

Book of Numbers Explained

Introduction:

Something went terribly wrong on the way to the Promised Land.

Why would it take the infant nation of Israel 38 years to travel a distance that should have only taken a few weeks at most?

And yet that one month's travel turned into nearly four decades of travail.

For the adults aged 20 and over who left Egypt, it consumed the rest of their lives.

They never made it to the Promised Land.

For many long periods the Israelites were in encampments, not wandering.

Still, the reason for this seemingly interminable period forms the heart of this book:

The Exodus generation adults had a spiritual crisis halfway from Sinai to Canaan.

It was not a question of geography or topography; it was a question of faith.

The trip from "prison land" to Promised Land was spiritual at its core.

It was a test to see whether the Hebrews would trust Yahweh to meet their needs and deliver them safely to their new home in Canaan.

The Exodus generation failed the test and died on the threshold of blessing and promise.

It would be their children, those under the age of 20 and those born in the wilderness years, who would lead the nation into Canaan.

The story of Numbers is so important from a spiritual perspective that two New Testament writers warn their readers about failing similar tests.

The apostle Paul advised the church in Corinth about yielding to temptations to grumbling, immorality, and idol worship like the Hebrews did (1 Cor. 10:1-11).

The author of Hebrews warned his readers about a failure to move in and claim the spiritual rest God had promised (Heb. 3:7 – 4:11).

He draws from the story in the Book of Numbers to remind his readers that promises must be grasped and acted on before they can be realized.

Numbers is far more than Moses' travelogue or a record of Israel's population growth.

It must be read with spiritual eyes wide open.

Title:

The Hebrew title for this book is "In the Wilderness", which is quite descriptive of the contents.

The English title has its origin in the Greek version of the Old Testament (Septuagint), where, by the way of the Latin Vulgate, we get the English name.

Another Hebrew title, favored by some early church fathers, is based on the first word of the Hebrew text (of 1:1), "and He spoke".

This designation emphasizes that the book records the Word of God to Israel.

Only a few chapters (1-4 and 26), are given over to numbering (census taking), while the major portion of the book deals with the laws, regulations and experiences of Israel in the wilderness.

The two censuses break the book into its two logical divisions.

Chapters (1-21), begin with a census and cover the years in the wilderness, while (chapters 26-36), begin with a census of the new generation and tell of the months before entrance into Canaan.

The Balaam story separates these two sections and forms a literary hinge connecting them.

Exodus concentrates on the deliverance from Egypt, the covenant at Sinai, and the erection of the tabernacle.

Leviticus highlights the nature of true worship and holiness.

Numbers focuses on the Land of Promise and Israel's journey toward it.

Leviticus emphasizes the importance of holiness and cleanness.

Numbers reiterates the value of faith and obedience.

Leviticus stresses the role of sacrifice in creating and maintaining right relations between God and man, whereas Numbers accentuates the indispensability of the priesthood for preserving the nation's spiritual health.

At least three theological strains run through the Book of Numbers:

1. The character of God, especially as He reveals Himself in punishing the wicked (11:25, 33; 12:5, 10; 14:10; 16:19, 42; 20:6);
2. The land as it had been given to Israel by the LORD (32:7, 9), to be a holy land (35:34), and Israel's permanent possession (36:9); and
3. Israel's being the people of God who reflect God's holiness and faithfulness in their lives.

Historical Setting:

Numbers should be read in connection with Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

Exodus 19:1, tells of Israel's arrival in the wilderness of Sinai in the third month after the Hebrews left the land of Egypt.

From the third to the twelfth months they received the Decalogue, instructions for building the tabernacle, and directions concerning the many details of the sacrificial system set forth in Leviticus.

Then in Numbers, the people of Israel are taught how to function as a camp.

Their religious, civil and military economies are set in order in preparation for their journeying, worshiping, and conquering as a nation.

The sequence of events in the book is as follows.

From Sinai, Israel journeyed north to the wilderness of Paran.

There the spies who brought back an "evil report" instigated a rebellion, so the people refused to enter the land.

Then, through foolish presumption, they suffered defeat at the hands of the heathen.

They were turned back to wander in the wilderness 38 more years.

At the end of this period, they traveled to the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan, and defeated and occupied all of Trans-Jordan north of the river Arnon.

Here they fell into sin with the Moabite and Midianite women and worshiped their gods.

A new generation of Israel was numbered, and at the command of God destroyed the Midianites who had so harassed them.

Gad and Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh were given possessions east of the Jordan, and Moses appointed Joshua as his successor.

