

Numbers - Introduction & Background

Title

The Hebrew title of the book is taken from words in the opening verse (1:1). These words are *wayyededabber* ("and he spoke") and *bemidar* ("in the wilderness"). Most prefer to entitle the book after the latter expression since it is more descriptive of its contents. The LXX entitles the book *arithmoi* ("numbers") after the two censuses recorded in chapters 1 and 26 and other numerical data.² The English title is derived from the English translation of the LXX title. The Latin Vulgate following the LXX entitles the book *Liber Numeri* ("the Book of Numbers"). Other titles for the book include the "Book of Journeyings," the "Book of Murmurings," and the "Fourth Book of Moses."

Author

Numerous lines of evidence point to Moses as the author of the Book of Numbers. First, internal clues indicate that Moses wrote the book. The opening words of the book are "and the Lord said to Moses" (1:1). Interestingly, this phrase occurs over eighty times throughout the book. The book also closes with recognition that it represents the statutes that God gave to Moses (36:13).

Second, the book refers to Moses' writing activity (33:1-2). Because this reference occurs in a chapter summarizing the book's content, it argues for Moses being the author of the entire book rather than this single chapter. Because this same writing activity is described in other books (Ex 17:14; 24:4; 34:27) where Mosaic authorship is assumed, then it is likely that Moses is the author of Numbers as well. Third, because Numbers appears in the middle of the Pentateuch and is therefore interconnected with it, any argument made in favor of the authorship of the Pentateuch must also be equally applicable to the Book on Numbers. Numbers stands in between Exodus–Leviticus and Deuteronomy and both of these books contain self-claims of Mosaic authorship (Ex 19:7; 20:1; 24:24; Deut 1:1; 31:24).

Fourth, because Moses is the main character in the book, he would be a natural candidate for authorship since he was an eyewitness to the recorded events. Fifth, Moses' education (Acts 7:22) would have prepared him for the literary task of composing Numbers. Sixth, Samaritan, Jewish, and Christian tradition ascribes authorship of the book to Moses. Seventh, the New Testament oftentimes refers to events in Numbers and then connects them to Moses (John 3:14; Acts 7:20-24; 13:39; 1 Cor 10:1-11; Heb 3-4). Eighth, the New Testament assumes Mosaic authorship over the entire Pentateuch (Matt 8:4; 19:8; Luke 24:44; John 1:45; 5:46-47; Rom 10:5).

Despite the potency of these arguments, several reasons cause many to still resist ascribing authorship of the book to Moses. First, the varied styles displayed in the book have caused some to attribute it to the work of multiple authors. However, these differing styles are explainable not only by the various occasions that Moses encountered throughout his life but also by the fact that he was a gifted writer who knew how to assimilate and incorporate material from a variety of genres. Second, various editorial insertions (12:3; 13:11, 22; 27:14; 31:53) have caused many to assume that the book was composed by an anonymous writer long after the lifetime of Moses. However, updating earlier editions was a common ancient Near East practice.

Third, references to Moses in the third person (8:23; 12:3; 14:36; 15:1,22-23) have caused many to question Mosaic authorship. However, it was common in biblical times for writers to refer to themselves in the third person. This practice is replete in Moses' other books that are attributed to him (Ex 24:1; Lev 6:1; Deut 5:1). Interestingly, Caesar's works exemplified the same practice. Fourth, the Documentary Hypothesis asserts that "J" is responsible for composing chapters 11-12 and 21-24 and parts of 10; 13-14; 16; 20; 25-32. "P" allegedly composed the rest of the book. However, this theory contradicts plain statements found within the book (33:1-2), violates tradition, and rests upon tentative assumptions, such as religious evolution, literary redactionism, the impossibility of divine revelation, and anti-supernaturalism.

