**Numbers**

**Is There Any Structure in the Wilderness?**

Two parallel blocks of text form the opening section of Numbers (Chapters 1-10).

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**The Opening of Numbers: What Is the Organizational Principle?**

The order of the opening passages in the Book of Numbers (Chapters 1-10) poses an exceptional challenge. The sequence of passages in Scripture is often justified in chronological terms. In the opening chapters of Numbers, however, a chronological explanation collapses under scrutiny and a different rationale for the ordering must be found.[[1]](#footnote-1) In addressing this problem, our discussion will bring together two key issues pertinent to the study of the Pentateuch: the relationship between literature and history, and the contribution of redaction to the orientation of biblical passages.

The passages in this unit are:

1. Chapters 1-2: The Israelite camp around the Tabernacle and the census conducted to count them.
2. Chapters 3-4: The completion of the Israelite census with the census of the Levites, and a description of the Levite camp.
3. Chapters 5-6: A series of commandments (expulsion of the ritually impure from the camp; guilt offerings for theft; laws pertaining to a suspected adulteress; laws of nazirites; the priestly blessings).
4. Chapter 7: The dedication of the altar by the tribal leaders.
5. Chapter 8: The dedication of the Levites and their preparation for Divine service.
6. Chapter 9:1-14: *Pesah Sheni* (the alternate Paschal sacrifice for those who were impure at the time of the first).
7. Chapter 9:15-Chapter 10: Signs of imminent departure: the cloud and the trumpets.

In general, the opening passages of the book constitute a prologue of sorts, describing the preparations of the camp for the coming journey; it is difficult, however, to identify the organizing principle behind the internal structure of these chapters.[[2]](#footnote-2) As a preface to my proposed solution, I wish to note two points that lay the groundwork for understanding the structure of the unit as a whole.

**Dates**

Many scholars have observed that the timetable of the opening passages in Numbers reveals two cycles:

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| Num 1:1 (Iyyar) | וַיְדַבֵּר יְ-הוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשֵּׁנִית לְצֵאתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם | The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year following the exodus from the land of Egypt |
| Num 7:1 (Nissan) | וַיְהִי בְּיוֹם כַּלּוֹת משֶׁה לְהָקִים אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן... | On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle…[[3]](#footnote-3) |

Clearly, the placement of the above units in the text do not correspond with their dating.

Note that the existence of the Tent of Meeting is a given in 1:1, but that the Tabernacle is just being completed in 7:1 and has not even been set up or consecrated yet.

**The Order of the Tribes**

First, one should take note of the order of the tribes in the account of the sacrifices offered by the tribal leaders (Chapter 7). Judah is at the top of the list, followed by Issachar and Zebulon and the rest of the tribes. This is the expected order when Chapter 7 is read in the context of the previous chapters. Earlier, in Chapter 2, Israel were commanded to camp around the Tabernacle in exactly this tribal order: Judah/ Issachar and Zebulon/ Reuben, Simon and Gad/ Ephraim, Menashe and Benjamin/ Dan, Asher and Naftali.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In actuality, though, the reader’s impression that Chapter 7 follows the expected ordering of the tribes is a textual illusion; it does not correspond with the chronological facts integrated in the text. As indicated above, the commandment to conduct a census (described in Chapter 2) took place in the second month, while the sacrifices of the tribal leaders (described in Chapter 7) took place in the first month, when Moses had completed erecting the Tabernacle. How did the tribal leaders know to bring their sacrifices in the first month according to the order which would be conveyed to Israel only in the second?

It would seem that the tribes were encamped according to the order mentioned above already in the first month. The opening passage of Numbers, i.e., the divine commandment dated to the second month is not actually concerned with the organization of the tribes, but rather is based on the order of their camp and seeks to enumerate them. That said, the link between these two lists of the tribes and their identical organization have structural significance, as I will propose below.

**The Split Treatment of the Levites**

Second, of the many similarities between the different passages in the opening chapters of Numbers, we should particularly note the connection between the two passages devoted to the Levites. The reader is left with the impression that this is a single passage split in two and incorporated into two different places in the opening chapters of Numbers.

