

NUMBERS

Author. As with the rest of the Pentateuch, the author of Numbers is Moses. The only direct reference to Moses writing the book is Num. 33:1-2, but there are over forty references throughout the book to the LORD giving words to Moses. Some items within the Book of Numbers may have come from other sources. For example, Numbers itself quotes a passage from the (now lost) Book of the Wars of the LORD (Num. 21:14), and the description of the building activity in the Transjordan (Num. 32:34-42) would have had to have been written after the nation crossed into Canaan without Moses, and so were probably a later, explanatory addition. The most questioned passage regarding Mosaic authorship is Num. 12:3, which in a parenthetical aside says, "*Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.*" The inherent contradiction of boasting about one's humility suggests that this was not written by Moses himself but was a later explanatory editorial addition. None of these exceptions, however, fundamentally overturns the case for Mosaic authorship.

Date. Given the events the book narrates, it almost certainly was written while the nation was on the plains of Moab, just before the entrance into the Promised Land, probably around 1406 BC.

Covenantal Significance. Numbers provides the immediate historical context for the Deuteronomic covenant. Ancient covenants would typically have a historical prologue, laying out the circumstances of the relationship between the two covenant-making parties which precipitated making a covenant. The book highlights the LORD's steadfast faithfulness to His covenantal people and promises, in stark juxtaposition to His people's repeated unfaithfulness. He provides for their needs, upholds His faithful servants like Moses, Joshua, Caleb, and Phineas, and successfully fights their battles. The LORD as king is present in the midst of His people, and the people are arrayed as His army prepared for holy warfare. Nevertheless, the nation fails to trust their covenantal king. Had Israel not sinned due to the negative report of the spies, it would have entered into the Promised Land a year after the Exodus, in fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. Israel's lack of faith, however, led to God's covenantal judgment on the nation which resulted in the Exodus generation dying in the wilderness. By the end of the book, as Israel readies to enter the Promised Land, the LORD, as Israel's beneficent king, gives His people a double blessing in both preliminary victories over the nation's enemies on the east bank of the Jordan, as well as through Balaam's grudging blessing on Israel. Understood in the context of God's covenant relationship with His people, this should have given them assurance of His continued faithfulness as they entered the Promised Land.

Israel's experience in the wilderness has relevance not only for the historically unfolding Old Covenant account of the LORD leading His people out of the Exodus into the Promised Land, but also for the New Covenant people as well. Christ's death and resurrection—the great salvific event of the New Covenant—parallels the Exodus, and so the period between Christ's First and Second Advents constitutes a parallel wilderness wandering for God's people as

He brings us to the eschatological, heavenly Promised Land. Reading Numbers provides a meditation as we think about our life in this tribulation period as we look forward to the Lord Christ Jesus bringing us home.

Outline. The Hebrew title of the book, *bemidhbar*, means “In the Wilderness,” which captures the contents of the book. The book unfolds as a chronological narrative, organized around the legs of the journey from Sinai to the plains of Moab: (I) From Sinai to Kadesh (chs. 1-12); (II) From Kadesh to Moab (chs. 13-21); and (III) Events on the Plains of Moab (chs. 22-36). This chronological approach explains why elements of law are interspersed throughout the narrative rather than being in one place.

Abbreviated Outline

- I. **From Sinai to Kadesh: Preparing to Enter the Land** (chs. 1-12)
 - A. **Preparations at Sinai** (1:1-10:10)
 - B. **Departure from Sinai** (10:11-12:16)
- II. **From Kadesh to Moab: The Wilderness Wanderings** (chs. 13-21)
 - A. **Arrival in the Wilderness of Paran** (13:1-20:13)
 - B. **Journey from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab** (20:14-21:35)
- III. **The Plains of Moab: Threshold of the Promised Land** (chs. 22-36)
 - A. **Balak's confrontation and Israel's sin** (chs. 22-25)
 - B. **Preparations for entering the Promised Land** (chs. 26-30)
 - C. **Last Battle Outside the Promised Land** (chs. 31-32)
 - D. **Summary of the Journey** (ch. 33)
 - E. **Inheritance Issues** (chs. 34-36)

Detailed Outline

- I. **From Sinai to Kadesh: Preparing to Enter the Land** (chs. 1-12)
 - A. **Preparations at Sinai** (1:1-10:10)
 - 1. Military census of the tribes and marching positions around the tabernacle (chs. 1-2)
 - 2. Census of Levites and description of duties (chs. 3-4)
 - 3. Instructions for cleansing the camp (chs. 5-6)
 - Exclusion of the unclean (5:1-4)
 - Confession and restitution of sin (5:5-10)
 - Tests for marital unfaithfulness (5:11-31)
 - Special dedication of Nazirite vows (6:1-21)
 - Priestly benediction (6:22-27)
 - 4. Tabernacle offerings and lamp arrangement (7:1-8:4)
 - 5. Dedication of and term of service for the Levites (8:5-26)
 - 6. Observance of the Passover (9:1-14)
 - 7. Explanation of the covering cloud (9:15-23)
 - 8. Explanation of the trumpet signals (10:1-10)
 - B. **Departure from Sinai** (10:11-12:16)
 - 1. Beginning of the journey (10:11-36)
 - 2. Complaints of the people (ch. 11)
 - 3. Complaints of Miriam and Aaron (ch. 12)
- II. **From Kadesh to Moab: The Wilderness Wanderings** (chs. 13-21)
 - A. **Arrival in the Wilderness of Paran** (13:1-20:13)
 - 1. The spies' mission and the people's rebellion (chs. 13-14)
 - 2. Laws on offerings, Sabbath, and garment tassels (ch. 15)

3. Korah's Rebellion and its aftermath (chs. 16-19)
 - Korah's rebellion (ch. 16)
 - The authority of the priests: Aaron's rod blossoming (ch. 17)
 - Duties of priests and Levites (ch. 18)
 - Law on purification (ch. 19)

B. Journey from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab (20:14-21:35)

1. Moses' sin at Kadesh (20:1-13)
2. Resistance of Edom (20:14-21)
3. Death of Aaron (20:22-29)
4. Destruction of Arad and the people's vow at Hormah (21:1-3)
5. The people's rebellion and the bronze serpent (21:4-9)
6. The journey to Moab (21:10-20)
7. Defeat of Sihon and Og (21:21-35)

III. The Plains of Moab: Threshold of the Promised Land (chs. 22-36)

A. Balak's confrontation and Israel's sin (chs. 22-25)

1. Balak's confrontation with Israel (chs. 22-24)
2. Baal of Peor and Israel's Apostasy (ch. 25)

B. Preparations for entering the Promised Land (chs. 26-30)

1. Second census (ch. 26)
2. Settling inheritance for women (27:1-11)
3. Choosing a successor to Moses (27:12-23)
4. Commands on offerings, festivals, and vows (chs. 28-30)

C. Last Battle Outside the Promised Land (chs. 31-32)

1. War against Midian (ch. 31)
2. Settlement of the Transjordan Tribes (ch. 32)

D. Summary of the Stages of the Journey (chs. 33)

E. Inheritance Issues (chs. 34-36)

1. Delineation of boundaries (ch. 34)
2. Identification of cities of refuge (ch. 35)
3. Inheritance for the daughters of Zelophehad (ch. 36)