Scope

Israel's calendar began with the celebration of the first Passover on the first day of the first month of the first year (Ex 12:2). The tabernacle was erected exactly one year later on the first day of the first month of the second year (Ex 40:17). The census was taken exactly one month later on the first day of the second month of the second year (Num 1:1). The events of the Book of Leviticus transpired in the one-month interim in between the erection of the tabernacle and the census. Israel departed from Sinai for Kadesh Barnea exactly 20 days after the census on the 20th day of the 2nd month of the 2nd year (Num 10:11). Leviticus was most likely written in the 20-day interim in between the census and the beginning of the journey from Sinai.

The next chronological marker in Numbers is the inauguration of Israel's journey from Kadesh Barnea to Moab, which took place on the first day of the fifth month of the fortieth year after the Exodus (20:1, 22-29; 33:38). Thus, 38 years, 3 months, 10 days elapsed in between the inauguration of Israel's journey from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea and from the beginning of the journey from Kadesh Barnea to Moab. The revelation found in the Book of Deuteronomy began to be given to Moses on the first day of the 11th month of the fortieth year (Deut 1:3). Thus, six months transpired in between the beginning of the journey to Moab and the beginning of the content found in Deuteronomy. Altogether the events recorded in Numbers took place over a period of 38 years, 9 months (Num 1:1; Deut 1:3). If

the second year after the Exodus was 1444 BC, then the Book of Numbers covers the time period in between 1444 BC and 1405 BC.

Numbers covers the time period in between the covenant setting at Sinai (Ex–Lev) and Israel's pre-conquest setting on the plains of Moab (Deut). Thus, it covers most of the time that elapsed in between the giving of the Law and the conquest. The Book of Numbers represents that unique period of time in Israel's history when the nation had been given the land promises and yet these promises had not yet been fulfilled. The book describes the first generation's pilgrimage to Canaan and failure to obtain the benefits of Canaan due to unbelief.

Date

Although Moses could have composed parts of the book during the wilderness sojourn, he obviously completed it after arriving on the plains of Moab after the contents recorded in the book had transpired. His arrival at Moab occurred over forty years after the Exodus (Num 33:38; Deut 1:3). He also obviously had to complete the book before his death (Deut 31:24), which took place roughly forty years after the Exodus (Acts 7:36). All things considered, a date of 1405 BC for the composition of the book seems appropriate.

Place of Writing and Recipients

Because the Book of Numbers concludes with Moses' arrival on the plains of Moab (22:1; 26:3; 33:50; 35:1; 36:13), this region represents the place where Moses completed the Book of Numbers. By this time the second generation had been reorganized for entrance into Canaan (26–36). This younger generation represented those who had survived God's purging judgment that had killed off the first generation (14:20–38). Thus, Moses wrote to the second generation encamped on the plains of Moab as they were on the brink of conquering Canaan.

Purposes

Moses had several purposes in mind in selecting and arranging his material when he wrote the Book of Numbers. First, he wanted to invoke belief and obedience on the part of the second generation by reminding them of the consequences that the first generation experienced as a result of unbelief and disobedience. Moses wants his readers to understand that because the first generation was elected (Ex 4:22–23), redeemed (Ex 12), regenerated (Ex 14:31), a recipient of the covenant (Ex 19–40), sanctified (Lev), and blessed (Num 1–10) they had everything they needed to enter the land. Yet because of unbelief and disobedience (Num 13–14) they forfeited the blessings of living in the land. Moses' goal in presenting this information is so that the second generation does not make the same mistake. Interestingly, Scripture often uses the failure of the first generation as a basis for exhorting subsequent generations to trust and obey God (Ps 78:40–55; 95:9–11; 1 Cor 10; Heb 3–4).

Second, Numbers serves as an instruction manual teaching the nation how they are to conduct themselves regarding how to behave while in transit to the Promised Land and also how to behave once they enter Canaan. Such instructions encompass order for military purposes, order for conquest purposes, Levitical order due to national mobility, and Levitical order once in Canaan. Third, Numbers explains that while sin can prevent any generation from being blessed in accordance with the terms of the Mosaic Covenant (Num 13--14), it cannot stop God's ultimate purposes for the nation as specified in the Abrahamic Covenant (Num 22--24).