This can be seen clearly through a comparison of the texts:

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| **Num 8:16-19** | **Num 3:9-13** |
| ח:טז כִּי **נְתֻנִים נְתֻנִים הֵמָּה** לִי **מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל** תַּחַת פִּטְרַת כָּל רֶחֶם בְּכוֹר כֹּל מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל **לָקַחְתִּי** אֹתָם לִי.[[5]](#footnote-5) | ג:ט וְנָתַתָּה אֶת הַלְוִיִּם לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו **נְתוּנִם נְתוּנִם הֵמָּה** לוֹ מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל... ג:יב וַאֲנִי הִנֵּה **לָקַחְתִּי** אֶת הַלְוִיִּם **מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל** תַּחַת כָּל בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּם. |
| ח:יז **כִּי לִי כָל בְּכוֹר** בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה **בְּיוֹם הַכֹּתִי כָל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הִקְדַּשְׁתִּי** אֹתָם לִי. | ג:יג **כִּי לִי כָּל בְּכוֹר** **בְּיוֹם הַכֹּתִי כָל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הִקְדַּשְׁתִּי** לִי כָל בְּכוֹר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאָדָם עַד בְּהֵמָה לִי יִהְיוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה. |
| 8:16 For they are formally assigned to Me from among the Israelites: I have taken them for Myself in place of all the first issue of the womb, of all the first-born of the Israelites. | 3:9 You shall assign the Levites to Aaron and to his sons: they are formally assigned to him from among the Israelites… 3:12 I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites in place of all the first-born, the first issue of the womb among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine. |
| 8:17 For every first-born among the Israelites, man as well as beast, is Mine; I consecrated them to Myself at the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt. | 3:13 For every first-born is Mine: at the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every first-born in Israel, man and beast, to Myself, to be Mine, the LORD’s. |

Most surprising is that the passage describing the dedication of the Levites is inserted into Chapter 8. On the face of it, the account of the preparation of the Levites for their service would be more appropriately included in Chapters 3-4, as these chapters are devoted to the status of the Levites, their census and their duties. Indeed, as can be seen from the table above, the process is already alluded to in Chapter 3, but the extended description of the taking of the Levites and their being given to the priests is delayed to Chapter 8, for reasons which are not clear. Although Moses is commanded to take the Levites in Chapter 3:45, the detailed implementation of this taking is explained only in Chapter 8.

**Condren’s Solution: Two Textual Blocks in Reverse Order**

Based on these three foundations—dates, the order of the tribes, and the split treatment of the Levites—Condren suggested that the opening passages of Numbers are composed of two parallel units,[[6]](#footnote-6) distinguished primarily by their different dates. The first part contains events and commandments gathered under the heading of ‘the second month,’ while the second block contains events and commandments under the heading of ‘the first month.’

The parallel between the blocks of text emerges when they are placed side-by-side:

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|  | Block 1 (Chapters 1-6) | Block 2 (Chapters 7-10) |
| **A. Tribes** | Tribes arranged around the camp (Judah first) | Offerings on behalf of the tribes (Judah first) |
| **B. Levites** | Levites arranged around the Tabernacle | Preparation of Levites to serve in the Tabernacle |
| **C. Laws** | Begins with removal of impure people, ends with the priests’ benediction. | Begins with Pesach Sheni for the impure, ends with the priest’s blowing of trumpets. |

A-A1: The link between these two opening elements is based on the order of the tribes. As noted earlier, we would not expect the tribal order in Chapter 7 (dated to the first month) to correspond to the tribal order in Chapter 1 (dated to the second month). Whatever the reasons for this correspondence, this unique ordering of the tribes forms a link between these two lists. Note also that the tribal leaders appointed to count the people at the beginning of the book are mentioned by name one after another in Numbers 1:5: *And these are the names of the men who will stand with you*…. At the end of the list of names, it says:

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| Num 1:17 So Moses and Aaron took those men, who were designated by name. | במדבר א:יז וַיִּקַּח משֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֵת הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר נִקְּבוּ בְּשֵׁמוֹת. |

These same tribal leaders play an active role in Chapter 7 where they are again mentioned by name, in the same order.

B-B1: The link between the next two elements has also been discussed above. The general commandment to Moses that he take the Levites in Chapter 3 is detailed in Chapter 8. In this case, the link is not only literary in nature, but also involves the splitting of an organic whole into two separate sections and their placement in two different textual contexts.

