



The Book of Numbers

(In the Traditions of the Jews and Christians)

According to the tradition of the Jews and also of the Church of Christ, *Numbers* is the fourth book of Moses. It declared the events concerning the wilderness journey of the children of Israel. The book recorded a span of years—from the second unto the fortieth year following their going forth from the land of Egypt.

Geographical Journey

Geographically, the account beginneth in the wilderness of Sinai, where the people sojourned before the mountain of the LORD. From thence it narrated their journey unto the plains of Moab, and described the matters which came to pass therein. The name *Numbers* is taken from the Septuagint, owing to the census that is recorded therein. Yet in the Hebrew tongue it is called *Bemidbar*, that is, “**In the Wilderness.**”

Two Generations

This book beginneth with the *generation of the Exodus*, but ended with the *generation of conquest*. The former perished in the wilderness for their unbelief; the latter was raised up to possess the land of promise.

The Author of the Book

The author of this book is Moses, the servant of the LORD. Though many among the liberal scholars do cast doubt and raise questions concerning this authorship, yet the greater part of learned men do affirm that Moses indeed wrote it.

The Date of the Writing

The book was written between the years **1440 B.C. and 1400 B.C.**, in the days of Moses.

Historical Background

The Book of Numbers doth encompass a span of **thirty and eight years and nine months**. This period is known in the early Hebrew chronicles as the time of *Wilderness Wandering*.

Timetable after the Exodus

- **Fifteenth day of the first month**
the children of Israel departed out of Egypt.
(Exodus 12:2, 5; Numbers 33:3)

- **First day of the third month**
they arrived at Mount Sinai.
(Exodus 19:1)
- **Third day of the third month**
The LORD revealed Himself upon Sinai in thunder and fire.
(Exodus 19:16)
- **First day of the first month of the second year**
the tabernacle of the congregation was completed.
(Exodus 40:1, 16)
- **First day of the second month of the second year**
The LORD commanded Moses to number the children of Israel.
(Numbers 1:1)
- **Twentieth day of the second month of the second year**
the host departed from Sinai.
(Numbers 10:11)
- **First month of the fortieth year?**
They came unto Kadesh, and Miriam died there.
(Numbers 20:1)
- **First day of the fifth month of the fortieth year**
Aaron died, and the people mourned for thirty days.
(Numbers 20:29)
- **First day of the sixth month of the fortieth year?**
The people journeyed toward the land of Moab.
(Numbers 20:22; 21:4)
- **First day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year**
Moses spake unto all Israel in the plains of Moab.
(Deuteronomy 1:2–3)
- **Time of Moses' death and mourning (date uncertain)**
(Deuteronomy 34:8)
- **Tenth day of the first month of the forty-first year**
Joshua led the people across Jordan and into Canaan.
(Joshua 1:19)

Purpose and Message of the Book

The message of this book is centred upon two great truths:

- The **patience and faithfulness of the LORD** in the face of Israel's continual murmuring and rebellion.
- The **revelation of the nature and character of the God of Israel.**

As in the Book of Exodus, the holiness of the LORD is emphasized; yet this book also maketh known other attributes of the Most High. The wilderness experience taught Israel much concerning Yahweh their God:

He is **long-suffering**,

He is the **Provider**,

He is the **Hearer of intercessory prayer**,

He is **just**,

And He is a **jealous God**, who will not share His glory with idols.

Historical and Theological Purpose

The Book of Numbers declared a specific historical intent: to set forth the early experiences of the Hebrew people after their going forth from Egypt.

Its **theological purpose** is to record the **mighty acts of the LORD** in the early days of His covenant with Israel.

Outline of the Book of Numbers

1. **Preparation for Departure from Sinai**
(Chapters 1 to 10:10)
2. **Journey from Sinai to Kadesh**
(10:11 to 20:21)
3. **From Kadesh to the Plains of Moab**
(20:22 to 36:13)

These are the three great divisions of the book.

Major Themes

1. The Census of Israel

The numbering of the people (or census) was a common administrative practice in the ancient Near East. In the Book of Numbers, the census served **three main purposes**:

- i. To determine and recruit the number of men fit for **warfare** (Numbers 1:3).
- ii. To allocate responsibilities for **religious and priestly duties**.
- iii. To establish the **basis for taxation and contribution**.