Fourth, Numbers was written to reveal God's guidance to Israel. "In Genesis God elected a people, in Exodus He redeemed them, in Leviticus He sanctified them, and in Numbers He directed them." Geisler observes how this purpose distinguishes the book from Leviticus. He notes, "In contrast to Leviticus, the book of *worship*, Numbers is a book of the people's *walk* with God. Leviticus stresses their *purity*; Numbers their *pilgrimage*, Leviticus is *ceremonial*, while Numbers is *historical*. Leviticus gives a call to *fellowship* with God; Numbers is a call to *faithfulness* to God. The emphasis shifts from *sanctification* before God to *direction* by God."

Message

Moses inculcates faith and covenant obedience in the second generation, which was on the verge of entering Canaan, so that they could fulfill their calling of mediating God's salvation to the ends of the earth (24:17). Moses accomplishes this goal by reminding the second generation of the first generation's modest successes but overall pattern of unbelief and covenant violation that resulted in that generation forfeiting the blessings of the land inheritance (11--25). Sadly, these failures occurred in spite of the many blessings that God had given to the first generation (1--10). Moses further inculcates faith and obedience in the second generation by reminding them of their many blessings and by warning them against violation of the covenant (26--36).

Structure

One possible way of structuring the book is by noting its geographical divisions. This structure observes the following geographical movements: Israel at Sinai (1:1--10:10), Israel en route to Kadesh Barnea (10:11--12:16), Israel's prolonged stay at Kadesh Barnea (13:1--20:13), Israel's journey to Moab (20:14--21:35), and Israel's sojourn in Moab (22--36).

Another structure notes that chapters 1 and 26 represent the different census for the first and second generations respectively and that Num 13-14 represent a transition away from the prominence of the first generation and toward the prominence of the second generation. This observation surfaces the following three-fold structure.

The first section (1:1--10:11) takes place at Sinai and represents the ordering of the first generation to enter Canaan over a twenty-day period. The second section (10:12--25:18) takes place in the wilderness and represents the disorder of the first generation in

postponement of Canaan over a thirty-eight year, three month, and 10 day period. The third section (26--36) takes place at Moab and represents the ordering of the second generation to enter Canaan over a six-month period. This is the structure that will be followed in this argument.

Another way of structuring the book involves a two-fold division. The first *faithless* generation represented Israel's failure to follow God in the wilderness (1:1-25:18). The second *faithful* generation represented Israel's willingness to follow God into the PromiseLand (26:1-36:13). Of this approach Allen notes, "Most commentators divide the Book of Numbers into three parts, with the second major section beginning at 10:11. The approach ...is to treat the Book of Numbers as a biped of two unequal parts (Num 1-25; 26-36), structured on the basis of the two census lists (Num 1-4; 26)."

Geographical Movement

Constable explains the geographical movement of the book as follows. "Geographically the Israelites traveled from Mt. Sinai to the plains of Moab, which lay to the east of Jericho and Jordan River. However their journey was not at all direct. They proceeded from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh Barnea on Canaan's southern border but failed to go into the Promised Land from there because of unbelief. Their failure to trust God and obey Him resulted in a period of 38 years of wandering in the wilderness. God finally brought them back to Kadesh and once again led them from there to the plains of Moab that lay on Canaan's eastern border."

Genre

The primary genre of the book is narrative. However, Dyer and Merrill note the many sub genres displayed in the book. Examples include census lists, travel procedures, regulations for the priests and the Levites, sacrifice and ritual instructions, inheritance rights, prophetic oracles, and poetry.