C-C1: The two halves conclude with a collection of laws that focuses on the relevance of the Tabernacle to the congregation as a whole and to the space of the camp itself. While this subject requires separate consideration,[[7]](#footnote-7) I will relate to the opening and closing words of each unit to demonstrate the link between these two collections of laws. Both passages open with laws relating to impure people: The first half discusses the expulsion of the impure from the camp, and the second half discusses *Pesah Sheni.* Both blocks conclude with commandments applying to priests:

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| Conclusion of Block 1 | Conclusion of Block 2 |
| ו:כז וְשָׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַאֲנִי אֲבָרֲכֵם. | י:י וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְזִכָּרוֹן לִפְנֵי אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲנִי יְ-הוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. |
| 6:27 Thus they shall link my name with the people of Israel and I shall bless them. | 10:10 They shall be a reminder of you before your God: I, the LORD, am your God. |

**The Tabernacle versus the Camp**

According to this structural proposal, the two halves conclude with laws pertaining to priests and both contain blessings which attest to the constant bond between Israel and God. If this structural analysis is indeed persuasive, we need to explore the relationship between the events in the first month (the first part) and the events in the second month (the second part). The role of the Tabernacle appears to be central to the division of the two parts; elements appearing in the first part are presented again in the second, but this time with a particular concentration on the Tabernacle.

This is most prominent in the opening component. The first part centers on the construction of the camp. The tribal leaders play a substantial role in conducting the census and in leading the journey, and they are responsible for the construction of the resting and travelling camp, but they stand in relation to Israel. In contrast, in the second part, the tribal leaders stand in relation to the Tabernacle and the altar, rather than in relation to the people. In this section, they dedicate the altar and bring many sacrifices, but even when acting as tribal representatives, they are not the focus of the passage; it is the altar that takes center stage.

This is also the case in comparing the second component of the two parts. The main subject of Chapters 3-4 is the friction between Israel and the Levites. The Levites are counted separately from Israel and take the place of their first-born. Their role in the Tabernacle is to **dismantle** it and transport it when it is not functioning. The verses in the first part emphasize that the Levites are forbidden to approach the vessels of the Tabernacle themselves (Numbers 4:20), a privilege reserved only for priests. The Levites are permitted to carry the Tabernacle on their backs only after it has been dismantled and covered.

The status of the Levites is markedly different in the second part. Here too, the journey of the Levites from Israel to the priests is described. Although the account of the Levites’ dedication is missing from the first part, it is given prominence in the second part, which focuses on the Levites’ entry into the space of the Tabernacle. The reader is told about Levites’ sacrifices and how they are lifted as a wave offering by Moses and Aaron. The idea conveyed by this section is that the Levites have a significant role in the Tabernacle. They do not simply carry it when it is non-functional, but also serve in it—or at least aid those who serve in it—when it is active and standing. The second part portrays them as approaching the Sanctuary in place of Israel:

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| Num 8:19 and from among the Israelites I formally assign the Levites to Aaron and his sons, to perform the service for the Israelites in the Tent of Meeting and to make expiation for the Israelites, so that no plague may afflict the Israelites for comingtoo near the sanctuary. | במדבר ח:יט וָאֶתְּנָה אֶת הַלְוִיִּם נְתֻנִים לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲבֹד אֶת עֲבֹדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּלְכַפֵּר עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא יִהְיֶה בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶף בְּגֶשֶׁת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ. |

The gap between the two parts extends to the comparison of the third closing element as well**.** In the first part, those who are impure must be sent away “*from the camp*.” The point of the law is that the camp as a whole must be pure; those who are impure must be sent away from it. In this context, there is no mention of the Tabernacle or of the sacrificial service. In contrast, in the second part, impurity is a ritual problem:

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| Num 8:19 and from among the Israelites I formally assign the Levites to Aaron and his sons, to perform the service for the Israelites in the Tent of Meeting and to make expiation for the Israelites, so that no plague may afflict the Israelites for comingtoo near the sanctuary. | במדבר ח:יט וָאֶתְּנָה אֶת הַלְוִיִּם נְתֻנִים לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲבֹד אֶת עֲבֹדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּלְכַפֵּר עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא יִהְיֶה בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶף בְּגֶשֶׁת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ. |

The problem of impurity in the second part is linked to the Sanctuary and the sacrifices.

