

# Numbers

## Author

The author of the Book of Numbers was Moses. Some liberal critics say that because many times the Book of Numbers refers to Moses in the third person, for example Numbers 8:23, 14:36, 15:1 and 15:22, and Moses would not say in Numbers 12:3 that he was the most humble man on Earth, Numbers was not written by him. But note:

1. the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy which were written by Moses (see Exodus 17:14, 24:3, 24:4, 24:27, Matthew 19:7-8, Mark 10:3-4 and John 5:46-47) also use the third person about him on numerous occasions (see Exodus 24:1-18, 34:29-34, Deuteronomy 1:1, 5:1 and 29:1).
2. Julius Caesar wrote of himself in the third person.
3. Numbers 12:3 was an addition by a later Biblical editor, possibly Joshua or one of the Prophets.

## Name of the Book

In Hebrew, the Book of Numbers is called 1) “Wayyedabber” meaning “And He said” which is based on the custom of using the first word of the text as a title and 2) “Bemidbar” meaning “In the wilderness”.

The name “Numbers” is from the Latin Vulgate title, “Eiber Numeri” meaning “Book of Numbers”. This title is based upon the two numberings or censuses which appear in Chapters 1 and 26.

## Date

The Book of Numbers was written during 38 years of the 40 year wandering period by the nation of Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan. This 40 years wandering period followed the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. This occurred between about 1447-1405 B.C. The Book of Numbers covers from the second year after the Exodus from Egypt (Numbers 10:11-12) until the arrival at the border of the promised land in the 40<sup>th</sup> year of the wilderness wanderings (see Numbers 33:38).

The Book of Numbers concentrates on the beginning and the end of the wilderness wandering period with most of the years in between being given little or no mention.

## The main teachings of the Book of Numbers

The main teachings of the Book of Numbers are:

1. The emphasis on the *Mosaic Covenant's promises*, its *blessings*, its *curses* and *God's faithfulness* to His *covenant* and *Word*.
2. The practical relationship between God the Supreme Ruler and His people – the nation of Israel – as recent recipients of the terms and conditions of the Mosaic Covenant.
3. God's Presence was manifested among His people) see Numbers 12:1-10). His Presence was especially revealed in the Tabernacle. One manifestation of God's Presence was Him leading the people of Israel through cloud and fire (see Numbers 9:15-23)
4. God is perfectly holy and as a result demands that all people who enter His Presence must be holy, purified and cleansed. God's holiness necessitated that unclean persons (see Numbers 5:1-4 and 19:11-20) and objects must be cleansed (see Numbers 31:22-23). The priests and Levites had to be purified before they could serve their Holy God (see Leviticus 8:5-26).
5. Sin, unbelief and rebellion result in punishment by God. 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 and Hebrews 3:7-4:13 teach that the examples of sin, unbelief and rebellion recorded in the Book of Numbers are there to teach later believers what to avoid. The main punishment mentioned in Numbers is the forty year desert wanderings. But there are other punishments recorded also. These are:
  - a) the opening of the earth to kill rebellious leaders (see Numbers 16:1-40).
  - b) Plague (see Numbers 16:41-50 and Chapter 25)
  - c) Being poisoned by snakes (see Numbers 21:4-9)
6. Sin and rebellion causes God to be *angry* (see Numbers 11:1, 11:10, 11:33 and 12:9).
7. The sin and rebellion of God's people will not thwart His plans. Even though a generation of Israelites died in the wilderness because of their unbelief and rebellion, God's plan for the nation moved forward with the next generation.
8. Continually God expresses His unmerited grace towards the Israelites. Despite the wickedness and lack of faith of the Israelites, God continued to perform great miracles for them (see Numbers 11:4-9, 20:1-11, 21:16-17 and 22:1-25) help them defeat foreign armies (see Numbers 21:1-3 and 21:21-23).  
Numbers 6:22-27 contains the wonderful *grace blessing* by the Israelite High Priests: ***“And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel.’ Say to them: ‘The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.’” So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.*”** Also despite the Israelites great sin and God's resulting judgment on them through snakes, He provided by His undeserved grace a bronze serpent through which they could be healed (see Numbers 21:4-9).
9. God is *patient* and *longsuffering*. Numbers shows how patient God was with the Israelites despite their lack of faith and constant grumbling, rebellion and bad attitudes. As stated before, it is true God did become angry on some occasions and punished the Israelites. But generally He was very patient with them.
10. Generally speaking, God's people can progress only to the degree they *trust in His promises* and *depend on His strength*. When the Israelites relied on themselves, they failed

(see Numbers 13:1-14:4 and 14:39-45). But when they relied on God, they defeated armies stronger than themselves (see 2 Kings 18:17-19:37).