Christ in Numbers

The Book of Numbers resonates with many Christological themes. One can see Christ's high priestly activity typified in Moses' faithful intercession on behalf of unfaithful Israel (11:2; 12:1-16; 14:11-19; 21:7). The same can be said for Aaron's priestly work (16:46-50). Other Christo-centric examples include the bronze serpent (Num 21:4-9; John 3:14), the ashes of the Red Heifer (Num 19; 1 John 1:9), Aaron's budding rod showing him to be the only high priest (Num 17; 1 Tim 2:5), the water from the rock (Num 20:7-13; 1 Cor 10:1-4), the star from Jacob (Num 24:17; Matt 2:2), the manna typifying Christ as the bread of life (Num 11:6-9; John 6:32), the cities of refuge typifying the believer's refuge in Christ (Num 35), and the pillar of cloud typifying the guidance of Christ (Num 10:11). Of this final type, Geisler explains, "The overall presence of Christ is symbolized in Numbers by the pillar of cloud. Through this symbol He is shown as the Director or Leader of His people."

Theological Themes

Numbers is replete with many rich theological themes. They include God's holiness, man's sinfulness, the necessity of covenant obedience, the consequences of covenant disobedience, God's faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant despite Israel's faithlessness to the Mosaic Covenant, the patience and mercy of God, the visual presence of God manifested through the ark and the tabernacle, and God's divine providence.

Outline

I. Preparation of the first generation at Sinai to enter Canaan (Num 1:1—10:36)

(1) Organization of Israel (Num 1:1—4:49)

(A) Organization of the tribes (Num 1:1—2:41)

(a) Census of the tribes (Num 1:1-54)

(i) Date (1:1)

(ii) Tribes enumerated (1:2-19)

(iii) Number from each tribe (1:20-43)

(iv) Total (1:44-46)

(v) Levites (1:47-54)

(b) Census and arrangement (Num 2:1-41)

(i) East (2:1-9)

(ii) South (2:10-17)

(iii) West (2:18-24)

(iv) North (2:25-32)

(v) Levites (2:33-41)

(B) Organization of the priests (Num 3:1—4:49)

(a) Census and arrangement (Num 3:1-51)

(i) Aaron's sons (3:1-4)

(ii) Responsibilities of the Levites (3:5-10)

(iii) Levites in lieu of first born (3:11-13)

(iv) Names of the clans (3:14-20)

(v) Census and arrangement of the clans (3:21-40)

(a) Gershonites (3:21-26)

(b) Kohathites (3:27-32)

(c) Meriarites (3:33-37)

(d) Moses, Aaron, and the priests (3:38-39)

(vi) Census of first born, Levites, and redemption (3:40-51)

(b) Census and responsibilities (Num 4:1-49)

(i) Responsibilities (4:1-33)

(a) Kohathites (4:1-20)

(b) Gershonites (4:21-28)

(c) Meriarites (4:29-33)

- (ii) Census (4:34-49)
 - (a) Kohathites (4:34-37)
 - (b) Gershonites (4:38-41)
 - (c) Meriarites (4:42-45)
 - (d) Levites (4:46-49)
- (2) Sanctification of Israel (Num 5:1—10:36)
 - (A) Sanctification by separation (Num 5:1-31)
 - (a) Purity in the camp (5:1-4)
 - (b) Restitution of wrongs (5:5-10)
 - (c) Test of an unfaithful wife (5:11-31)
 - (B) Sanctification by Nazirite vow (Num 6:1-27)
 - (a) Vow (6:1-21)
 - (b) Aaronic blessing (6:22-27)
 - (C) Sanctification by worship (Num 7:1—9:14)
 - (a) Offerings at the dedication of the tabernacle (Num 7:1-89)
 - (i) Leaders provide carts and oxen to the Gershonites and Meriarites to transport tabernacle (7:1-11)
 - (ii) Each tribal leader presents gifts (7:12-83)
 - (iii) Abundance of supplies (7:84-89)
 - (b) Setting up of the lamps (Num 8:1-4)
 - (c) Setting apart of the Levites (8:5-26)
 - (i) Levites purified, sanctified, ordained (8:5-10)
 - (ii) Levites presented as an offering to the Lord (8:11-13)
 - (iii) Levites qualified to worship God (8:14-19)
 - (iv) Levites followed requirements and commenced their ministries (8:20-22)
 - (v) Levites' age requirements (8:23-26)
 - (d) Celebration of the Passover (Num 9:1-14)
 - (i) Celebration of the 14th day of the first month of the first year (9:1-5)
 - (ii) Postponement of the Passover for one month in cases of the cleanliness or being on a distant journey (9:6-12)
 - (iii) Taking advantage of loophole results in being cut off (9:13-14)
 - (D) Sanctification by divine guidance (Num 9:15—10:36)
 - (a) The cloud above the tabernacle (9:15-23)
 - (b) Two silver trumpets (10:1-10)
 - (c) Departure from Sinai (10:11-36)
 - (i) From Sinai to the Wilderness Paran (10:11-13)
 - (ii) Tribes and clans fulfill function in journey (10:14-28)