Obviously, the same gap occurs in the link between the priestly blessings and the law of the trumpets. The priestly blessings exceed the confines of the Tabernacle. A unique priestly commandment, the priestly blessings have relevance in the camp as well as within the Tabernacle; even today, in the absence of Tabernacle and altar, priests bless the congregation in houses of prayer. In contrast, the trumpets are blown “on your burnt offerings and on your peace offerings,” a commandment contingent upon the sacrificial offerings.

It seems, then, that the month of Nisan (the second part of the above unit) is bound up with the Tabernacle experience, while the month of Iyar (the first part) is bound up with the construction and shaping of a sanctified camp.

**The Reverse Order: The Importance of the Camp in the Book of Numbers**

This analysis prompts us to consider why the events of the second month are positioned before the events of the first month in the biblical text. Another way to formulate this question is: What is the significance of the placement of passages that discuss a sanctified camp before the passages that discuss a holy Tabernacle?

It seems probable that the opening passages of Numbers constitute a preface of sorts to the book and shed light on its unique perspective. The Book of Numbers envisions the camp broadly, requiring the safeguarding of its sanctity and purity. Unlike the first half of Leviticus, which summons those who seek to worship God to the Tabernacle, Numbers follows on from the second half of Leviticus (the section dealing with sanctity); it asserts that sanctity exceeds the bounds of the Tabernacle to embrace the whole camp. For this reason, Numbers specifically opens with the second month and not the first, as though to declare that the construction of the camp is not for the sake of the Tabernacle, but for the sake of shaping a holy people. The camp is the protagonist of this narrative and its story must be told.

The divergence between the historiographic facts and the narrative is apparent here. From a practical perspective, the Tabernacle must be sanctified before its holiness can spread outward; for this reason, the events of Nisan are documented as happening before the events of Iyar. From a literary perspective, the Book of Numbers narrates the later events first, to emphasize that the core of the story, which takes place in the Tabernacle, can only be described after the foundational nature of the camp has been asserted.

1. This is the case for many sections of Scripture, but in the Book of Numbers it is particularly marked. There are additional cases in Numbers where the redaction can be seen as conceptually purposeful. I have demonstrated this in the collection of laws and narratives found in Numbers 25-30. ("Divine Command and Human Initiative: A Literary View on Numbers 25-31", Biblical Interpretation 15 (2007): 54-79 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are many discussions of this topic which cannot be dealt with in the context of this paper. See, for example, R. P. Knierim and G. W. Coats, *Numbers* (FOTL 4; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See discussion in T. R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids 1993), 43; R. D. Cole, *Numbers* (NAC; Nashville 2000), 64. This position differs from that of Ibn Ezra, who makes a point of connecting the sacrifices of the tribal leader with the priestly blessings mentioned immediately before them: “And the reason that ‘*And it was on the day that Moses completed*…’ follows after the priestly blessing is because it was thus, for on the day that Aaron lifted his hands to the people and blessed them, the dedication of the altar began.” (Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Numbers 7:1.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For discussion of different models for ordering the tribes, see J. Chinitz, "The Listing of the Tribes of Israel", *JBQ* 24 (1996): 36-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Chapter 8 circles back to this point while Chapter 3 does not:

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   | במדבר ח:יח וָאֶקַּח אֶת הַלְוִיִּם תַּחַת כָּל בְּכוֹר בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. ח:יט וָאֶתְּנָה אֶת הַלְוִיִּם נְתֻנִים לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו | 8:18 Now I take the Levites instead of every first-born of the Israelites; 8:19 and from among the Israelites I formally assign the Levites to Aaron and his sons… |

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Janson C. Condren, "Is the Account of the Organization of the Camp Devoid of Organization? A Proposal for the Literary Structure of Numbers 1.1-10.10", *JSOT* 37 (2013), 423-452. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Elsewhere I have suggested that these laws represent the relevance of the Tabernacle to different circles in the Israelite camp: the congregation, the family, and the individual. ("The Mishkan and the Nazir", in: E. Bick and Y. Beasley [eds.] *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach – Bemidbar* [Jerusalem 2014], 63-70) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)