

# *The Book of Numbers*

## **I. Name of Book:**

In Hebrew: *Bemidhbar* (the fifth word in the Hebrew text) = “In the wilderness”

Greek LXX: *Arithmoi* (Latin Vulgate: *Numeri*) = “Numbers”

## **II. Setting and evidence of Mosaic Authorship**

Written in the 40th year of wandering in the wilderness, the last year of Moses’ life.

Presupposes knowledge of previous books of the Pentateuch—e.g., 1:1 mentions YHWH, Moses, the Exodus, Mt. Sinai, the tabernacle...meaning it is a natural sequel to the earlier books of Moses.

It picks up the story one month later than the erection of the tabernacle at the end of Exodus, and ends in the Plains of Moab, with the second generation encamped across Jordan from Jericho (36:13)—thus anticipating Deuteronomy (and Joshua).

Mentions Moses writing (at least portions) in 33:1-2; 36:13

Though not specifically attributed to Moses in the New Testament, its stories are counted as true (e.g., John 3:14 / 1 Cor.10:4-11 / Heb.3:16-19 / 2 Peter 2:15-16 / Jude 11), hence, its frequent mention of Moses receiving the information from God would also be regarded as true (e.g., 1:1; 2:1; 3:1; etc.).

It contains, and is part of, “the Law,” which others, including Jesus, attributed to Moses. Josh.8:31 / 2 Kings 14:6 / Neh.8:1 / John 7:19

Other literary sources mentioned include *The Book of the Wars of the Lord* (21:14-15); *The Song of the Well* (21:17-18); (probably written) prophecies of Balaam (chs.23-24)

Many of its concerns would be those relevant to the time of Moses, but not much afterward—including the elaborate instructions for the arrangement of the wilderness camp and the moving of the tabernacle.

## **III. Perceived problems with Numbers:**

A. The large number of people recorded in the censuses (confirmed in Exodus 38:25-26)

1. Growth from 70 original households?
2. Only two Hebrew midwives in Egypt for 600,000 families?
3. Crossing the sea in one night?
4. The number is too large for the number of firstborn numbered (27 to 1)
5. Where are the graves?
6. Why do some passages seem to indicate that Israel was a small nation (Ex.23:29f /Dt.7:7)?

B. Differences in detail of the parallel accounts in Deuteronomy (e.g. Num.20:14-21/Dt.2:4-8)

## **IV. New Testament lessons from the book:**

A. Parallel to the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness (Matt.4:1-11 / Mark 1:13 )

B. The book is a “type” of the Christian experience in this world (1 Cor.10:6, 11)

C. Justification by grace through faith (John 3:14-15)

D. Let us fear...lest we fail to enter the rest (Heb.3:19-4:1)

E. Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor.10:12 / Jude 1:5)

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## V. Contents of the Numbers

### 1:1-10:10 Preparations for departure from Sinai (19 days)

- Chs.1-4 The *outward* form of the Camp (Numbering and arrangement of the tribes)
  - Ch.1 Census of men of war (603,550 men above 20 years old)
  - Ch.2 Arrangement of tribes around the tabernacle, each by its standard
  - Ch.3 The roll of the Tribe of Levi from one month; the redemption of the firstborn
  - Ch.4 The numbering of 8,580 Levites from each family qualified to serve (age 30-50)
  
- Chs.5-9 The *inward* condition of the Camp
  - Chs.5 Cleansing and the ordeal of jealousy (separation *from* defilement)
  - Ch.6 Nazirite vows and Aaronic benediction (separation *to* God)
  - Ch.7 The offering of gifts from the tribal princes (spontaneous; uniform; particular)
  - Ch.8 The consecration of the Levites (cleansing, separation and atonement)
  - 9:1-14 Passover at Sinai (special flexibility for those who were defiled)
  
- 9:15-10:10 The cloud and trumpets (Guidance by God and through human instruments)

### 10:11-21:35 The Transition: Journey from Sinai to Plains of Moab

- 10:11-14:45 Journey from Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea
  - Ch.10:11-36 Removal from Sinai
  - Ch.11 Complaining at Taberah; lusting at Kibroth-hattaavah (70 elders)
  - Ch.12 Dissention of Aaron and Miriam
  - Ch.13 Spies bring back a report from Canaan
  - Ch.14 God sentences that generation to die, they attempt to take the land
  
- Chs.15-19 Thirty-seven years of wandering
  - Ch.15 Laws of sacrifice; punishment for Sabbath breaking; tassels on garments
  - Chs.16f Korah's rebellion
  - Ch.18 Service of priests and Levites
  - Ch.19 Laws of purification
  
- Chs.20-21 From Kadesh to Moab
  - Ch.20 Death of Miriam; Moses smites the rock; Negotiations with Edom; Aaron's death
  - Ch.21 Defeat of Arad; Bronze serpent incident; Defeat of Sihon and Og

### 22:1-36:13 The New Generation: Events in the Plains of Moab

- Chs.22-24 Story of Balaam
- Ch.25 Idolatry at Baal-peor and the zeal of Phinehas
- Ch.26 The second census
- Ch.27 Zelophehad's daughters
- Chs.28-29 The order of the offerings
- Ch.30 The law of vows
- Ch.31 The war of vengeance against Midian
- Ch.32 The inheritance on the east side of Jordan
- 33:1-49 List of Israel's encampments
- 33:50-56 Instruction for the conquest of Canaan
- Ch.34 Boundaries and division of Canaan
- Ch.35 Levitical cities and refuge cities
- Ch.36 The rights of female heirs