11. God provided for the *real needs* of the Israelites in a very difficult and testing environment – the land between Egypt and the Promised Land. Despite the constant complaining and lack of faith of the Israelites, God continued to by His undeserved grace and mercy supply their food, water and other needs. But note He did this in His way and timing in order to *test* their hearts.
12. God is pleased when people intercede to Him on behalf of others. We see in the accounts of Moses praying for Miriam his sister (see Numbers 12:13-14) and in him praying for the rebellious Israelites (see Numbers 14:11-25), how God sometimes grants the intercessions of His people to change His previously stated intentions.
13. Like all humans, Moses committed sin and had limitations. Moses records his own sin (see Numbers 20:1-12) and his own weakness in leading the people of Israel (see Numbers 11:11-15). In Numbers 11:16-30, God commanded Moses to appoint elders to support him in leading the people of Israel. God filled each of these leaders with His Spirit. Moses needed these elders because he was not able to lead so many people by himself.
14. God is a *God of order*. This is reflected in the two census lists, the arrangement of the tribes when camped and the order of the tribes when marching (see Numbers 1:1-54, 2:1-34 and 26:1-65). The two censuses in the Book of Numbers occurred (a) before and (b) after the wilderness wanderings.
15. God is the ruler of all nations. This relates to the attempt by the Moabite king to have the prophet Balaam curse the Israelites. Balaam said God would not permit him to curse what God had blessed (see Numbers 23:7-10 and 18-24).
16. God gave instructions about how the land of Canaan was to be divided among the tribes of Israel (see Numbers 34:1-29).

## Overview of Numbers

1. Numbers 1:1-10:10 relates to when the Israelites were at Mt Sinai and were receiving instructions about breaking camp and moving through the desert under God's guidance. Numbers Chapter 2 refers to the camping location each of the twelve tribes of Israel were to be positioned around God's Tabernacle. Numbers 2:17 reveals the tribe of Levi was positioned closest around the Tabernacle (N.B. Out of the original 12 sons of Israel, Joseph had 2 sons – Ephraim and Manasseh – who became two tribes). So if we count the Levites, there were 13 tribes. There was *Judah*, *Issacher*, and *Zebulan* to the East, *Ephraim*, *Manasseh* and *Benjamin* to the West, *Dan*, *Asher* and *Naphtali* in the North and *Reuben*, *Simeon* and *Gad* in the South with the *Levites* in the middle.  
In Numbers Chapter 4, there are instructions about which clans of the Levites were to carry various pieces of the Tabernacle while traveling.
2. Numbers Chapter 9 is the climax of Chapters 1 to 10. in its first part – verses 1 to 14 – it refers to the *second* celebration of the *Passover* for the Israelite nation. The Passover is a celebration of God's undeserved grace and mercy through a substitutionary death of a lamb. Numbers 9:15-23 stresses God's Presence associated with the Tabernacle and God's guidance through the cloud and fire.

3. Numbers Chapter 10 refers to (a) two silver trumpets being used to direct the movements of the Israelites while traveling and (b) to the actual departure of the Israelite nation from Mt Sinai.
4. Numbers Chapter 11, refers to the first complaints of the Israelites, God's punishment of them and He providing the elders to help Moses lead.
5. Numbers 12 refers to the attacks of the High Priest Aaron – Moses' brother – and Miriam the prophetess – Moses' sister – or Moses. They criticised him for having an Egyptian wife and for exercising more God-given authority than them. God was not pleased with their attitudes. He punished Miriam briefly with leprosy as a punishment.
6. Numbers Chapters 13-14 refer to the twelve spies going into the Promised Land, the bad report of 10 of them and the bad response of the Israelite nation to their message. The Israelites refused to go into the Promised Land and would not trust or obey God in relation to this  
Then after God through Moses told the Israelites that they would be punished as a result, they then tried to enter the Promised Land. This was *presumption* and *not faith* in the Word of the Lord. As a result, God permitted the Amalekites and Canaanites to defeat the Israelites.
7. Numbers Chapter 15 gives laws about grain and drink offerings for when they later entered the Promised Land. This Chapter also refers to laws about unintentional and intentional sin and the death penalty for breaking the Sabbath.
8. Numbers Chapter 16 refers to the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, Abiram and 250 other Israelite leaders against the leadership of Moses, Aaron and God. As a result, these rebels were punished by God with death.
9. Numbers Chapter 17 refers to the miraculous budding of Aaron's rod. This showed God's approval of Aaron's leadership as High Priest.
10. Numbers Chapter 18 instructs on the duties of the priests and Levites and offerings and tithes for the Levites. Note the Levites were not just given tithes alone.
11. Numbers Chapter 19 gives more laws of purification.
12. Numbers Chapter 20 refers to Moses' great error and the death of Aaron.
13. Numbers Chapter 21 records more complaining and rebellion by the Israelites, God's punishment, His grace in healing poisoned Israelites and His miraculous help in enabling the Israelites to defeat the armies of King Sihon and King Og. The latter occurred despite the Israelites previous bad attitudes.
14. Numbers Chapter 22-24 refers to the prophet Balaam.
15. Numbers Chapter 25 mentions the fall of the nation of Israel through immoral Moabite women.
16. Numbers Chapter 26 records the Second Census of Israel.
17. The rest of the Book of Numbers gives other laws and details in preparation for the Israelites entering the Promised Land, including the appointment of Joshua as the next leader.