(iii) Hobab agrees to come on the journey (10:29-32)

(iv) Supernatural guidance (10:33-36)

II. Failure of the first generation (Num 11:1—25:18)

(1) Failure en route to Kadesh (Num 11:1—12:16)

(A) Failure of Israel (11:1-15)

(a) Failure of the people (11:1-9)

(i) Complaining at Taberah (11:1-3)

(ii) Complaining about diet (11:4-9)

(b) Failure of Moses (11:10-15)

(B) God's provision (11:16-35)

(a) God provides for Moses (11:16-30)

(b) God provides for the people at Kibroth-hattaavah (11:31-35)

(C) Failure of Miriam and Aaron at Hazeroth (12:1-16)

(2) Failure at Kadesh Barnea (Num 13:1—14:45)

(A) Investigation of the land (13:1-33)

(a) Election of the spies (13:1-16)

(b) Duties of the spies (13:17-20)

(c) Spying of the land (13:21-24)

(d) Spies' report (13:25-33)

(B) Israel rebels (Num 14:1-10)

(C) Moses' intercession saves Israel (14:11-19)

(D) God disinherits the first generation (14:20-38)

(E) Israel rebels against God's judgment (14:39-45)

(3) Failure in the wilderness in and around Kadesh Barnea (Num 15:1—20:13)

(A) Law of the offerings (15:1-41)

(a) Supplemental offerings (15:1-21)

(b) Offerings for unintentional sins (15:22-29)

(c) Intentional sins (15:30-36)

(i) Severity of intentional sins (15:30-31)

(ii) Example of an intentional sin (15:32-36)

(d) Visual reminder to keep the Law (15:37-41)

(B) Korah's rebellion (Num 16:1-50)

(C) Confirmation of Aaron's leadership (Num 17:1-13)

(D) Confirmation of the priesthood (Num 18:1—19:22)

(a) Levites' responsibilities (18:1-32)

(b) Red heifer purification (19:1-22)

(i) Purification by blood and ashes of the red heifer (19:1-10)

(ii) Purification from touching a corpse (19:11-13)

- (iii) Purification from the presence of a corpse (19:14-19)
 - (iv) The unclean to be excommunicated (19:20-22)
 - (E) Moses' failure at Meribah (20:1-13)
- (4) Failure en route from Kadesh to Moab (Num 20:14—21:35)
 - (A) Edom refuses to allow Israel passage (20:14-21)
 - (B) Death of Aaron at Mount Hor (20:22-29)
 - (C) Defeat of Arad at Hormah (21:1-3)
 - (D) Bronze serpent on Edom's eastern border (21:4-9)
 - (E) Journey to Moab (21:10-20)
 - (F) Victory over Sihon King of the Amorites (21:21-32)
 - (G) Victory over Og of Bashan (21:33-35)
- (5) Failure at Moab (Num 22:1—25:18)
 - (A) Balak and God summon Balaam (22:1-41)
 - (a) Balak seeks to hire Balaam (22:1-6)
 - (b) Balaam's refusal after receiving counsel from God (22:7-14)
 - (c) Balaam comes to Balak after being financially induced (22:15-34)
 - (d) God allowed Balaam to continue with his mission after telling him he would say what God told him to say (22:35-41)
 - (B) Balaam's seven oracles blessing Israel (Num 23:1—24:24)
 - (a) Circumstances of first Oracle (23:1-12)
 - (b) Circumstances of second Oracle (23:13-26)
 - (c) Circumstances of third Oracle (23:27—24:14)
 - (d) Circumstances of fourth Oracle (24:15-19)
 - (e) Circumstances of fifth Oracle (24:20)
 - (f) Circumstances of sixth Oracle (24:21-22)
 - (g) Circumstances of seventh Oracle (24:23-24)
 - (C) Moab seduces Israel at Baal Peor (25:1-18)
 - (a) Israel's sin (25:1-3)
 - (b) Command to execute the sinners (25:4-5)
 - (c) Phineas' heroism (25:6-8)
 - (d) Resulting plague (25:9)
 - (e) Phineas' covenant (25:10-13)
 - (f) Slay the Midianites (25:14-18)

