

The Book of Numbers: Introduction

Dr. Alan Branch

The book of Numbers explains why the generation that left Egypt was not the generation that entered Canaan. Lack of faith stalled the people an incredible forty years, and an entire generation died wandering in the wilderness.¹ David Malick offers a helpful summary statement of Numbers:

After the Lord constituted the exodus generation at Sinai into a people in covenant relationship with him under theocratic rule, as well as initiated and guaranteed her walk with him in spite of her repeated disobedience, he made final preparations for the sons of Israel to obtain and maintain the Promised Land.²

I. Title

A. Hebrew Title

Following typical Hebrew tradition, the Hebrew title of the book is taken from the first verse and is “in the desert” or “in the wilderness.” The Hebrew term is transliterated as *bammidbar*.

B. Greek Title

In the LXX, the Greek title is Αριθμοί, transliterated as *Arithmoi*.

¹ Herbert W. Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1991), 219. Wolf mentions both “40 years” and “38 years” in the wilderness. Apparently, he believes the incident concerning the negative report of the spies and the refusal to enter took place 2 years after leaving Egypt.

² David Malick, “An Argument for the Book of Numbers.” <https://bible.org/article/argument-book-numbers>. (Accessed July 29, 2013).

C. English

English borrowed the idea of calling the book Numbers from the Greek title. In English, the fourth book of the Pentateuch is called Numbers because of the censuses contained in chapters 1 and 26.

II. Author of Numbers

Numbers was authored by Moses. Attempts to discredit Mosaic authorship are rooted in the documentary hypothesis' flawed reconstruction of Israelite history.

A. Moses

The book of Numbers doesn't specifically mention an author. However, see Numbers 33:2:

Numbers 33:2: Moses recorded their starting places according to their journeys by the command of the LORD, and these are their journeys according to their starting places.

Numbers 33:2 is the only specific reference in the book of Numbers to Moses writing anything.

B. The Documentary Hypothesis

1. The Documentary Hypothesis on Numbers: A Convenient Invention

The documentary hypothesis sees the book of Numbers as a convenient invention; liberals who reject the inspiration of Scripture do not believe Moses wrote the book of Numbers. Advocates of the Documentary Hypothesis assert that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BC created a theological crisis among Jewish people. They were asking, "Why did God allow this to happen? We thought God made a covenant with David?" JEDP people claim that the "P" material was invented in an

attempt to answer this question. The P material was written after the return from the exile. Basically, the Documentary Hypothesis says the authors of P were saying, “We should have been faithful to follow all of these rules. If we follow these rules, God will be happy with us and we won’t be under foreign domination.” So, lots of the book of Numbers was conveniently invented at a low point in Jewish history to motivate people to be more devout. From the liberal perspective, while Numbers purports to be written 1450 – 1400 BC, it is actually a pious forgery written during or after the Babylonian Exile.

2. JEDP Division of Numbers

Critical scholars generally assign Numbers 1 – 10 to the block of Priestly (P source) beginning in Exodus 35 and extending through Numbers 10. Hill and Walton summarize the Documentary Hypothesis’ approach to the rest of the book, “Chapters 11 – 36 of Numbers are considered a composite of the Yahwist (J) and Elohist (E) sources, and two different P traditions (with portions of 11 – 14, 16, and 20 – 25 assigned to J and E and portions of 13 – 17, 20, and all of 25 – 36 assigned to P.”³ Basically, liberals claim Numbers underwent a series of expansions and revisions until it reached its present form somewhere around 450 BC.

This is why I claimed earlier that the Documentary Hypothesis leaves you with a Bible full of holes.

C. Difficulties with Asserting Mosaic Authorship

1. Humble Moses

Numbers 12:3 (NASB): Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.

³ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 145.

Numbers 12:3 is often quoted by those who claim Moses didn't write Numbers. The assumption is that a "very humble" man wouldn't write such things about himself. It's like a modern person saying, "I'm humble: just ask me!"

2. Balaam – Numbers 22 – 24

Numbers 22 – 24 tells the story of Balaam, the prophet for hire. Moses is not mentioned in these chapters. Many people have speculated on how this story came to be part of the book of Numbers. Usually they suggest it is just an old story that a redactor placed in Numbers in a "cut and paste" methodology around 450 – 400 BC.

