some of the numbers in general seem to reflect mathematical oddities, most figures are rounded to even 100s, and that the ratio of adult males to firstborn males seems quite large (27 to 1).

Proposed Solutions. Briefly stated, the proposed solutions may be summarised under the following four explanations:

1. The figures should be taken at face value. In this case, it is assumed that the people were sustained, protected, and led by God's miraculous provision and presence during the 40 years in the wilderness; that the Promised Land was more fertile in ancient times; and that the number of firstborn sons (22,273; see Numbers 3:43) corresponds to the number who were born during the thirteen month period since the exodus. Those who support this position argue that the author of Numbers seems to be taking the numbers at face value, since they all add up correctly even when different methods of tabulation are used.
2. The figures should be taken at face value but they correspond to the population of Israel at a later date, possibly in the time of David. This suggestion, advocated mainly in the mid-twentieth Century, has lost favour, largely because it does not correspond well with the apparent population in the time of David. Also, the tribes of Simeon had already been merged with the tribe of Judah in David's time, whereas the two tribes are clearly distinct in the lists in Numbers Chapters 1 and 26.
3. The numbers were changed due to scribal misunderstanding. This view suggests that the numbers were originally much smaller, but that larger numbers were substituted later due to scribal misunderstanding of the Hebrew word *'elep*, which can be translated either as 'thousand' or 'group' or 'clan'. Thus it has been proposed that a number that now appears in Hebrew as 46,500 (1:21) originally meant 46 groups totalling 500 persons. Following this hypothesis, there would have been a total of 598 families, with a total of 5,550 male warriors, yielding a total population of about 20,000.

This hypothesis, however, presents other difficulties, as do other similar proposals based on the meaning of the Hebrew word *'elep*, one of which yields an estimated population of 140,000 and another that proposes a total population of 72,000. Those who support this general line of argument agree that it still needs refinement. They also agree that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for every OT case of what may seem to be very large numbers.

4. The numbers are symbolic. Two variations on the symbolic view are: (1) that the figures are based on 'gematria', that is, the symbolic numerical value given to each of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet; or (2) that the figures correspond in a symbolic way to astronomical periods associated with the 12 tribes of Israel. Although some have argued that astronomical symbolism is hinted at in Joseph's dream, by the way in which the sun, moon and 11 stars bowed down to Joseph, it is difficult to apply this symbolism in a comprehensive and consistent way.

Summary. Since these numbers claim to be census figures, the natural presupposition is that they are to be taken at face value. And although this presupposition is not without its difficulty, there is no obvious solution to the problems posed by these census figures. In any case, the theological message of this section in Numbers is clear, namely:

1. That every eligible adult male in Israel must be prepared and committed to fight in the Lord's army.
2. That all the people of Israel who were delivered from Egypt are the elect people of God, but they must confirm God's choice by their wholehearted participation in the realisation of their calling.

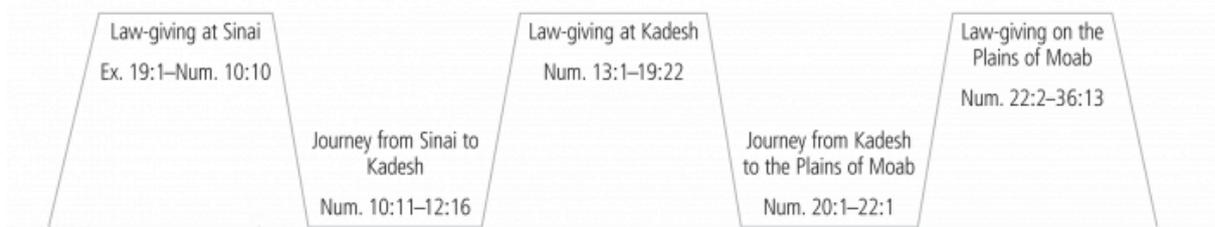
### Journeys in the Wilderness (circa 1446 BC)

The Book of Numbers details the Israelites' experience in the wilderness as they journeyed from Mount Sinai to Canaan. As with the exodus, it is difficult to establish the exact route that the Israelites took, but it is generally believed that they headed east from Mount Sinai until they reached the Red Sea, where they turned northward to the top of the gulf and on to Kadesh-barnea.



