

THE BOOK  
OF NUMBERS

LOST

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## PURPOSE OF THE SERIES

What do you do when you feel like nothing is working right? What do you do when you're walking around in circles or treading water spiritually? How do you pick up the pieces after you sin? Thousands of years ago, we find the community of faith, Israel, grappling with the same issues we still face and struggle with today. So, take hope! You are not alone!

The purposes of Yahweh's testing Israel in the wilderness have profound impact and application for the people of God today. In Numbers, the audience will find that the Lord humbles the Israelites so they might learn total dependence on Him.

In the Pentateuch, the Heavenly Father taught Israel obedience to His commandments; commands that give life and not death. In similar fashion, Jesus reminds that "the one who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. And the one who loves me will be loved by my Father. I also will love him and will reveal myself to him" (John 14:21).

In the wilderness, the Almighty showed the congregation the true condition of their hearts; the hearts of man are desperately wicked at all times.

But there is hope! When you feel lost or stuck in the desert places, remember that Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). This is the theme of Numbers and the purpose of this series: that everyone would know Jesus is your ever-present help in time of need.

## **AUTHOR**

As is the case with Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, the internal evidence of the Book of Numbers suggests a Mosaic origin for much of the material. Indeed, the text reveals that Moses recorded certain materials. Yet the Book of Numbers does not identify its author in the modern sense.

Some doubt the Mosaic authorship of Numbers due to the wilderness journey. The lengthy span of forty years lessens the likelihood that Moses would have written the entire Book at one setting.

According to Numbers 33:2, the Lord commanded Moses to write; Numbers shows a consistent and logical continuation of Exodus and Leviticus. Traditionally, the weight of evidence supports the fact that Moses was the author of the entire Pentateuch except for the account of his death in Deuteronomy.

## **TITLE**

The English title “Numbers” is derived from the Greek and Latin nomenclature, dating to no later than the first half of the second century A.D. Tertullian, an early church father living one hundred years after Christ, refers to the Balaam stories of the Book of Arithmi, so by inference the fourth book of the Pentateuch may have been called by the Greek name Arithmoi as early as the first century. This title makes sense because of the census records in Numbers 1-4 and 26.

A more appropriate title is the Hebrew designation: the fifth word of the first sentence, bemidbar (“in the wilderness [of Sinai]”). The Hebrew designation reflects the mnemonic approach to organizing the contents for memorization and recitation. This also more aptly describes its contents and its inclusion in the larger meta-narrative of the Pentateuch (Five Books of Moses). It is most helpful to think of Numbers by its content, God’s people wandering in the desert places.

## **THEOLOGY**

Theology, theo= god and logy= the study of, means the study of God. Often the reader of the Word will encounter explicit theology, verses that clearly illuminate the majestic nature of the Lord. However, Numbers is not that book. Rather, what the reader will encounter in the fourth book of the Bible is the nature of God told through the story of Yahweh and His people. As you read, the biblical text begs you to look past prima facie historical narratives and look intently at the Sustainer, the One True God. “The reader is asked to include himself or herself as a participant in the promise and challenge of this new generation of God’s people.”<sup>1</sup> The wilderness journey is more than a group of people wandering through the wilderness longing for a distant promised land. Numbers is about Yahweh, the One who alone is worthy of your complete devotion and praise.

## **KEY THEMES**

**GOD AT WORK IN ISRAEL**—God is at work in history via his presence and providential purpose. The Ark is located at the center of the camp as a visual reminder of the presence of the I Am. The congregation would not embark until the presence of the Lord, either by cloud or smoke, led the way. What the Lord began in Genesis, He continues in Numbers.

**TRIBAL COMMUNITY**—Unity and disunity are the polar structures of the tribal coalition: unity is evident when they are obedient to Yahweh; disunity, when in rebellion. This differentiation anticipates future discontent and disharmony.

**JOURNEY OF FAITH**—The journey theology of Genesis keeps Israel in pursuit of the dream by faith. Identification is made with the patriarchal ancestors. The wilderness journey continues the quest for the covenantal promises of the Lord, the Promised Land, for His holy nation and royal priesthood.

<sup>1</sup>Roy Gane, NIV Application Commentary, 472.

**REBELLION**—Rebellion among God’s people will be judged. The past and present examples anticipate a future history of contention with God.

**LAND AND PEOPLE**—They pursue the promise, but they reject it and then later prepare for entry into the Land. “The promise of land proleptically fulfilled for each generation.”

**PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT**—God will work on behalf of his people to fulfill His promises, even among a rebellious generation. At the end of Numbers, the only two who remain and who enter the promised territory, are Joshua and Caleb. The second census clearly demonstrated the faithfulness of Yahweh in spite of man’s sinfulness.

**PRIESTS AND LEVITES**—The priests and Levites serve a key cultic role on behalf of God for the community of faith.

**PURIFICATION RITES**—Purification ritual delineation is needed to prevent and atone for defilement.

**WILDERNESS MOTIF**—The wilderness motif provides Israelite history with a model of purification in the wilderness setting. In similar manner, the Spirit of the Lord leads Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days to be tested. Although the people of God in the Pentateuch fail their testing, the Son of God in His wilderness remains sinless, thus providing redemption.

