

## NAME

In Hebrew the title comes from the first verse of the book: בְּמִדְבָּר “be-mid-bar” meaning “In the wilderness” from מִדְבָּר (mid bar) meaning “wilderness.” The title in Hebrew focuses on the people’s being disciplined for their failure of faith in not entering the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 8:2,3).

In Greek (LXX) the title is Αριθμοι “arithmoi” (meaning “number, a number”) - which comes from the verb αριθμεω “arithmeo” (meaning “to number”) from which we derive our English word “arithmetic.”

Our English title “Numbers” is taken from the LXX. It is called this because twice in the book, chapters 1 and 26, a census is taken and thus the people are “numbered.”

NOTE: The census taken at Mount Sinai shows 603,550 males above the age of 20, not including Levites (Leviticus 1:45-47). The second census, taken 38 years later, excluding Levites showed 601,730 males above the age of 20 (Leviticus 26:51). The probability is that there were about 2.5 million in the nation at this time and throughout the wandering in the wilderness.

Yet, the book could well have been given several other titles. It could just as well have been called, “The Book of Murmurings” because it contains seven distinct occasions where the people murmured. They complained about the route of travel, the food, the giants, their leaders, God’s judgments, the desert, and the manna God had graciously provided.

The Murmurings of Israel - in Numbers (note also Exodus 15:22-25 - concerning the lack of water)

1. Numbers 11:1-3; 4-9  
Concerning the way  
Concerning the manna
2. Numbers 12:1-3  
Concerning the Ethiopian wife of Moses
3. Numbers 14:2-5  
Concerning the giants and because of their fear
4. Numbers 16:1-5  
Concerning the authority of their leaders
5. Numbers 16:41,42  
Concerning God’s judgments
6. Numbers 20:1-5  
Concerning the lack of water in the desert and their fear
7. Numbers 21:4-6  
Concerning the lack of water and food; concerning the manna

However, this book might well have been named “The Book of Wanderings” because it is a book of movement. As a result of unbelief, Israel is forced to wander forty years in the wilderness.

Finally, it could also be referred to as “The Book of Training” for God obviously used the forty years wandering to train the new generation which was to invade Palestine. Actually, one-third of the book deals with instructions for the conquest and resettlement of the land of Canaan. (Mitchell)

## AUTHOR

Conservative scholarship has maintained Mosaic authorship. However, as with the rest of the canon, recent higher criticism has questioned Mosaic authorship. For a discussion on the argument of higher criticism (Documentary Hypothesis) see the discussion on authorship from Notes on Genesis (JEP).

### DATE

Numbers begins where Exodus left off (Exodus 40:17,18; Numbers 1:1). Numbers covers a period of about 40 years and gives just the highlights (or low lights depending on one's perspective). Based on the date of the Exodus, the Book of Numbers covers the period of 1446 to 1406 B.C.

### THEME

Type of Literature: Law, History.

Halley (page 43): Journey to the Promised Land

*"Numbers begins with the Lord organizing Israel into an army en route to establish God's kingdom in the Promised Land. Throughout the journey we see the Israelites' rebellion as well as God's anger against their disobedience. But despite God's judgment, He is faithful in bringing Israel into the land of promise. We see God's grace renewed time and time again."* (Halley, page 157)

Kartozian: Unbelief bars the entrance to the abundant life (see Hebrews 3:7-19).

Mitchell: There is actually a dual theme evident in this book. One theme emphasizes the human perspective, and the other one depicts the Divine perspective.

#### 1. Human Perspective: The Peril of Unbelief and the Tragedy of Not Trusting

The people of Israel failed to trust God, hence they failed to enter the land. They did not obey God and thus traveled in circles. As a result of this, they turn into a bunch of wandering complainers out of fellowship with God, and out of sorts with each other. Their wandering was the way of failure because it was the way of the flesh. They had started out with great enthusiasm; but upon seeing the giants, they failed to trust God and thereby lost their power and joy.

There is an obvious lesson in this book for the Christian today. Have you lost your power? Have you lost your joy? Are you moving ahead or just going in circles? Maybe the cause of your problem can be found in this book. (NOTE: We start out great but, when we fail to trust God, end up on the wilderness merry-go-round not making progress.)

#### 2. Divine Perspective: God's Patience With His People

This same book also reveals a fantastic God! What patience He shows toward an ungrateful, disobedient people! What love He demonstrates toward the unlovely! If we were in God's shoes we would have given up; on them as a bad job. They even wanted to go back to Egypt, but God stayed with them!