3. Response

There may be some editorial additions to the book, such as Numbers 12:3. This should not surprise us or bother us. The compilation of the Psalms is informative here. Numerous Psalms have later editorial or musical additions, and some Psalms are later constructions of various parts of earlier poems. Yet, the faithful Christian still speaks of the final product of the Psalms as the work of the Spirit of God.⁴ Allen concludes:

We may conclude, however, that it is reasonable to assume that the essential content of the book did come from Moses, the servant of the Lord. His name is repeatedly in the book; he is the principal human protagonist in the book; and he is the one with the training, opportunity, motivation, and opportunity to produce the book.⁵

There is warrant to believe Moses is the author and Numbers accurately records events from his lifetime. Concerning Numbers 12:3, Wolf says "it is

⁴ I am following Ronald Allen's thought here. Ronald B. Allen, *Leviticus*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 666.

⁵ Allen, *Leviticus*, 668.

not necessary to insist that Moses wrote it.”⁶ Wolf then suggests Joshua 24:26 gives room to believe Joshua may have inserted this comment. Numbers is not a pious forgery.

III. Date of Numbers

The book of Numbers was written somewhere around 1,400 BC.

A. Liberal View

Liberals see Numbers as a composite work and a pious forgery developed over an extended period of time. As such, that have different dates for the authorship of different sections of Numbers:

1. Liberals believe Numbers 1 – 10 comes from after the Babylonian Exile (ended 539 BC).
2. Some stuff in Numbers 11 following came from J and some from E, plus a little from P.
3. An unknown redactor (according to liberals, the streets of ancient Israel were full of redactors! People were tripping over them in the road to the Temple!) pulled all this stuff together around 450 – 400 BC.

Remember, there is not one shred of textual evidence for this liberal theory: no one has ever found a version of Numbers that looks different from what you have.

B. Biblical View

The Book of Numbers was written during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness which followed the Exodus from Egypt. The wilderness wanderings began when the Hebrews departed from Sinai c.

⁶ Wolf, *Pentateuch*, 68.

1445 BC. Numbers is the record of the events of the forty-year span of the time from the Exodus to the first penetrations into Canaan c. 1405 – 1400 BC. For me the simplest explanation is that Moses kept a record of people, places, and events of importance in God’s dealings with the Hebrews in the wilderness.

IV. Purpose

Numbers has to be studied in conjunction with the other books of the Pentateuch. It builds on the promises made to Abraham in Genesis and the redemption from bondage in Exodus; it completes the cultic instructions for Israel that were laid down in Leviticus, and it concerns the worship in and the movement of the tabernacle that was built in Exodus.

A. Relevance of Numbers for the Contemporary Christian

The purpose of the Book of Numbers was more than to record a diary of the travels of the Israelites. Its purpose was to warn the nation of the dangers of disobedience, and to encourage them with prospects of blessing in view of the provision and faithfulness of the LORD.⁷ I Corinthians explain the purpose of these stories for the Christian life:

1 Corinthians 10:6: Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved.

1 Corinthians 10:11: Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of ages have come.

⁷ W.A. Criswell, ed., *The Believer’s Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), 187 – 188.

B. Needed Historical Information

Numbers fills-in the historical period from the Exodus and Sinai revelation to the preparations in Moab to enter the Promised Land.

Numbers explains the 38 – 40 year period in the wilderness was a consequence for the unbelief of the older generation (Deuteronomy 1:35ff).

C. God's Faithfulness

Numbers demonstrates God's faithfulness and forbearance against the backdrop of Israel's unfaithfulness, rebellion, apostasy and frustration.

D. Focal Verses in Numbers

I believe the "Song of the Ark" is central to the book of Numbers:

Numbers 10:35 – 36: Then it came about when the ark set out that Moses said, "Rise up, O LORD! And let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You." When it came to rest, he [Moses] said, "Return, O LORD, to the myriad thousands of Israel."

These words were later used in Psalm 68:1 to describe God's triumphal march from Sinai to Jerusalem. As Israel moves towards the Promised Land, it is God Himself on the march.

V. Outline and Structure of Numbers

A. Summary

Numbers contains a mixture of law and narrative designed to remind the readers that saving history concerns everyone and that now is when they must do the will of God.

B. Outline

Some authors protest the Book of Numbers is difficult to outline and claim it lacks literary coherence, but I think the following approach emerges from the text and is easy to follow. The Book of Numbers divides into three main portions, each centered in a geographical setting to mark the main stages of the wilderness march.⁸

Sinai:	1:1 – 12:16
Preparations for Departure:	1:1 – 10:10
Journey from Sinai to Kadesh	10:11 – 12:16
Kadesh:	13:1 – 22:1
In the wilderness of Paran	13:1 – 20:13
Journey from Kadesh to plains of Moab	20:14 – 22:1
Moab:	22:2 – 36:13
Preparations for Canaan	22:2 – 32:42
Conclusion: backward and forward look	33:1 – 36:13

⁸ I've taken this summary outline from a more extended one found in William S. LaSor, David A. Hubbard, and Fredric Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 100 – 101.