**NUMEROUS DESCENDANTS**—The blessing of progeny extends throughout the generations. Twice the census taking evidences God’s richest blessing upon the people, fulfilling the promise of numerous descendants.

**GOD’S LEADERS**—Leadership is needed among God’s people to carry out his work in an orderly manner. The motif of leadership in matters of administration and cult begin in earnest with Moses and is succeeded by Joshua and Aaron followed by Eleazar. But even God’s chosen leaders may fall.

**NAZARITE VOW**—Provided a means for religious service for non-Levites who felt called to God’s service. The vow could be for life or a specific time. During this season, distinction from ordinary was emphasized and included: no fruit of the vine, no razor on the head, and it prohibited the touching of a dead body (Numbers 6).

## **KEY PEOPLE**<sup>2</sup>

**MOSES**—Personal name meaning “drawn out of the water.” Moses was the leader of the Israelites in their exodus from Egyptian slavery and oppression, their journey through the wilderness with its threats in the form of hunger, thirst, and unpredictable enemies, and finally in their audience with God at Mount Sinai/Horeb where the distinctive covenant, bonding Israel and God in a special treaty, became a reality.

The death of Moses is marked by tragic loneliness yet graced with God’s presence. Because of Moses’ sin (Numbers 20), God denied Moses the privilege of entering the promised land. Deuteronomy 34 reports the death scene. Central to the report is the presence of God with Moses at the time of his death. Moses left his people to climb another mountain. Atop that mountain, away from the people whom he had served so long, Moses died. God attended this servant at his death. Indeed, God buried him, and only God knows where the burial place is.

**AARON**—Moses’ brother and Israel’s first high priest. His parents Amram and Jochebed were from the tribe of Levi, Israel’s tribe of priests (Exodus 6:16–26). Miriam was his sister. In Numbers 12 he and Miriam spoke against Moses’ marriage to the Cushite (Ethiopian) woman. (Cush was an old name for Upper Egypt—approximately modern Sudan.) Though Miriam was severely judged, Aaron was not, perhaps because he was not the instigator, but the accomplice. He confessed his sin and pleaded for mercy for Miriam.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpts taken from the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary.

When Korah, Dathan, and Abiram opposed Moses and Aaron, Aaron's intercession stopped the plague (Numbers 16). God vindicated Aaron's leadership in the miraculous blossoming of his staff (Numbers 17).

**MIRIAM**—Personal name of uncertain meaning, perhaps “bitter,” “God’s gift,” “beloved,” or “defiant.” Sister of Moses and Aaron and the daughter of Jochebed and Amram. At Hazeroth Miriam sided with Aaron in an act of rebellion against Moses when he married an Ethiopian woman (Num. 12:1–15). Beneath her disapproval of Moses’ choice of a wife lay a deeper problem of ambition and insubordination. Consequently God reminded her of Moses’ divinely appointed leadership and chastened her with leprosy. She was healed following Moses’ intercessory prayer and a seven-day quarantine (Numbers 12:15). Miriam died at Kadesh (Numbers 20:1). Later biblical writers remembered her as an example to Israel in cases of leprosy (Deuteronomy 24:9) and as a leader sent by God (Micah 6:4).

**KORAH**—Personal name meaning “bald.” Leader of rebellion against Moses and Aaron while Israel was camped in the wilderness of Paran (Numbers 16). Korah, Dathan, and Abiram led a confederacy of 250 princes of the people against Aaron’s claim to the priesthood and Moses’ claim to authority in general. The rebels contended that the entire congregation was sanctified and therefore qualified to perform priestly functions. As punishment for their insubordination, God caused the earth to open and swallow the leaders and their property. A fire from the Lord consumed the 250 followers.

**JOSHUA**—Personal name meaning “Yahweh delivered.” Joshua was Moses’ servant (Exodus 24:13). He was on the mountain when Moses received the Law (Exodus 32:17). He was also one of the 12 spies Moses sent to investigate Canaan (Numbers 13:8). He and Caleb returned with a positive, minority report. Of all the adults alive at that time, only the two of them were allowed to live and to enter the land of Canaan (Numbers 14:28–30, 38).



**CALEB**—Personal and clan name meaning “dog.” Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, was one of the 12 spies sent by Moses to scout out the territory of Canaan (Numbers 13:6). He was one of only two who brought back a positive report (Numbers 13:30). Because of his steadfast loyalty to the Lord, God rewarded him by letting him survive the years of wilderness wandering and giving him the region of Hebron as his portion in the promised land. At the age of 85, Caleb conquered Hebron (Joshua 14).

**BALAAM**—Non-Israelite prophet whom Balak, king of Moab, promised a fee if he would curse the invading Israelites. Balaam was one of many prophets of eastern religions who worshiped all the gods of the land.

Later, in four vivid messages, Balaam insisted that God would bless Israel (Numbers 23–24). God used Balaam to preach truth. He even spoke of a future star and scepter (Numbers 24:17), a prophecy ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. Balak’s actions brought God’s anger upon Moab (Deuteronomy. 23:3–6). In a battle against the Midianites, Balaam died (Numbers 31:8; Joshua 13:22). Balaam could not curse Israel, but he taught the Moabites to bring the men of Israel into Baal worship with its immorality. For this God would punish Israel. What Balaam could not accomplish with a curse he did through seductive means.

