

# Numbers<sup>1</sup>

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## Authorship and Dating

Internal evidence indicates that Moses wrote Numbers (1:1; 33:2; 36:13). The New Testament also indicates that Moses wrote Numbers (Matt. 8:4; 19:7; Luke 24:44; John 1:45).

One verse that is of particular concern when discussing the authorship of Numbers is 12:3. “Now Moses was very meek, above all the men that were on the face of the earth.” It is claimed by some that such a self promoting statement would not have been made by Moses. However other explanations are available. First, it isn’t unusually for Biblical writer to address himself in such a manner especially considering possible contempt (2 Cor. 11:5; 2 Cor. 12:11,12).<sup>2</sup> Second, it has been noted that Moses’ self claim only heightens the dramatic effect of the passage.<sup>3</sup> Third, there is nothing wrong with providing such information if it is true. It has also been explained as evidence of inspiration as only one who is inspired would have said such things.<sup>4</sup> The first three explanations work to support the book’s claim of Mosaic authorship.

Concerning the date Numbers records events that occur after the wandering experience and before Moses’ death. Therefore with respect to Mosaic authorship the book should be dated circa 1406 B.C.

## Recipients

The book’s coverage of Israel’s entire wandering experience, including both the 1<sup>st</sup> generation’s death, indicate that Number’s was written for the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of Israelite believers.<sup>5</sup>

## Purpose

Moses wrote Numbers encouraging the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Israelites to enter and subdue the promised land through faith in Yahweh. The book also works as an encouragement indicating that “the land of Canaan would be Israel’s in spite of this record of unbelief and unfaithfulness on Israel’s part.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Book of Numbers is the fourth of the five books of Moses, commonly called the Penteteuch. The English name “Numbers” comes from the Greek Septuagint translation; it focuses on the two census lists in the book. The principal Hebrew name for the book is bemidbar, meaning “in the wilderness,” from the fifth word of the first verse. This word emphasizes the wilderness motif that marks the book, and which mars it for the interest of many individuals.” Class Notes from Dallas Theological Seminary OT1 Summer 2003 Dr. Ron B. Allen.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, "A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments," (Oak Harbor, Wa: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Dennis R. Cole, "Numbers," in *Logos Library System; New American Commentary 3B* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. Roy B. Zuck John F. Walvoord(Grand Rapids: Victor Books, 1985). 238.

<sup>5</sup> Charles & Eugene Merrill Dyer, *Nelson's Old Testament Survey*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll & Roy B. Zuck(Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001). 97.

<sup>6</sup> Paul N. Benware, *The Essential Bible Survey of the Old Testament*(Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003). 68.

## Message

Arnold and Beyer contend that the book has “a clear geographical and chronological arrangement in three parts.”<sup>7</sup> I think a much broader outline is to be considered and retained. The whole book is designed around two groups. There is the first generation which failed to enter the Promised Land (1-25) and the second generation to which the book moves with anticipation. This is marked off not only the inherent content but also by the two censuses (1, 26). For that reason I divide the book into two separate sections instead of three. Therefore, the first section covers the census (1), preparations (2-9) and movements (10-25) of this rebellious group. The second section contains a census (26), preparations (26-30), movements (31-32) and charge (33-36).

## Theme

Obedience demands Faith

## A Special Note

Often the “high” numbers used throughout the book has been rejected as implausible. It is contended that the 603,550 men who were ready for war in 1:45 and following demanded an estimated group of 2-3 million people. This amount of people plus cattle, it is contended, is not in keeping with the small area of Israel. Lasor, Hubbard and Bush note the problem and provide four varied approaches to the issue.<sup>8</sup> Another solution has been forward by Ron Allen. He contends that the numbers used in the book was a literary device common to the writers of the ancient near east. He indicates that it wasn’t unusual for the writer to “inflate” his numbers by the multiple 10. Therefore, he contends, that the inflated numbers are not a mistake but a conscience act morally acceptable within the author’s day.<sup>9</sup> However, Archer provides the following summary to his study. “In answer to this rationalistic objection it should be noted that the entire narrative of the Israelite migration frankly conceded that this was a physical impossibility, from the natural standpoint. It emphasizes in every conceivable way...that the sustaining of this great multitude was a miraculous, supernatural work of God.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bill T. & Bryan T. Beyer Arnold, *Encountering the Old Testament*(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). 128.

<sup>8</sup> David Allan Hubbard William Sanford LaSor, Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey the Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, Second ed.(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996). 103-106.

<sup>9</sup> Ron Allen, "Numbers," in *Old Testament I*(Dallas Dallas Theological Seminary, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Gleason L. Jr. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*(Chicago: Moody Press, 1994). 267.

# Outline of Numbers

## I. First Generation Israelites 1:1-25:18

### A. First Generation Census 1:1-54

1. God's Command 1:1-17
2. Census Taken 1:18-54

### B. First Generation Preparations 2:1-9:14

1. Physical Preparations for Marching 2:1-34
2. Priestly Preparations Under Aaron 3:1-51
3. Spiritual Preparations 5:1-6:27
4. Worship Preparations 7:1-9:14
5. Travel Preparation 9:15-10:10

### C. First Generation Movements 10:11-25:18

1. Israel's Failure to Enter Promised Land 10:11-14:45
2. Israel's Movement to the Plains of Moab 15:1-25:18

## II. Second Generation Israelites 26:1-36:12

### A. The Second Generation Census 26:1-51

### B. Second Generation Preparations 26:52-30:16

1. Land Allotments 26:52-27:11
2. Moses Commissions Joshua 27:12-23
3. Moses Provides Second Generation Laws 28:1-30:16

### C. Second Generation Movements 31:1-32:42

1. Israel's Defeat of the Midianites 31:1-24
2. Israel's Division of the Spoil 31:25-53
3. Gad, Reuben and Half Manasseh Given Land 32:1-42

### D. Moses Charges Second Generation to Occupy West of Jordan 33:1-36:12

1. Rehearsal of Israel's 40 year Exodus 33:1-49
2. Moses Charge to Possess all of Canaan 33:50-56
3. Moses Charge to Divide Land 34:1-36:12

### E. Book Closing 36:13

## Questions for Study

1. How is the name “Numbers” different from the Hebrew Title of the Book?
2. Who does the book claim as its author and what evidence may be presented for the conclusion.
3. Who was the book’s original audience?
4. What is the book’s purpose?
5. How would you summarize the book?
6. How are the census numbers to be understood within the book? Are they to be understood literally as given or as expanded numbers representative of cultural habits of Israel’s day?
7. Why was the first generation excluded from entering the promised land?
8. In what ways did the Israelites complain?
9. Where did the Israelites settle before entering the promised land?
10. Discuss New Testament usage of the book of Numbers.

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