## Outline

Numbers consists of three major blocks of material describing the events and laws associated with three centres where Israel encamped for a significant time. These centres are Sinai (Chapters 1-10), Kadesh (Chapters 13-19), and the plains of Moab (Chapters 22-36). They are linked by two short travelogues recording what occurred as Israel journeyed from one camp to the next.



- I. Israel Prepares to Enter the Land (1:1-10:10)
  - a. The First Census of Israel (1:1-54)
  - b. The Order of Encampment and Marching (2:1-34)
  - c. Two censuses of the Levites (3:1-4:49)
    - i. Census of all male Levites (3:1-51)
      - 1. The Sons of Aaron (3:1-4)
      - 2. The Duties of the Levites (3:5-13)
      - 3. A Census of the Levites (3:14-39)
      - 4. The Redemption of the Firstborn (3:40-51)
    - ii. Census of mature Levites (4:1-49)
      - 1. The Kohathites (4:1-20)
      - 2. The Gershonites and Merarites (4:21-33)
      - 3. Census of the Levites (4:34-49)
  - d. Cleansing the camp (5:1-6:27)
    - i. Unclean Persons (5:1-4)
    - ii. Confession and Restitution (5:5-10)
    - iii. Concerning an Unfaithful Wife (5:11-31)
    - iv. The Nazirites (6:1-21)
      - 1. Definition of a Nazirite (6:1-6)
      - 2. Nazirites and uncleanness (6:7-12)
      - 3. Completion of a Nazirite vow (6:13-20)
      - 4. Summary of the law (6:21)
    - v. The Priestly Benediction (6:22-27)
  - e. Offerings of the Leaders (7:1-89)
  - f. The Seven Lamps (8:1-4)
  - g. Consecration and Service of the Levites (8:5-26)
    - i. The Dedication of the Levites (8:5-22)
    - ii. The Retirement of the Levites (8:23-26)
  - h. The Passover at Sinai (9:1-14)

- i. The Second Passover (9:1-5)
    - ii. The Delayed Passover (9:6-14)
  - i. The Cloud and the Fire (9:15-23)
  - j. The Silver Trumpets (10:1-10)
- II. Marching from Sinai to Kadesh (10:11-12:16)
  - a. Departure from Sinai (10:11-36)
    - i. Israel strikes camp at Sinai (10:11-28)
    - ii. Request to Hobab to Accompany Israel (10:29-36)
  - b. Three protests (11:1-12:16)
    - i. Complaining in the Desert (11:1-15)
    - ii. The Seventy Elders (11:16-30)
    - iii. The Quails (11:31-35)
    - iv. Aaron and Miriam Jealous of Moses (12:1-16)
- III. Forty Years Near Kadesh (13:1-19:22)
  - a. The Mission of the Spies and the National Rebellion (13:1-14:45)
    - i. Spies Sent into Canaan (13:1-24)
      - 1. Spies Sent Out (13:1-16)
      - 2. Mission Accomplished (13:17-24)
    - ii. The Report of the Spies (13:25-33)
    - iii. The People Rebel (14:1-12)
    - iv. Moses Intercedes for the People (14:13-25)
    - v. An Attempted Invasion is Repulsed (14:26-45)
  - b. The Law-giving at Kadesh (15:1-41)
    - i. Various Offerings (15:1-31)
      - 1. Meal, Oil, and Wine to Accompany Sacrifice (15:1-16)
      - 2. The Dough Offering (15:17-21)
      - 3. Sacrifices for Unintentional Sins (15:22-31)
    - ii. Penalty for Violating the Sabbath (15:32-36)
    - iii. Tassels on clothes (15:37-41)