The Camps and the Order of the Tribes

Encampment around the Tabernacle

The twelve tribes were arranged in an appointed order around the Tabernacle of the LORD, as follows:

- **North:** Dan, Asher, Naphtali
- **West:** Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin
- **South:** Reuben, Simeon, Gad
- **East:** Judah, Issachar, Zebulon
- **At the centre:** The **Tabernacle** itself

Order of March Through the Wilderness

When the camp did set forward, they marched in the following holy order:

1. **First:** Judah, Issachar, Zebulon
2. **Then followed:** The **Ark of the Covenant**, borne by the Levites

3. **After them:** Gershon and Merari, bearing the **Tabernacle materials**
4. Then came: Reuben, Simeon, and Gad
5. **Followed by:** The Kohathites, bearing the **furniture of the Tabernacle**
6. **Then marched:** Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin
7. **Lastly:** Dan, Asher, and Naphtali

Thus did the host of Israel move forward by their companies, under the command of the LORD?

Major Themes in the Book of Numbers

(a) The Census of the Tribes

The numbering of the tribes is recorded in **two distinct censuses**:

- The **first** in *Numbers chapter 1*, at the beginning of the wilderness journey.
- The **second** in *Numbers chapter 26*, nearing the end of the journey, after the generation of unbelief had perished.

Tribe	Reference (Chap. 1)	Number	Reference (Chap. 26)	Number
Reuben	1:20–21	46,500	26:5–11	43,730
Simeon	1:22–23	59,300	26:12–14	22,200
Gad	1:24–25	45,650	26:15–18	40,500
Judah	1:26–27	74,600	26:19–22	76,500
Issachar	1:28–29	54,400	26:23–25	64,300
Zebulon	1:30–31	57,400	26:26–27	60,500
Ephraim	1:32–33	40,500	26:35–37	32,500
Manasseh	1:34–35	32,200	26:28–34	52,700
Benjamin	1:36–37	35,400	26:38–41	45,600
Dan	1:38–39	62,700	26:42–43	64,400
Asher	1:40–41	41,500	26:44–47	53,400
Naphtali	1:42–43	53,400	26:48–50	45,400
Total		603,550		601,730

Note: The greatest decrease was in the tribe of **Simeon**, whose number fell by **37,100**.

Adapted from William Sanford LaSor, David A. Hubbard, and Frederick W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 167. Used by permission.

(b) The Testing of the LORD

"All the commandments which I command thee this day, ye shall observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers."
— *Deuteronomy 8:1*

"And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness,
to humble thee, and to prove thee,
to know what was in thine heart,
whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no."
— *Deuteronomy 8:2*

This theme revealed that God, in His covenantal mercy, tested His people—not to destroy them, but to refine them, to humble their hearts, and to draw forth obedience from within.

(c) The Revelation of God in Human Culture

The Book of Numbers also declared how **God revealed Himself through human traditions and societal forms**, in ways that bear both **respect for culture** and **transcendence above it**.

1. **God worked through human culture**, and thereby showed His honour for the dignity of man and the structures of society.
2. Yet at times, **for the sake of holiness and covenant obedience**, the LORD doth call His people to act **counter to the culture**, that they might be a holy nation unto Him.

(d) The Events Concerning Balaam the Prophet

The narrative of Balaam showed forth that **God is faithful to His promises**, and that **He guarded His people from unseen curses and hidden dangers**. Though Balaam was summoned to curse Israel, he was compelled by God to speak only blessing.

Christ Foreshadowed in the Book of Numbers

The Book of Numbers contained several **types and shadows of Christ**, pointing forward to His redemptive work:

1. **The Red Heifer** – a symbol of **purification through the sacrifice** (cf. Numbers 19; Hebrews 9:13–14).
2. **The Bronze Serpent** – lifted up upon a pole, a picture of **Christ crucified for the healing of the people** (cf. Numbers 21:8–9; John 3:14–15).
3. **The Final Prophecy of Balaam** – “There shall come a Star out of Jacob...” – a **Messianic prophecy** (Numbers 24:17).
4. **The Cities of Refuge** – a type of **refuge and salvation in Christ** for those who flee from wrath (cf. Numbers 35; Hebrews 6:18).