We should be thankful for the book of Numbers because it lets us know that there is hope for us. This God will love us when we are unlovely. He will patiently work with us in times of failure.

Halley page 163 - The purpose of the wilderness miracles may have been:

- To preserve the nation; in God's plan the nation had been established to pave the way for a coming Messiah.
- To teach the nation, which had been nurtured in Egyptian idolatry, faith in the one, true God; and to give them concrete proof, which would be a reminder for all time to come that God can be trusted in all the circumstances of life.
- To impress the surrounding nations, particularly the Canaanites, with the fact that the

movement of Israel toward Canaan was of God, and that it would be with God, rather than merely a group of people without much fighting experience, that they would have to reckon.

Key word (Nelson's): "wanderings" - Numbers records the failure of Israel to believe in the promise of God and the resulting judgment of wandering in the wilderness for forty years.

Key Verses (Nelson's):

*"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace."* (Numbers 6:24-26)

*"None of the men who have seen My glory and My signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed My voice, shall see the land that I swore to give their fathers. And none of those who despised Me shall see it."* (Numbers 14:22,23)

*"These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and through them He showed Himself holy."* (Numbers 20:13)

*"And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord was gone."* (Numbers 32:13)

Key Chapter (Nelson's): Chapter 14: The critical turning point of Numbers may be seen in Numbers 14 when Israel rejects God by refusing to go up and conquer the Promised Land.

### Outline:

- I. Organization at Mount Sinai chapters 1-14 (From Sinai to Kadesh)  
With 2.5 million people wandering through the wilderness for 40 years you have to be organized.
  1. The Census chapter 1
  2. Organization of the Camp chapters 2-4 (see Halley page 158)
  3. Miscellaneous Laws chapters 5,6
  4. Preparation for the Journey chapters 7-9
  5. Setting Out for the Promised Land chapters 10,11  
The people stayed at Mount Sinai for one year. Then the cloud lifted, the trumpet sounded and the people moved. NOTE: Within in three days, at Taberah, they began complaining (10:33; 11:1-3)
  6. Miriam and Aaron Oppose Moses chapter 12
  7. The 12 Spies Sent to Canaan chapters 13,14  
Israel at Kadesh Barnea which is the southern entrance to the promised land (see map Halley page 163). It seems that the original plan was to go from Mount Sinai to Kadesh Barnea and then northward to take possession of the Promised Land. This, sadly, did not happen. Chapter 14 is a huge turning point in the book, the history of God's people, and of history in general.

- II. Disorganization in the Wilderness chapters 15-20 (Israel's Wanderings)
  1. Various Laws & Korah's Rebellion chapters 15-19
  2. The Final Start For Canaan chapter 20:  
The death of Miriam, Moses striking the rock at Meribah (& God's judgment), Edom refuses passage, the journey from Kadesh Barnea to Mount Hor and the death of Aaron
- II. Reorganization at the Jordan River chapters 21-36 (From Kadesh to Moab)
  1. Journey From Kadesh Barnea to the Jordan River chapter 21
  2. The Balak and Balaam Blessing chapters 22-25
  3. The Second Census chapter 26
  4. Various Regulations and Events chapters 27-36

### **RECIPIENTS**

God's people - specifically the Hebrews...and us.

### **CONTRIBUTION TO CANON**

Messianic Types

1. The Red Heifer - Leviticus 19:1-10 and Hebrews 9:11-14
2. The Smitten Rock - Leviticus 20:7-11 and 1 Corinthians 10:4
3. The Brazen Serpent - Leviticus 21:6-9 and John 3:14,15
4. The Cities of Refuge - Leviticus 35:6,9-32 and Hebrews 6:18

What we learn about God:

- He is a tremendous God Who cannot be defeated even though His people blow it
- The tremendous patience of God despite the unbelief of His people

What we learn about ourselves:

How miserable is unbelief - 38 years of wandering because of unbelief filled with hard, tough lessons. It would have been so much better if they would have believed.

**RESOURCES**

Gromacki, Robert C. *New Testament Survey*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1978

Halley, Henry H. *Halley's Bible Handbook*, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan Publishing House

Horton, David, General Editor. *The Portable Seminary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bethany House Publishers, 2006

*Nelson's Quick Reference - Bible Maps And Charts*, Nashville, Tennessee; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994

As general resources I've relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoizian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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