## **GOSPEL IN NUMBERS**

### **THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD CENTERS YOUR LIFE**

The theme of the book of Numbers is the journey to the Promised Land of Canaan. But something happens between the miraculous deliverance in Egypt, the supernatural parting of the Red Sea and the acquisition of the long awaited Promised Land-the Wilderness. When you are in the wilderness, and make no mistake, if you are living in paradise now one day you will walk in the wilderness-to know that the presence of Yahweh is in midst of the camp, changes everything! So vital is the presence of the Lord to the community of God, that they encamped facing the Tent of Meeting.

The community would only move when the presence of God (smoke by day and fire by night) would advance. The presence of God is central! We no longer have a tabernacle or Temple, but have the same assurance that the presence of Jesus Christ remains with those who love Him and are called according to His purposes. *"Be satisfied with what you have, for He Himself has said, I will never leave you or forsake you. 6 Therefore, we may boldly say: The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me (Hebrews 13:5)?"* The presence of Yahweh is vital!

### **THE PLANS OF THE LORD GUIDE THE WAY**

As Numbers begins, Israel is in its final days at Sinai. The year-long experience of Israel at Mount Sinai forms the foundation of its life as the covenant people of God. God did not intend for Israel to stay on the mountain. He had a plan and a Promised Land. A plan is a detailed proposal for doing or achieving something. The more you let the plans of God guide your way, the less you let the pains of wilderness lose your way. If you are in the will and plan of the Lord, you are not lost. You might feel lost, you might not know the way, you might look lost, but you are not. "I find the doing of the will of God leaves me no time for disputing about His plans." (George McDonald)

### **THE PROMISES OF THE LORD BRING HOPE IN DIFFICULTY**

"In the second year after they had come out of the land of *Egypt* (Numbers 1:1)." Egypt, a part of Israel's past, had such a profound impact on their lives that the community marked time by the experience. Have you ever experienced anything like this? For hundreds of years the people of God were enslaved in Egypt. At times, this enslavement simply necessitated that they could not worship as they so desired.

In greater measure, the bondage included extreme burdensome controls and expectations. The community of faith longed for the day that the Lord would rescue them, and they could worship freely in spirit and in truth. Can you image the first time Israel heard (Exodus 4:31) that the Lord paid attention and listened to their misery? The day God rescued them left a permanent indentation in their lives. "In the second year, out of Egypt," Israel remembered the promises of the Promise-Maker and Keeper.

## **THE PURPOSE OF THE LORD GIVES YOU REASON TO PERSEVERE**

Why a census in the first chapter of Numbers? First, a head count of troops was always conducted before a campaign and at its conclusion. Make no mistake, the people of God were going to battle. For Israel, the mission and campaign was to take the land promised to the covenant people. For those in Christ Jesus, the mission remains: to follow Christ means that you live on campaign. Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit(Matthew 28:19).

Additionally, taking a census is a political act in which a ruler demarcates and makes a claim upon the people being numbered. The census was a reminder that God had claimed the people as His own. If you are in Christ, he has complete claim upon your head and upon your life. There is no such thing as Christian who has not surrendered their life. It is a myth that Christ has no claim over one who calls themselves a Christ follower. Jesus has complete authority. You are his possession, his special treasure, and knowing the purpose of the Lord gives reason to keep going.

## OUTLINE

### THE END OF THE FIRST GENERATION (1:1-25:18)

Census and consecration (1:1-6:27)

Tabernacle and celebration (7:1-10:10)

Rebellion in the wilderness (10:11-25:18)

### CHALLENGES FOR THE NEW GENERATION IN THE LAND (26:1-36:13)

Census of the new generation (26:1-65)

New Leadership (27:12-23)

Preparation for war and entry into the Promised Land (31:1-36:13)

## RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

Timothy Ashley. *Numbers* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament).

Dennis Cole. *Numbers* (The New American Commentary).

Iaian Duguid. *Numbers* (Preaching the Word).

Jacob Milgrom. *Numbers*. (The JPS Torah Commentary).

Dennis Olson. *Numbers* (Interpretation).

Gordon Wenham. *Numbers* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries).

## KEY VERSES

*1:2 "Take a census of the entire Israelite community by their clans and their fathers' families, counting the names of every male one by one.*

*6:24 "May the LORD bless you and protect you; 25 may the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; 26 may the LORD look with favor on you and give you peace."*

*14:15 "If you kill this people with a single blow, the nations that have heard of your fame will declare, 16 'Since the LORD wasn't able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them, he has slaughtered them in the wilderness."*

*23:19 "God is not a man, that he might lie, or a son of man, that he might change his mind. Does he speak and not act, or promise and not fulfill?"*

*24:17 "I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel. He will smash the forehead of Moa and strike down all the Shethites. 18 Edom will become a possession; Seir will become a possession of its enemies, but Israel will be triumphant."*













