

Traditional theory:

Num 1:1-10:10 Conclusion of the Sinai complex (Exodus 19- Numbers 10)
Numbers 13-19 the Kadesh complex
Numbers 22-36 Plains of Moab complex

These three major blocks/traditions are linked by two short travelogues: Num 10:11-12:16 (From Sinai to Kadesh) and Num 20:1-22:1 (From Kadesh to the Plains of Moab)

Canonical Reading:

Dennis T. Olson, The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch (Brown Judaic Studies 71; Chino, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985).

Dennis Olson saw this traditional approach problematic.

Even if Num 1:1-10:10 was originally part of the "Sinai theme" in the history of the growth of the literature, it has now been cut off from what precedes and has been joined to the rest of the material in Numbers to form a separate literary entity. Thus, a proper method must begin with the present form of Numbers and ease into the later stages of redaction and on into the rest of the history of the growth of the literature as far as the evidence allows (p. 37).

Stories of a series of people's revolts and YHWH's subsequent punishments in Numbers

Num 11 Moses to YHWH (read vv. 1-3)
Num 12. Aaron and Miriam to Moses
Num 13-14. Leaders and People
Num 16:1-40 Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Levites) and On (Reubenite)-- read vv. 31-35
Levites were swallowed up by the ground. 250 men were consumed by the fire from YHWH.
41-50 The whole congregation rebelled against Moses and Aaron
14,700 died by the plague
Num 20 Report of Miriam's death (20:1)
Waters of Meribah
Moses's disobedience prevented him from entering into the land of Canaan (v. 12)
Report of Aaron's death (20:22-29)
21 King Sihon and Og defeated
22-24 Balak and Balaam
25:9 Worship of Baal Peor and 24,000 killed
26 Census

No further complaining motifs and YHWH's subsequent punishment is recorded. No deaths, no murmurings, no rebellions against YHWH are in view, and various hopeful signs are presented. This new generation is the audience of the book of Numbers.

The Spy story and the editorial framework of numbers

The story of sending spies is linked by the census lists in Numbers 1 and 26. Num 14:28-30 read:

- 28 Say to them, "As I live," says the Lord, "I will do to you the very things I heard you say:
29 your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and of all your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upward, who have complained against me,
30 not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.

Read Numbers 13:17-31

Moses's command to spy the land	17-20
Reports of the spies	25-31
Report 1: Ten spies	25-29
Report 2: Caleb (and Joshua)	30-31

The phrase "from twenty years old and upward," is the recurring age formula that appears in the census in Numbers 1 (1:3, 18, 20, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, and 45).

These people, all those numbered "from twenty years old and upward" in Numbers 1, are those who are condemned to death in the wilderness in Numbers 13-14.

The spy story is also linked to the second census list in Numbers 26, which marks the new generation of Israelites. So Numbers 26: 63-65 read:

- 63 These were those enrolled by Moses and Eleazar the priest, who enrolled the Israelites in the plains of Moab by the Jordan opposite Jericho.
64 Among these there was not one of those enrolled by Moses and Aaron the priest, who had enrolled the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai.
65 for the Lord had said of them, "They shall die in the wilderness." Not one of them was left, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.

Verse 65 clearly recalls YHWH's oath in the spy story (14:29-30). In doing so, the plague which killed 24,000 in Num 25:9 presumably took the last remaining members of the old generation.

The new generation in Numbers 26 stands on the threshold of Canaan just as the old generation in chapters 13-14 had stood before the promised land in the wilderness of Paran. The old generation had failed in their mission, condemned to die in the wilderness. The fate of the second generation is undecided.