From chapter 20 through chapter 36, the book deals with events of the fortieth year (36:13).

Numbers has much in common with Deuteronomy because of its many laws and regulations.

Authorship:

The first 5 book of the Bible, called the Law, of which Numbers is the fourth, are ascribed to Moses throughout Scripture (Joshua 8:31; 2 Kings 14:6; Neh. 8:1; Mark 12:26; John 7:19).

The book of Numbers itself refers to the writing of Moses (in 33:2 and 36:13).

Numbers was written in the final year of Moses' life.

The events from 20:1 to the end occur in the 40th year after the Exodus.

The account ends with Israel poised on the eastern side of the Jordan River across from Jericho (36:13), which is where the conquest of the land of Canaan began (Joshua chapters 3-6).

The book of Numbers must be dated (ca. 1405 B.C.), since it is foundational to the book of Deuteronomy, and Deuteronomy is dated in the 11th month of the 40th year after the Exodus (Deut. 1:3).

Background and Setting:

Most of the events of the book are set "in the wilderness".

The word "wilderness" is used 48 times in Numbers.

This term refers to land that contains little vegetation or trees, and because of a sparsity of rainfall, it cannot be cultivated.

This land is best used for tending flocks of animals.

In (1:1 – 10:10), Israel encamped in "the wilderness of Sinai".

It was at Sinai that the LORD had entered into the Mosaic Covenant with them (Exodus 19-24).

From (10:11 – 12:16), Israel traveled from Sinai to Kadesh.

In (13:1 – 20:13), the events took place in and around Kadesh, which was located in “the wilderness of Paran” (12:16; 13:3, 26), “the wilderness of Zin” (13:21; 20:1).

From (20:14 – 22:1), Israel traveled from Kadesh to the “plains of Moab”.

All the events of (22:2 – 36:13), occurred while Israel was encamped in the plain to the north of Moab.

That plain was a flat and fertile piece of land in the middle of the wasteland (21:20; 23:28; 24:1).

The book of Numbers concentrates on events that take place in the second and fortieth years after the Exodus.

All incidents recorded (in 1:1 – 14:45 occur in 1444 B.C.), the year after the Exodus.

Everything referred to (after 20:1 is dated ca. 1406 / 1405 B.C.), the 40th year after the Exodus.

The laws and events found (in 15:1 – 19:22), are undated, but probably all should be dated (ca. 1443 to 1407 B.C.).

The lack of material devoted to this 37-year period, in comparison with the other years of the journey from Egypt to Canaan, communicates how wasted these years were because of Israel’s rebellion against the LORD and His consequent judgment.

Liberal scholars hold that much of what is related in the Book of Numbers is unhistorical.

They may make some concessions that some of the material is factual, but they basically have proposed that the book is a composite of several documents.

Such scholars designate most of the book as the “P” (Priestly), document, which they claim was written not earlier than the sixth or fifth century B.C., chiefly by priests of postexilic times.

They do allow that some of Numbers is from “J” and “E,” two documents not older than the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.

Even these earlier documents, they say, were far separated from Moses’ time, and their traditions are so confused that they tell us little about the Mosaic period.

The bible attest that Moses compiled the book during the wilderness wanderings (1447 – 1407 B.C.).

The phrase “the LORD spake unto Moses” appears more than 80 times in the book, along with the statement “Moses wrote their goings out” (33:2).

The chief arguments in favor of this view are statements within the Pentateuch that Moses did write some of it down (Exodus 24:4; Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:9, 22), the constant claim that the laws

were revealed to him (Exodus 25:1; Lev. 1:1; Num. 1:1), and the New Testament record of Mosaic authorship (Matt. 8:4; 19:7; Luke 24:44; John 1:45).

There are several indications of a second millennium B.C. dating for the book:

1. Parallels to the census lists (chapters 1 and 26), are found in the Mari tablets (eighteenth century B.C.), from Mesopotamia, and in Old Kingdom Egyptian documents.
2. The names of the tribal leaders (1:5-15), are characteristically second millennium in form.
3. So was their mode of encampment, the tribes of Israel camping in a square with the tent of their divine King at the center (chapter 2); this arrangement was followed by Rameses II (thirteenth century B.C.), on his campaigns, whereas first millennium Assyrian royal tent enclosures were circular.
4. The role of the priests and Levites in guarding the tabernacle (chapter 4), finds parallels in second millennium B.C. Hittite texts.
5. The design of the lampstand (chapter 8), shows that it comes from the Late Bronze Age (sixteenth to thirteenth centuries B.C.).
6. Trumpets were used during the Egyptian New Kingdom (1570 – 1585 B.C.), to summon to war and worship (chapter 10).
7. The tasseled garments (chapter 15), are attested among Israel's neighbors from the mid-second millennium onward.
8. In style and form, the letter to Edom (chapter 20), resembles second-millennium diplomatic notes.
9. A bronze serpent (chapter 21), and a tent shrine used by Midianites in the twelfth century B.C. have been found at Timna.
10. The laws on sacrifice (in chapters 28 and 29), resemble a fourteenth-century ritual calendar from Ugarit. And
11. The boundaries of Canaan as defined (in chapter 34), correspond to those of the Egyptian province of Canaan in texts of the fifteenth to thirteenth centuries B.C.