- c. Revolt of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (16:1-50)
  - i. The Complaints of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (16:1-14)
  - ii. The Death of the Kohathite Supporters of Korah I (16:15-19a)
  - iii. The Death of the Ringleaders and their Families (16:19b-35)
  - iv. The Death of the Kohathite Supporters of Korah II (16:36-40)
  - v. Judgement Averted by Aaron (16:41-50)
- d. The Budding of Aaron's Rod (17:1-13)
- e. Duties and Privileges of Priests and Levites (18:1-32)
  - i. Responsibility of Priests and Levites (18:1-7)
  - ii. The Priests' Portion (18:8-32)
    - 1. The Priests' Income (18:8-20)
    - 2. The Levites' Income (18:21-24)
    - 3. The Tithe of the Tithe (18:25-32)
- f. Ceremony of the Red Heifer (19:1-22)
  - i. The Recipe for Producing the Cleansing Ash (19:1-10)
  - ii. The Cleansing Procedure (19:11-22)
- IV. Marching from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab (20:1-21:35)
  - a. The Waters of Meribah (20:1-13)
  - b. Passage through Edom Refused (20:14-21)
  - c. The Death of Aaron (20:22-29)
  - d. The Bronze Serpent (21:1-9)
  - e. The Journey to Moab (21:10-20)
  - f. King Sihon Defeated (21:21-32)
  - g. King Og Defeated (21:33-35)
- V. Israel in the Plains of Moab (22:1-36:13)
  - a. Balak, Balaam, and Israel (22:1-24:25)
    - i. Balak Summons Balaam to Curse Israel (22:1-21)
      - 1. Balak Summons Balaam (22:1-6)
      - 2. Balaam Turns Down Balak's First Invitation (22:7-14)

3. Balaam Accepts Balak's Second Invitation (22:15-21)
- ii. Balaam, the Donkey, and the Angel (22:22-40)
  1. The Donkey and the Angel (22:22-35)
  2. Balak Greeted Balaam (22:36-40)
- iii. Balaam blesses Israel three times (22:41-24:14)
  1. Balaam's First Oracle (22:41-23:12)
  2. Balaam's Second Oracle (23:13-30)
  3. Balaam's Third Oracle (24:1-14)
- iv. Balaam's Fourth Oracle (24:15-25)
- b. Worship of Baal of Peor (25:1-18)
- c. A Census of the New Generation (26:1-65)
- d. Laws for the Land (27:1-30:16)
  - i. The Daughters of Zelophehad (27:1-11)
  - ii. Joshua Appointed Moses' Successor (27:12-23)
  - iii. Calendar of Public Sacrifices (28:1-29:40)
    1. Daily Offerings (28:1-8)
    2. Sabbath Offerings (28:9-10)
    3. Monthly Offerings (28:11-15)
    4. Offerings at Passover (28:16-25)
    5. Offerings at the Festival of Weeks (28:26-31)
    6. Offerings at the Festival of Trumpets (29:1-6)
    7. Offerings on the Day of Atonement (29:7-11)
    8. Offerings at the Festival of Booths (29:12-40)
  - iv. Vows Made by Women (30:1-16)
- e. Retribution on Midian (31:1-54)
  - i. War against Midian (31:1-12)
  - ii. Return from the War (31:13-24)
    1. Moses' Anger with his Officers (31:13-18)
    2. Purification for Uncleanness (31:19-24)

- iii. Disposition of Captives and Booty (31:25-54)
  - 1. Dividing the Spoils (31:25-47)
  - 2. Head Count and Atonement (31:48-54)
- f. Conquest and Division of Transjordan (32:1-42)
- g. Summary of Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan (33:1-56)
  - i. The Stages of Israel's Journey from Egypt (33:1-49)
  - ii. Directions for the Conquest of Canaan (33:50-56)
- h. The Boundaries of the Land (34:1-15)
  - i. The Southern Border (34:1-5)
  - ii. The Western Border (34:6)
  - iii. The Northern Border (34:7-9)
  - iv. The Eastern Border (34:10-15)
- i. Tribal Leaders (34:16-29)
- j. Cities for the Levites (35:1-8)
- k. Cities of Refuge (35:9-15)
- l. Concerning Murder and Blood-Revenge (35:16-34)
  - i. Homicide that Warrants the Death Penalty (35:16-21)
  - ii. Homicide that does not Deserve Death (35:22-29)
  - iii. Final Points (35:30-34)
- m. Marriage of Female Heirs (36:1-13)