III. Preparation of the second generation on the plains of Moab to enter Canaan (Num 26:1—36:13)

- (1) Reorganization of Israel (Num 26:1—30:16)
 - (A) Military reorganization (Num 26:1—27:23)
 - (a) Second census (26:1-65)

- (i) Instruction to take a census (26:1-4a)
 - (ii) List of the tribes (26:4b-11)
 - (iii) The census (26:12-51)
 - (iv) Method of dividing the land (26:52-56)
 - (v) Census of the Levites (26:57-62)
 - (vi) Only the second generation numbered (26:63-65)
- (b) Inheritance for Zelophedad's daughters (27: 1-11)
- (c) Joshua to succeed Moses (27:12-23)
- (B) Spiritual reorganization (Num 28:1—30:16)
 - (a) Offerings (28:1-15)
 - (i) Daily (28:1-8)
 - (ii) Sabbath (28:9-10)
 - (iii) Monthly (28:11-15)
 - (b) Festivals (Num 28:16—29:40)
 - (i) Passover (28:16-25)
 - (ii) Weeks (28:26-31)
 - (iii) Trumpets (29:1-6)
 - (iv) Atonement (29:7-11)
 - (v) Tabernacles (29:12-38)
 - (vi) Conclusion (29:39-40)
 - (c) Vows (30:1-16)
- (2) Preparation for conquest of the land (Num 31:1—36:13)
 - (A) Victory over Midian (31:1-54)
 - (a) Slaughter of the Midianites (31:1-12)
 - (b) Slaughter of all non-virgin Midianite women (31:13-18)
 - (c) Purification for touching a corpse (31:19-20)
 - (d) Purification of the booty (31:21-24)
 - (e) Division of the booty (31:25-31)
 - (f) The enumeration of the booty (31:32-47)
 - (g) The booty offered to the Lord (31:48-54)
 - (B) Reuben, Gad and one-half of Manasseh received their inheritance on the Transjordan (32:1-42)
 - (a) Request of the tribes (32:1-5)
 - (b) Rejection by Moses (32:6-15)
 - (c) Pledge of the tribes (32:16-19)
 - (d) Acceptance by Moses (32:20-32)
 - (e) Division by Moses (32:33-42)
 - (C) Review of Israel's journey (33:1-49)

- (a) Fight from Egypt (33:1-4)
- (b) From the Red Sea to Sinai (33:5-15)
- (c) From the Sinai to Kadesh (33:16-36)
- (d) From Kadesh to Moab (33:37-49)
- (D) Instructions regarding driving out the Canaanites (33:50-56)
- (E) Canaan's borders (34:1-12)
 - (a) Southern border (34:1-5)
 - (b) Western border (34:6)
 - (c) Northern border (34:7-9)
 - (d) Eastern border (34:10-12)
- (F) Leaders responsible for apportioning the land (34:13-29)
 - (a) Transjordan (34:13-15)
 - (b) West of the Jordan (34:16-29)
- (G) Special cities (Num 35:1-34)
 - (a) Levitical cities (35:1-8)
 - (b) Cities of refuge (35:9-34)
- (H) Instruction concerning tribal land preservation (Num 36:1-13)