What it Says:

For more than a year, the Hebrew slaves underwent a transformation.

They shuffled into the shadow of Mount Sinai as an unorganized family, the descendants of Jacob.

But they left in a wholly different manner.

While at Sinai, Moses grouped them by tribes according to the 12 sons of Jacob.

The tribes camped around the periphery of a square, three tribes to a side, with the tabernacle erected in the middle of the square.

And each grouping of tribes had a lead tribe responsible for their group.

Once organized, it was possible for the new nation to meet their King, the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

They entered into a covenantal agreement with Him to receive and to obey His laws, summarized in the Ten Commandments Moses brought down from the mountain.

And they learned what it meant to be separate from the world, illustrated by their separation from the pagan ways of Egypt.

The difference between the Hebrews' arrival at Sinai and their departure could not have been more different!

They arrived as refugees and left as a military nation.

They were as organized in their march to Canaan as in their camp at Sinai.

In a little over a year, the children of Israel had become a nation under the rule of God.

What it means:

Numbers can be grouped into two movements based on the two censuses: (chapters 1-25 and chapters 26-36).

The book is undergirded by four central themes:

Covenant:

The Law of God, the covenant by which Israel was to be ruled, plays a critical role in Israel's history.

The covenant was given by God at Mount Sinai beginning with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17).

Throughout the rest of Exodus, all of Leviticus and Numbers (1:1 – 10:10), commandments, statutes, and judgments were added.

These laws were focused particularly on worship, emphasizing instructions concerning the tabernacle and sacrifice.

More laws were added at Kadesh (chapters 15; 18-19), and again in the plains of Moab (chapters 27-30; 35-36).

Land:

The land that the LORD promised to Abraham and his descendants forever (Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 15:7-21), was the land of Canaan, and the people were to possess what had been promised to them.

But the land where they would finally dwell would involve many battles.

The two descriptions of census and organization in Numbers (chapters 1-3; 26), were for preparing an army.

Israel's battling to inherit their land is a type of the Christian's preparation for victory in spiritual warfare (1 Cor. 10:1-13; 2 Cor. 10:1-6; Eph. 6:10-17; Heb. 3:7 – 4:11).

Faith:

Israel's crisis of faith came at Kadesh.

That is when the people rebelled against Moses and the LORD upon hearing the evil report of the 10 faithless spies.

A report of insurmountable problems in the land (chapters 13 and 14).

Israel learned the lesson that faith is manifested by obedience to God's commands.

As a result of their disobedience, the adult Israelites (except for Joshua and Caleb), were barred from entering the Promised Land (14:22-23).

Promises:

The promises of God are not invalidated by the failures of humanity.

People's actions can delay the realization of God's promised blessing but not cancel them.

Just as God waited 38 years for a new generation of Israelites to inherit the land, so Israel has been waiting nearly 2,000 years to re-inhabit the land under God's blessing.

The apostle Paul takes up the issue of Israel and God's promises (in Romans chapters 9-11).

What it Means to You:

What happened one night at a crossroads called Kadesh changed the destiny of millions and erased the hopes of a whole generation.

There is no way to overstate what a devastating effect the negative, faithless report of 10 men had on the nation.

Israel was at a tipping point that night: the words of the returned spies would either tip the people toward the Promised Land, or toward death and futility.

Summation:

People all around us in the course of our day may be, for one reason or another, at an intersection in their lives.

Our attitude, our outlook, our faith, our words, our courage at their crossroads could actually lift their lives, sending them in a positive direction.

Conversely, our negative, discouraging, cynical talk might easily nudge the confused or disheartened down a longer road into doubt or despair.

Is it any wonder that the Lord spoke so soberly about the power of our words and our responsibility in speaking them?

Jesus said, "I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the Day of Judgment (Matt. 12:36).